



Metro by TM O'Leary

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by: T.M. O'Leary

It began at around 4 pm. It was just like any other day. A ride on the Metrolink, a coffee from Starbucks, an illegal smoke on the steps of the station. The air was crisp. It was January...something. Thomas couldn't remember. He wanted to finish the Marlboro before he boarded the Shrewsbury train. However, he was disturbed when an icy wind started blowing harshly against his right cheek. He snuffed the butt half through the smoke and started walking up the stairs.

Two young people, a couple, passed him on the way up. The sky was glowing brightly though no sun was showing through the clouds. A day where sunglasses were necessary, but still gloomy enough to expect snow. He sat in the Northernmost unit so he was facing the way the train was moving. The unit doors still open, an icy chill swept through it. The Securitas security boys checked his ticket. An all day pass. He half expected to get a nod of appreciation from the guard for the pricey purchase, but instead just moved on to the next ticket holder.

Not a lot of people on board that afternoon. Maybe a dozen people combined throughout the entirety of the cabs. A girl boarded. Very pretty. Maybe 21. She was wearing a brown and heather trench coat which looked to be made of 100% wool. On that chilly day, it was buttoned to the very top. A small pink scarf peeked out where the collars met. Blue jeans underneath, and brown moccasins. Beautiful brown hair and a book beneath her right hand. He could barely see the title. "Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim".

The doors closed and the Metrolink operator asked the passengers to take their seats and that the train would be moving soon. The brown-haired girl didn't sit. She stood with her left hand hooked around the bar and swayed when the Metro

finally started to pick up speed. As much as he would have liked to stare at her all day, she had already flashed Thomas a couple of apprehensive looks and he didn't want to make her uncomfortable. He felt rather timid himself. He looked away. He diverted his eyes to the abandoned buildings and factories along the Metrolink route, covered in graffiti with their windows smashed out.

They reached their next stop and a large group of people boarded. Over a dozen people huddled onto the unit, their arms folded, their shoulders up around their neck from the chill. He briefly wondered where they were headed, what they did for a living, what was on their bucket list?

He knew Forest Park was his first destination. The operator's voice cracked over the intercom instructing the passengers to exit from the left. Thomas stepped off the unit and an arctic blast of wind hit his face. From there, he would catch a connecting Metro to the Delmar Loop or U City Loop as the Washington University students called it. It was one of his favorite places in the world. He gazed down the track as the Metro approached, his eyes slowly glazing over with wind chill. This unit, more crowded than the last one as it is one of the few connection points on the St. Louis Metrolink.

Thomas stepped off at his destination and discreetly slipped his wallet from his back pocket to his front. Having his wallet stolen was not an odd occurrence in St Louis so he always took extra precaution. Upon looking around his surroundings, he saw a group of teenagers hanging off the hand railings on the other side of the tracks. He would have to walk straight through them to reach the street. Walking through groups of people, particularly those already associating with each other caused nervousness for him. He was what some would call "anti-social".

One of the kids jumped off the railing and stopped him. "Hey" the young man said. Thomas didn't respond, he simply looked him in the eye. "I saw you put your wallet in your front pocket when you got off. Worried you might get robbed?" He was spot on. "It has happened to people before in this area" Thomas replied. There was a certain aggressive energy in the air that Thomas could feel. The small group of friends who were just a second ago, about 5 of them, hanging off the railings were now positioned around Thomas. They didn't look like an immediate threat but their body language was intimidating.

"Listen here chief, I have something I want you to hold for me. I have to go up the street and talk to my boy. See that officer?" The boy pointed at the direction of a cop standing on the top of the Delmar stairs. The officer was staring downwards on the track and was slowly turning his head towards them. "Don't look. Chill chill." The boy said. Thomas didn't quite know what to make of the situation and wasn't sure what the boy was asking but panic was starting to creep up his throat. "Like I said I just need to holler at my boy right quick and my boy Jeff here..." "Sup" says the friend. "... he's gonna wait right here on this side of the tracks. If I pass by this cop, he is going to stop me and ask me to empty my pockets because he busted me doin' shit I wasn't supposed to be doin' on these tracks before." Instantly Thomas thought why the hell doesn't he have one of his friends hold whatever the hell it is?

The boy pulled back the bottom edge of his shirt and Thomas could see a pistol tucked into the front of the boy's pants. Immediately his heart started racing. It became very clear to Thomas that no matter what he said at that exact moment would mean dire consequences regardless of what actually came out of his mouth. "Hold this, it will be 15 minutes and I will give you \$20 for your time." The boy said, and slapped a \$20 bill in Thomas' hand and then after a careful look back and forth handed him the gun and said, "hurry up! Put it in your pocket!" Not knowing what to do, Thomas complied. Finally the pressing question came to the surface. "Why can't one of your boys hold this while you go up the street?" Thomas asked. The boy seemed like he had fully expected Thomas to ask just that question. "My boy here is already on parole and these other four dudes are comin' with me." The boy said. The guy who the boy was talking about who was apparently on parole looked to be not even 17 years old. But this was St.Louis, Thomas knew of people not even 15 who had been incarcerated for well over a year.

Thomas was petrified of the situation he found himself in. "Like I said, 15 minutes and I will be right back. No sweat." The boy said. As the boy said the word "sweat" Thomas instantly started feeling little ice drops of perspiration run down his neck and down his spine. Before Thomas could tell the boy why he was the last person for this detail, the boy and the other 5 members of his crew jogged off towards the officer and up the stairs, disappearing across the street.

Thomas didn't know what to make of this situation at all. Manic thoughts ran through his head: Do I stand here? Do I take a seat? Do I head over the the trash

can and just dump the pistol and go on my merry way? He sure as hell wouldn't dare board the metro again with a concealed firearm on his person. If he got caught, that is a two year stint in the Thunderdome: The St Louis City Jail where inmates fight so violently that they make the floor shake and the roof vibrate. He decided to try to play it cool: Cross the tracks and mind my own p's and q's. Just another day. This was the first time he had been seriously hassled at a Metrolink stop and for his inauguration, it had to be the worst situation possible. Panic was not a familiar sensation in Thomas. Nothing that had escalated to a full fledged panic attack. He was thankful he never had one. But he felt he would soon find out exactly what one felt like. Finally, after looking around, salvation. He saw a trashcan to the far left of the stop but as soon as he got up out of his seat, a bicycle cop wheels up to the trashcan and parks against it. He was devastated.

Snow began to fall. Thomas slowly took his seat again. It was coming down quickly and in wide range but the chunks of snow themselves were not very thick. He tried an old mantra he heard while observing a yoga class one time: Think of your finest day. Remember the good things that are going on in your life. Remember your center. He immediately began day dreaming about the day he lost his virginity. The first time he saw the ocean. His first airline flight as a child. Anything and everything that was not there, in that present moment.

"Feeling okay?" Oh shit. It was the bicycle cop. Sitting on the bench with Thomas' head tilted back trying to remember the best days of his must've looked like he was about to nod out on heroin. "Um, yea, I was just daydreaming." Thomas said. She shifted her belt. "There has got to be a warmer place to do that." She said. Thomas half-smiled. Her radio crackled. She spoke some police talk gibberish into the speaker and released the button. "You have any id on you sir?" She asked Thomas. "Of course." He replied. He pulled out his wallet from his front pocket. A rush of blood and adrenaline shot up his throat. He had put the gun in the same pocket as his wallet and if the bicycle cop wanted him to empty out his pockets on the spot, all she had to do was ask. Trying to retrieve his wallet now would instantly throw Thomas under the bus. Just then, loud horn went off in the distance. The Metro must have spotted someone on the tracks and sounded the horn to signal for them to get out of the way. The bicycle cop looked over her shoulder at the Metrolink cab. This bought Thomas just enough time to make the maneuver he had to make. As she looked, Thomas maneuvered the gun's barrel away from where his wallet was stuck and he got his I.D. out just before she

looked back at him. Thomas' hands shook profusely. "I have it right here. Ha." Thomas could feel the sweat build up on his forehead. "Mr. Robinson. From Crystal City? Far away from home today aren't you? What brings you to Delmar?" Oh shit. What am I gonna say.

Originally my plan for coming to the loop was to go to Blueberry Hill and grab dinner and maybe shoot some pool at Fitz's but now I have to explain to the cop what I was doing there perched like a dumbass on the Metro stop. "I am just on my way to the airport. I had lunch at Blueberry Hill and now I am going to meet my sister at the airport." It was a reasonable explanation, he thought, but he could tell he gave away something in his voice and he could see her eyebrows shift beneath her sunglasses to indicate she was puzzled. "Well you just missed your train." She said. The comment threw him through a loop. What train? Is she talking about the Metrolink? Just then it dawned on him. "Oh yes. Well there will be another one on its way shortly." He showed extra teeth when he smiled. "Well stay out of trouble Mr. Robinson." She said as she handed back his I.D. back. As she picked up her bike to walk up the stairs, he managed to get his I.D. back into his wallet and then put his wallet...shit! There's hardly any room in my pocket! Between the wallet and the firearm it looks like I am concealing a small midget in my pants! He tucked the wallet in half way through so the other half was poking out from his jeans. OK, OK, five or six minutes have gone by and no hang ups besides the officer. This asshole better show up soon before shit really goes down. The officer Thomas was warned about was making his way towards him as the bicycle cop pedaled away. The cop was coming in Thomas' direction. Thomas tried not to look directly at him, but he could see the cop was trying to make eye contact.

He walked directly in front of Thomas. "Sir?" He said standing stiffly. "Yes officer?" Thomas said, as nervous as could be. "Where are you heading today sir?" The cop asked "Um, to the airport, to see my sister." Thomas replied. This didn't put a dent in the cop's inquisitiveness. "I just got done talking to the Officer Maley." Said the cop. "She says you were coming from Blueberry Hill and were on your way to the airport. Like you said, but..." good, this honorable officer was vouching for me and was confirming what I was doing at the Metro stop. "I just saw you get off the stop two stops ago and you haven't left this stop yet." Thomas' head spun like crazy. Passing out sounded like a great idea at that point. A million excuses ran through

his head. I hadn't had to lie in any way since he was in high school. What the fuck am I going to say to this random cop? "Paul! PAUL!" Screams came from the top of the stairs. The cop finally broke eye contact with him and jerked his head over to the street where there was a lot of commotion. The cop ran off like a lightning bolt where Thomas could see two of the six bastards who were left him there to be harassed by police while he had a (presumably loaded) handgun the size of Arkansas in the front pocket of his Levi's.. Hopefully the fucker who handed off the pistol to Thomas was in the group who both cops now barreled down on, their clubs drawn. Thomas immediately power walked over to the trash can where the bicycle cop was before. Without looking left or right; he dumped the gun through the lid and walked back the way he had come from.

Just then, he heard a roar coming down the tracks of the Metrolink that led back to Forest Park, then

Shewsbury. He quickly boarded and felt the weight of fifty boulders lift off his chest. A spiked chill ran down his spine with the warmth of the cart hitting his body. Almost hyperventilating, almost crying, he sat in the back row, facing traffic, and watched as the police knocked the boy who handed Thomas the gun what felt like a lifetime ago to the ground and applied their handcuffs. The doors closed. The unit began to move.

Feeling back to his old self, he took a gander around the car. Graffiti. Buildings. Cruising on tracks above the street traffic. Bright skies and snow lightly falling. Away from that awful, awful situation. Then, there she was again. Hanging on to the bar at the front of the unit like she was when he boarded at Shewsbury. But how? Why? He had only been off the tracks for 20 minutes and she couldn't possibly have done what she had to do in that short period of time. She looked at Thomas. He realized he was staring again. He looked out the window.

As he watched traffic, he saw her approaching him and with a slight smile across her face. When she got in front of him, they locked eyes and a big smile spread across her face. He smiled sheepishly back at her. She sat down. "I'm Amanda," she said putting her book evenly on her lap. "Thomas", he said. She smelled of dandelions, or some potent pollen. Her hair flowed down well past her shoulder blades. Her eyes as dark brown as freshly brewed espresso. He didn't think of what happened at Delmar.