

Every Step, and There Are Lots

by Kathryn Sanders

You are heading to work, and every step you take closer to the subway feels like a step further away from the person you wanted to be. When did you become this? This hard-hearted Hannah, this shell of a real person. You have been waking up every day for the past week lying flat on your back, both hands clutching your heart. So dramatic. You're sad that you care more now after it's ended. You're praying the dreams will stop soon.

The first two seconds of every day are the best. There is a brief window in the morning, the glorious break between dreaming and remembering. You long for the day when you'll wake up with only an ambiguous sense of loss, and your feelings will be like an old newspaper, yellowed and crinkly at the edges.

You woke up one morning, exactly a week ago, ready to cut the proverbial cord, though even now you worry there will be remnants stuck in your belly button for the rest of your life. It has been one week, and still, the hands, the clutching. It simultaneously feels like one day and one year. You wonder how long it takes to forget. You think back on former, similar times. How long did it take? You don't remember.

When you were a child, 26 seemed so old. You thought you would be in love by age 26, or at least capable of it. Now, you're older and have experienced hurt, and you no longer have the romantic sensibilities, or the ability to give yourself completely to someone else. You sneer at terms like "soul mates." When you were 21, you would gladly have taken a bullet for the boy you were dating, but you're pretty sure that level of unconditional love is a window that is permanently jammed closed. Now, you hold back. Now, you know.

You fall back into happier scenes in your mind, scenes and moments that weren't even particularly happy at the time but seem

better than where you are now. You seemed to yourself more adjusted, more focused, not so insecure. You liked yourself. You wish your entire life could be lived under the halo of nostalgia's hazy kindness.

You are listening to the latest Bob Dylan bootleg album on your Ipod. You first heard it playing at a restaurant, a hole-in-the-wall place run by some people from upstate. Their sign reads "Best Chicken Wings in Park Slope" and they're not wrong. You went one time last fall for dinner, alone, sitting at the counter and writing and eating chicken wings with a knife and fork. You were happy and sad at the same time. You are never just one emotion, always a mix, and usually contradictory. You can never enjoy anything too much.

You descend the subway steps, and these steps feel even more like a journey away from the person you thought you would become. You thought that once you found a man you liked, it would be easy. Your mother and everyone else said that, "it should be easy, you'll know when you find him." You thought that you had found him. But it wasn't easy. Does that mean you didn't work hard enough?

You get a seat on the subway. There are always people older than you standing and you always feel guilty but you only once offered up your seat to someone's aging legs. Your mind recalls a scene in his living room. His cat was trying to claw its way up your leg; he calls you selfish, your needs unfair, you need to grow up. "You've been spoiled," he told you, and you wanted to cry, but now you want to laugh. You picture your insides rotting. Your emotions are pieces of fruit that have been left too long in the bowl.

You close your eyes, block out the heavy-set man in the seat next to you who smells like mothballs and urine and...sunscreen? You wrap your arms around yourself. You've never tried hugging yourself but it's not a bad substitute for someone else. The man next to you shifts in his seat and you can tell he is looking at you, but it's not distracting. You lift your right thigh and move it closer to you left, and clear your head and try to imagine the most peaceful thing you can. You immediately see yourself in a wide field, no, under a tree by a stream. This surprises you; you hate nature.

Huh. Well, the temperature is perfect. A little on the hot side, but you've always liked to sweat, and there is shade from the tree, though you're sitting just outside of the shade shadow. A friend is with you, but you don't know who, but you know you're close, maybe best friends. Maybe it's Bob Dylan, but the young Bob, 1960's Bob with the crazy curls, and it's a faceless Bob, so you're not scared. It's Bob Dylan, but not. A white shadow of Bob.

The friend is playing an acoustic guitar, singing, singing words that aren't English and maybe aren't any real language though they make sense to you. It's a perfect song, but no one else will hear it. It is just for you.

You don't want to interrupt, but you want Bob's advice. "Bob," you say, though you're still not entirely sure that's his name. "Will I ever get over this? Will I ever forget him?" Bob continues finger-picking but stops singing. He pauses. "Do we ever forget anything?" Bob asked, in typical Bob fashion. He was the type to never answer you directly, only answered a question with another question. It could be very frustrating, but he got cut a lot of slack on account of his genius.

"And do we ever really *remember* anything? Or is it all fantasy?" he continued. This is not what you came here for. A bee buzzes suddenly in your ear and the sun becomes too hot and the sweating is no longer fun. You sigh, a gusty sigh, your guts heave, shoulders rise and fall. He is still finger-picking but not singing. "Play that song again, Bob." He starts up again, never looking at you, but he's faceless, so it doesn't really matter. It's not like he would look you in the eyes, anyway. You feel yourself getting cranky. Maybe it's the heat. He is singing too softly.

You open your eyes and noticed the heavy-set man beside you has left. You are pleased to see you haven't passed your stop, and you're only at Rector Street so you have several more stops to go, a little more time on the subway before you have to go to your office. Seeing Bob did not comfort you like you thought it would. You turn off your i-pod. You listen to the homeless man asking for change. "I know my situation is all my fault...I was a drug addict. This is my

cross to bear, but please, my children are hungry. I want the food for them, not for me. So if you have anything, a granola bar, a sandwich, a pretzel, anything." You've noticed a trend in begging on the subway lately. People are blaming themselves, putting on a humble façade. You are still not inspired to give. You never give of yourself, you realize. That was something he told you but you didn't believe until now. However, this realization doesn't guilt you into giving money. You're poor, too. You spend your money stupidly. But you dig in your purse to see if maybe you have a spare granola bar or a pretzel. All you find is a stick of gum half out of the wrapper and covered in lint and ink. Gum offers no nutrients and it's sugar-free, so the homeless children wouldn't even get the benefit of empty calories. You, for once, look the beggar in the eyes and shrug. "Sorry," you say. He nods, holding your eyes for a split second too long, and moves along. Now you're uncomfortable. This is why you have trouble making eye contact.

The homeless man shuffles away and it's a good thing, because the woman who sits down beside you at the next stop has a bag of groceries with her, and she doesn't look like she would spare much of anything, judging from the hard set of her jaw and the thin line of her mouth. She looks at you and her lips seem to disappear. Her plastic shopping bag brushes your leg. You look into it and all you see is a 2 liter of Coke, a bag of Lay's potato chips and a package of Oreos. It's so oddly touching, so purely American, that your heart breaks a little bit. You want to hug this woman. You also want to wring her neck for passing along such unhealthy snacks with all we know about health these days. Mostly, you just want to rip open that package of Oreos and stuff a fistful into your mouth at once.

Just past Prince Street, the air conditioner stops working. Your skin gets clammy before you've reached the next stop, sweat beads on your upper lip. Your hair is snaky damp clumps on your neck. There is an Indian boy across the aisle from you, cute, taking his glasses off and wiping his face with a maroon washcloth he pulled from his bag. *Does he always travel with that?* The heat is so pervasive; you know it's the only thing on his mind. You turn left, to

the door that leads to the next car. You wish you were taller and could see through the window in the door if the people in that car are fanning themselves and wonder if it's worth the effort to actually get up to check. You look back to the Indian boy. He is not looking at you. He is standing up and heading to the door to your left. He stands there for what seems like too long. He is not reaching for the handle, just staring. His back slumps.

You think how nice it is to share a singular train of thought with someone. Your brain immediately shifts to the boy of two months, the one you keep remembering to forget, and your final argument, his words that solidified your breakup: "I still never have any idea what's going to come out of your mouth."

