

The Way Home

by Debbie Ann Ice

I'm in the Grand Central Station bar-- the one at the top of the stairs-- waiting for my husband to enter so I can watch him. The bar is crowded, everyone getting in that last beer before heading back to whiney children and tired spouses. I turn back and forth on my bar stool, which is small and too close to the next bar stool where a man sits, scrolling through his BlackBerry. He pauses every now and then to suck his whiskey. I look across the bar at a rail-thin woman spitting words into her palm and dial my husband.

My husband does not like to talk while walking down the street, but he always answers the phone. It's me, I say, glancing quickly at the man next to me. The man smiles at his email, and I notice his incisor is gold capped, which looks odd with his clean face and tailored shirt. My husband asks where I am, and I say at a PTO committee meeting. He says it sounds like a bar. I say well it's crowded here and they're serving wine. Elementary school is stressful. I take a sip of my wine. The man looks up at me. I say to my husband, can you hold on a sec, then place my fingers over the two tiny holes at the bottom of my cell phone. I say, get out your cell; you're starting to look unpopular. Don't you have any thoughts? The man says nothing.

My husband says he'll be home at seven or so and asks where the kids are. I say there's no football practice, so Jack's home with Ellie. He says the day has been rough; the market was down fifty points. I say my day was rough too; my opinion of Connecticut mothers is

down several points, so we're both losing. Then I pause and listen to him breathe, wondering if he can hear the men at the bar, the clink of glass, the whisper of voices. He must know I'm lying. Does he think I'm out partying? He says, well, I gotta run, I'm at the station now. I hang up after my lyrical love you.

I consider saying something to the man by me, but he's back looking at his BlackBerry and laughing to himself. I crane my neck and catch the beginning of the mail. I think I see the word pussy. He looks up and my eyes slip away fast.

I see my husband walking through the far door. I leave my drink at the bar and walk to the edge of the stairs to take him in--how he checks his watch, walks briskly to track 21, not even bothering to check the information boards to see if the train is late or if the track has changed. He disappears under the arched passageway. It was all too fast, his walk through Grand Central. Over too soon. There, then gone.

The train jerks a few times before it takes off. I am across the aisle and six seats behind my husband and can see his graying head bent over, reading something--a journal, his BlackBerry. He seems at peace, soon to be arriving home to dinner, my kids, me.

He answers the phone so loud everyone around him looks up. I whisper hey. He asks why I'm talking low and I say I'm in a store. I say dinner will be difficult with the meeting and all. He says what? The man across the aisle from him puts down his paper and stares, like he is going to snatch my husband's cell phone. I tell him I wonder if we could talk, or something. He is quiet, then says he is on the train and is it possible to do this another time. I say my cell has been ringing all day. My past, you know. Mama, telling me what hurts. The man across the aisle leans over and taps my husband's shoulder. My husband nods at him and says could we please do this another time. I say my mama is fading like a burnt star, and I feel drawn into the resulting black hole. He says huh? Look, what's going on? I'll be home soon. How is she? I say today? At the mall...My husband interrupts, says he really cannot talk about this here. My

voice mail, I continue, was marked urgent. She wanted to make sure that I understood where her mother's gold necklace was in case something happened to Daddy when she died. It was in a shoebox, she said. I wonder which shoebox.

He says he's sorry, his voice low, gentle. I can see his face drop. It looks like his eyes are closed.

He says he's hanging up now. He says everything will be OK.

I watch him rub his eyes, lean back. I can barely make out the passenger next to him--a man with a balding head, busy with something, papers, maybe work.

I say I don't want to go down there and deal with Daddy. He says, well, then don't, and look, I'll be home soon. Now the man by his side is saying something to him; his voice sounds like hissing from here.

I say, I slapped Jack today. He says what. I say I slapped him, across the face. Just like that. He said go to hell. And wop. It happened so fast.

Is he OK?

I say, yes, he is. He's fourteen and can take it, I guess. He will go to therapy one day, maybe write a story about his abusive mother. A memoir, I say. He will exaggerate and say I hit him with a hot pan. A woman ahead of me turns around and puts her finger to her lips. I stop whispering and look at my husband's body, now bent over his elbows which rest upon his knees. He rubs his eyes as he shakes his head. The man across the aisle from him looks his way again. My husband says he is going now; he has to hang up. We'll talk later, he says.

I close my cell phone without saying goodbye.

To my right, a man, wide and the color of walnuts, starts humming. He has on his iPod and the humming sounds vaguely like this Fats Waller tune my parents used to listen to. I look at him and point to my mouth in an indignant way. He takes out his ear plugs and says you got something you want to say to me? I say, you're humming. He says, and you were talking on your cell a while ago. I tell him to hush up. He says, what do you mean hush up? I put my

finger to my mouth and point my forehead over at my husband, as if he will catch on right away and stop it. He looks around, confused. I shrug and whisper that his humming is OK, more than OK. I actually find it soothing, I say. Please continue. He says, look, I've had a long day and let's not get smart. I say I am not smart and would prefer not to talk. Sorry.

I see my husband turn, and I duck. My humming friend stares down at me and shakes his head.

I dial my husband. I peek around the seat and watch him pull his cell out and look at the number. I imagine he is making a face, puffing out air through his lips the way he does. He whispers hi, then waits for me. Humming Man has now turned off his iPod, and unplugged his ears so he can take me in. I say hey, low and soft. The train comes to a stop and the doors open. I say, so where's the train now? My husband says Greenwich so loud we can hear him. Humming Man leans into the aisle, searching for the voice that said Greenwich. So, I say, you are, what, fifteen, twenty minutes from home? I am maybe half an hour from home, had to stop at another store. I cover the two holes at the bottom of my cell when Humming Man laughs. I say, excuse me, but is the music not good enough for you? He says, I don't want to listen to it anymore. You're better. I say would you please keep it down, and I point my forehead to my husband, now looking around. The doors sigh, and we're off again.

Are you still there, my husband says. I say, very low, yes. Humming Man whispers brother.

I say I slapped Jack because he called his brother crazy, then told me to go to hell when I said shut up. Crazy, he said. His brother off in that place and he says crazy. My husband says, is this what's going on here? I don't say anything for a while. Humming Man waits. My husband waits. I say no. Mama is calling me and I do wonder where her shoeboxes are, how many she has. And, well... I slapped Jack.

My husband starts up, but the man by him says, loud, look, can you shut up, we can all hear you.

I say it's just getting to be too much for me. How many shoeboxes does Mama have anyway?

The train is now at the Stamford station, two stops from our town, and my husband stands up, cell to ear, and waits by the door. The doors wheeze open and he steps off.

I say, ignoring the woman who turns to look at me, where are you now? I got off at Stamford, he says, so we can talk without getting interrupted on the train.

He stands on the platform, pulling his lapels together. The doors sigh, the train jerks, people move around my husband. The train speeds up and he shrinks into a small black etching in a kinetic stream of people, leaning into my voice.

