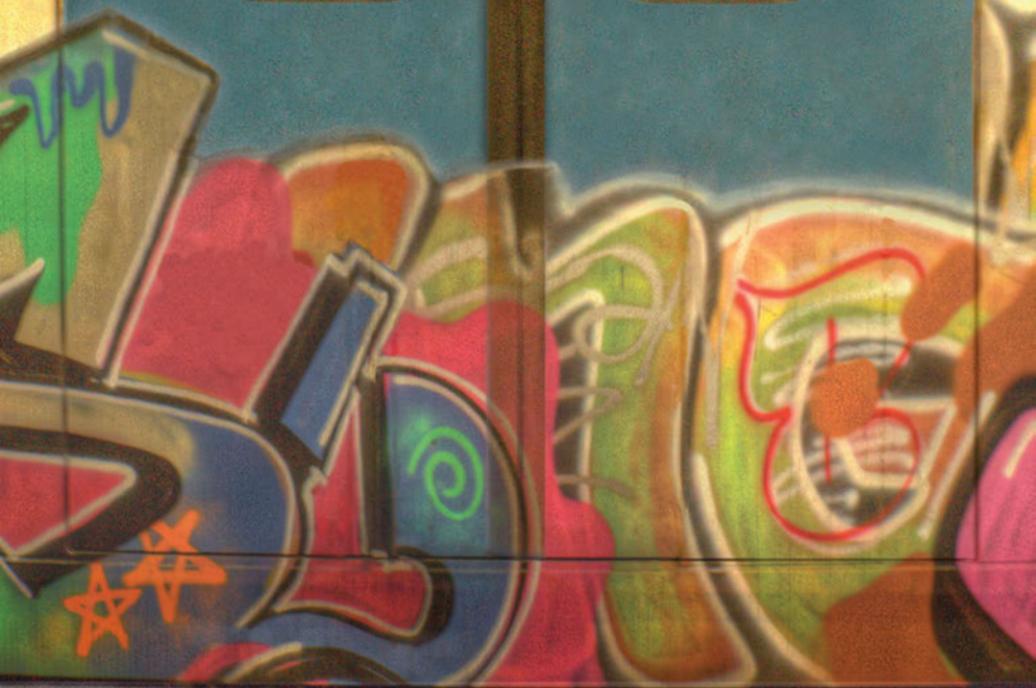


SUBWAY LOVE



N o r a R a l e i g h B a s k i n

SUBWAY

LOVE



LAURA remembered the day it was taken, or rather she remembered as soon as she saw the photo, pinned to the folding display panel among all the others. It was a black-and-white picture of *her* sitting on a swing, clutching the chain in one hand, her eleven-year-old face smudged with dirt, and her blackened bare feet poking out from the bottom of frayed overalls. It was taken at the Sunday picnic in Woodstock on the town green, 1969, just three years earlier, and now here it was, for sale.

Laura didn't say anything. She just stared at herself in the photograph. The other photos, all mounted on the same gray-matte board, revealed scenes meant

to capture the time, *this* hippie time that was already passing, that had already passed. The artist, at least Laura assumed he was the artist, didn't recognize her. He sat on his metal stool chatting with a prospective buyer.

One photo held the image of a young couple in a close embrace. The girl, or woman, or girl-woman, was wearing a long velvet dress with lace trimming the ends of the wide sleeves. If the picture were in color, the dress might have been red or deep purple, like velvet is meant to be. The man was shirtless, his skinny hip bones protruding from his jeans, and wisps of curly hair reaching out of his pants and up to his belly.

Laura turned her head away.

Another photo showed a wildly bearded man sitting on a milk crate, playing the guitar; the varnish was worn where his hand had moved up and down hundreds, if not thousands, of times across the strings. He was looking directly into the camera.

"Can I help you?" The photographer must have lost his sale. He was alone now, without a customer, and he turned his attention to Laura.

"Oh, no," Laura answered.

He still didn't seem to realize who she was; that an older version of this girl he was talking to hung on the board behind him, the actual in-the-flesh representative of the 1960s flower children that he was trying

to peddle. What right had he to sell this picture, her image, her moment in time?

“You like my work,” he said. He didn’t ask.

Laura answered, “Not particularly.”

She walked away from the man’s booth. It was a huge crafts fair, and her mother had told her these kinds of massive events were going to be big in the future. Laura’s mother said she could make a lot of money selling leather goods, headbands, vests, and fringed pocketbooks. Not that they wanted a lot of money. Just enough to live on. Anything more than that was being a Capitalist Pig.

According to her mother, those people (people like her father) were deluded and misguided. They were squares and they were conservatives. They were Republicans.

When she was in elementary school, Laura used to open her lunch, praying she could be a Republican, praying that there had been some horrible switch, some crack in the fabric of the universe that had dumped her into this life, and that right at this moment, she would slip back into reality, a reality that put a Skippy peanut butter and Welch’s grape jelly sandwich on Wonder bread and a bottle of Yoo-hoo in front of her. If the universe really wanted to be nice, there might even be a Twinkie or a Hostess cupcake. Laura would watch her friends unroll their Yodels and

lick the white insides while she bit into her peanut butter (all-natural, unsalted, and awful), banana, and honey sandwich on cracked whole wheat.

“Hey, you,” the photographer called after her. “Isn’t this you?” He pointed to his own work. “It’s you, isn’t it? Just younger.”

Laura looked at the picture once more, as if only just now considering the claim. She had dressed like her mother wanted that day; she ran around bare-foot, holding out her hand and begging for food from the other picnickers (because, after all, wasn’t Jesus a rebel, a long-haired freak who loved the poor?), playing the part of the carefree Woodstock flower child.

“No,” Laura answered, “that’s not me.”

The man looked back and forth from Laura to the photograph. “No, it is. I remember now. You and your friend were taking turns on the swing. It was the end of the afternoon, in Woodstock. The Sunday picnic. It was bloody hot. I remember.”

Laura shook her head. “Not me.”

“Oh, yeah?” the man said. “Well, whatever you say, babe, but my work is important. You’re too young to understand, but this is all going to end, and someday people will look back, and they won’t have faith anymore; they won’t remember. But I’ll have the proof.”

Laura wanted to tell him she *did* understand. She wanted to tell him what it was going to be like in the future, but she knew he wouldn't believe her.



JONAS'S cell phone dropped into the toilet again. It wasn't his fault, but of course, it was. It tipped off the toilet tank when he was getting out of the shower.

"Shit," he said out loud. He was already late for school. Twelve unexcused tardies meant a full-point drop in his GPA. Not that he cared. It was all a load of crap, but for some reason it bothered him. He stubbed his toe reaching for something to dry himself with. Dirty towels were scattered on the bathroom floor, too damp to use, along with a couple of pairs of underwear, stray socks.

"Shit." Why does a big toe hurt so damn much? You'd think it would be more resilient being out there on the front lines.

Worse, his Droid looked dead. He took out the battery, left the whole thing open on his desk, and hoped for a miracle.

"Jonas," his mother called up the stairs, "it's six fifty-six."

"Thanks for the info, Mom," Jonas said. If he ran

out of the apartment now, he might be lucky enough to jump directly onto the train, walk the five blocks to school, and make it there before they locked the doors. He'd have to be buzzed in then, a surefire tardy.

“Do you want breakfast?”

He hated those kinds of questions. Of course he wanted breakfast, but he was late, and even if he wolfed down a bowl of cereal as fast as he could, he'd be that much later. If he took time to tie his shoes, he'd be later still.

His mother was standing in her bathrobe, coffee in hand.

“I'll take some coffee,” Jonas said. “To go.”

His mother smiled widely, as if this was going to be the greatest accomplishment of her day. Being a person's be-all and end-all is a heavy load.

“Consider it done,” she said. She handed him a thermos. “Light, no sugar.”

It could have been his father's load too, but even before they split up, it wasn't.

“Thanks, Mom,” Jonas said. He arabled his army jacket and headed at.

Jonas missed the 6 train by two seconds, watched the doors closing—faces inside speeding away—and wondered if it was worth it going to school at all at this point.



CHANGE floated on four-four time from the apartment next door right into their window, and just like that, the world as Laura knew it began to unravel. It began long before they moved to Woodstock, before crafts fairs, before long hair, before any town picnic. It began when her parents were still married, when they all still lived in New York City. Laura was seven, her brother ten.

“It’s so hot.” Mitchell waved his hand in front of his face. He was sprawled on the couch in front of the television set. *Chiller Theater* was about to begin.

The windows were open wide, which never failed to elicit the same debate, whether it was hotter with

the windows open or closed. Their mother couldn't stand the stuffiness. Their father said having the windows open just brought in hotter air from outside, but that day, it brought in music, a rhythmic guitar accompanying a whiny, pleading voice singing about a tambourine and a journey on a magical ship. Laura stood by the window, listening.

As always when a babysitter was coming over, Laura's parents were going out with the Hanssens, and so five kids—three Hanssens plus Laura and Mitchell—were dumped together in one apartment or the other. This time it was Laura and Mitchell's apartment, which is why Mitchell got the couch.

The grown-ups were busy chatting about the film they were about to see. Mitchell and John were arguing about who should get the prime real estate on the couch so he could stretch his legs. The two Hanssen sisters were clutching each other while the creepy six-fingered hand rose out of the ground and the deep, wavy voice announced the start of the show. Laura stood by the window and felt a secret kinship with the music no one else seemed interested in or even able to hear.

She didn't know exactly where the song was coming from, or who was singing. At that moment, Laura's mother walked into the living room wearing a plain

sheath and flat shoes, with her hair in a neat bob—a veritable, fashionable, and very conservative take on Jackie Kennedy.

“Hey, sweetie,” her mother said. “Why aren’t you watching television with everyone else?” She ran her hand over Laura’s head gently.

“I will,” Laura answered. She turned away from the window. The episode was starting, “Attack of the 50 Foot Woman.” She needed to find space for herself on the floor next to Julie or Lizzy Hanssen, far away from the boys.

Then Laura caught the look of her mother’s face as she heard the song. The desperate, urging music that leaked randomly from someone’s open window would somehow have the power to change all their lives, but no one knew it then.

Jonas sat down on the bench and waited for the next train. He might not be going to school, but he sure wasn’t going back home. The platform was crowded with commuters, everyone vying for personal space: an angry businesswoman in a blue suit bumping into an earbudded kid in pants belted around his butt; a future famous movie star on her way to a waitress gig alongside a corporate ad executive who didn’t lift his eyes from his BlackBerry. And they all had the same

goal—to cram into the next train and get where they needed to be in as little time and with as little acknowledgment of one another as possible.

Jonas stayed seated, letting five trains come and go, watching hundreds of people pouring out and hundreds more getting sucked inside and being whisked away, and eventually the crowd thinned out altogether.

A pretty girl wearing those large headphones, the thick, padded kind that shut out the whole world, sat down next to him. She swayed ever so slightly to music that must have been thunderously loud, since the beat was audible three feet away. Jonas hadn't seen her walk over, so he had no way of determining how tall or short she was. He never tried talking to a girl who was taller than he was, no matter how pretty, and it seemed each year his choices were diminishing. Her choice of audio technology precluded that from happening anyway. Maybe that was her point.

When the next train stopped, she got up and hopped on. Jonas could see her, silently dancing, as she held on to the metal pole inside. He smiled to himself. The doors hissed shut and the whole image was gone. Girls, or getting girls, had not been his strong suit, not since third grade, which he now considered the height of his romantic life, when he and James Michelson duked it out during recess to see who would get

Sabrina Branch to be his girlfriend. James pushed him twice, Jonas pushed him back once, before the playground monitor broke it up, giving them both detention, and by that time Sabrina had changed her mind about her potential relationship status.

“I don’t want to be anyone’s girlfriend,” she announced, and she ran off to the basketball courts.

Last time he checked, Sabrina had updated herself as “in a relationship” with Caroline Fein and posted ridiculously provocative webcam photos of the two of them hugging and kissing. Photos had become so meaningless. Anyone could take one, anytime, anywhere, and everyone did, all the time. They took pictures with digital cameras, digital video cameras, with cell phones, with their computers. There was a picture of everything.

If 9/11 had happened today, there would be hundreds of videos, the more graphic the better, getting millions of hits all over YouTube. In fact, 9/11 was probably the last major event in human history not to be recorded, posted, tweeted, retweeted, and viewed over and over and over for all time.

Jonas preferred real photography, the kind that took skill and still had meaning, even if he had discovered it by accident. He had found the old film camera in the back of his parents’ closet. His dad must have missed it, or left it on purpose, knowing it was useless,

like, apparently, his family was. It was heavy, a Canon AE-1. When Jonas picked it up by its thin black strap, the whole thing tipped forward and he nearly banged it against the dresser. “Whoa.”

“Jonas, what are you doing in there?” He could tell by Lily’s thick mucousy voice that she had been crying, when the last thing he needed was more crying.

“Nothing. Go find Mom,” he called out. He waited for the footsteps, but his sister didn’t move. He could hear her breathing behind the closed bedroom door. “OK, Lily, come in. But shut the door behind you and be real quiet.”

Lily had burst into the room, throwing herself down onto the carpet next to her brother. Jonas furrowed his brow at her.

“Oh, right.” She jumped up and closed the door with a bang.

His sister was eight, six years younger than he was. She didn’t understand what was happening. She kept asking when Daddy was coming home from the hospital.

“Lily,” their mother would try to explain, “your daddy’s been out of the hospital for weeks. It was just a kidney stone, sweetie. Daddy’s fine. He lives in his own apartment now.”

And Lily would answer with “Yeah, but when will he be home?”

She plopped back down on the floor next to her brother. “What’s that?”

“A camera,” Jonas told her. He turned it over in his hands. There was a long lens and lots of dials with tiny numbers. He clicked open the back, where the film would drop inside.

“Mommy’s being mean to me. Again.” Lily said.

“No, she’s not, Lily. And I know you know Daddy moved out. We saw his new apartment last week. You can’t get what you want just by wanting it bad enough.”

Jonas watched Lily’s eyes filling up. “Lily, I’m here. It’s OK. It’s going to be OK. Nobody stays married anymore. I mean, seriously, who do you know whose parents are married?”

He put down the camera and wrapped his arm around his sister. “And look on the bright side: We get double presents on our birthdays.”

“Is that a present?” she asked.

Jonas picked up the camera again. “It is now,” he said.

And he really hadn’t gone many places without it since. Another train rolled to a stop at the platform and the doors flew open. It had been two years since his dad moved out. It took Jonas a moment to notice the smattering of loopy red lettering covering the side

of the subway car. At first he thought it might be promotional graffiti, the kind in the shuttle trains when the Yankees won the World Series or the Rangers the Stanley Cup. But no, this didn't look commercial. It was just good old-fashioned messy graffiti.

You never saw that anymore in New York.

Maybe it was a MoMA retrospective: New York Subway Art, the Lost Era.

Of course, it would have been easier to flip open a phone, press the power button on a digital camera, point and click, and snap two or four or five pictures, but Jonas reached for his Canon AE-1. This meant unscrewing the lens cap, checking the light meter, twisting the aperture, and setting the shutter speed, and by the time he did all that, the subway was picking up speed. The photo would be blurry. It might not even be recognizable, but Jonas was pretty certain he had captured the image.

Subway Love

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