

Razor Wire

by Robb Todd

I flip up my hoodie, pull the string tight across my lips until it cuts into them, pull tighter, saw back and forth until blood warms the hairs on my chin. My girlfriend is asleep, hugging a pillow instead of me, and my breath is an amber cloud under lamplight.

Small piles of frozen dog shit stud the sidewalk and mounds of black plastic trash bags lean against a chain-link fence topped with coils of razor wire. I like razor wire. I like looking at it, I like saying it, I like hearing it slice the air: "Razor wire." "Ray-zor why-er."

Cones of light beam in rows over the elevated subway tracks. On the train this morning, a woman looked sad. She was not crying, but her chin trembled like it was going to burst. She pressed the corner of her bag to her lips and stared through the floor of the subway car, stop after stop. Every time her chin quivered, I studied her eyes expecting tears, but they never came. Her eyes were wet obsidian to the edges. I wrote down what happened on my phone and took a blurry picture without her knowing.

I met my girlfriend after work at a bar that played dance music but did not have a dance floor. People were not there to drink but everyone was drinking. Everyone was looking at everyone looking at everyone. All the women looked like the woman on the train. My girlfriend said she was bored. We left. We came home. I stared at the ceiling in bed next to her. I whispered, "Razor wire." She did not hear me. Now I am standing at the top of a hundred-something steps. Nothing moves in the street under the tracks.

You can ride from here through the heart of the city to the southern tip of the island in about an hour. A train echoes off sleeping brick apartment buildings, the shadows of fire escapes frozen against the walls, the rails rattle, and sparks float to the asphalt like electric

snow. The train screeches to a stop. Sliding doors swish open, a bell, swish close. Nobody gets on or off. Nobody else is awake in the world.

A white plastic bag flaps in the razor wire above me. "Razor wire." I look down the steps: shattered glass, chicken bones, crushed cans, candy wrappers, and a puddle of puke with a splatter crater in the middle. Broken bottles glint in the wind and the empty train disappears around the bend. Three stops and an icy river before it is underground.

I made myself stare at the woman on the train, afraid of what I might not feel. I stared. She was in pain. I could not help her. I stared. She was in pain. I waited for something.

Where I sit now was once a rocky cliff with tall pines. A picture of it from hundred years ago hangs in a museum. The street was dirt and a truck with cartoon tires kicked up a cloud of dust under the subway tracks. These steps were cut into that stone. Dozens of families have lived in my apartment before me, warmed by the same rattling, hissing radiator. There is an Irish pub on every corner of this neighborhood but very few Irish left. Most everyone is brown. There is a Buddhist temple a block away but I do not speak Chinese. I would sit in lotus position, my palms turned up on my knees, thumbs making circles with fingers. I would stretch the letters of my mantra: "Razzzerrrwhyerrrr."

When I get off the subway after work, I walk down three dozen steps from the train, climb up these dozen dozen steps to my street and up a half-dozen dozen steps to my apartment. Four keys unlock four locks along the way. Fresh graffiti brags on every building. Most of it is new — bored, uninspired children of a recession, not artists. Scribbles and scratches with nothing to say. There is no sleep. The woman was sad. I lean back on the cold stone steps, pull a flask from my jacket pocket, sip from the brushed steel. My cut lips sting. I

wait. The light of another train appears, a distant speck, a star. The air is filled with the scent of Italian cookies. The Italian cookie union is still on strike and scabs bake biscotti and anginetti and angel wings.

If I could sleep, the train would be a lullaby. A mariachi band woke me up once in the middle of the night, serenading outside a window across the street. I yelled out the window, "Shut the fuck up!" but not in Spanish. My girlfriend got mad at me.

Soon there will be barking dogs and sirens and honking horns and hydraulic bus brakes and beeping trucks backing up. All there is now are the sounds of a city moving slowly. The train in the distance sounds like a cresting wave. A pigeon pecks a chicken bone. The bag struggles in the shark teeth of the razor wire. "Razor wire." My chin trembles.

