

Last Stop on the Gold Line

by Scott Cimarusti

It was dark and raining when Paul Evermore stepped out from the lobby of the marble and glass Bainbridge Building. The streetlights above were crowned with misty amber haloes and the traffic lights flickered like hazy red and green kaleidoscopes. Just a few feet away, six lanes of traffic hissed past on the slick pavement. Pedestrians darted out of nearby buildings, scrambling to stay dry. But while they wrestled to raise their stubborn umbrellas, Paul left his closed, opting instead to tilt his face upward to welcome the gentle raindrops.

He could remember doing the same thing when he was a kid—back when daily life had been rich with such simple pleasures. Too bad he had taken them all for granted back then; he could really use them now.

Paul lowered his head against the rain and began his long walk to the bus stop, dreading each step that carried him closer to home. As if it weren't bad enough to be trapped in an aimless and unrewarding career, he didn't even have the promise of a loving family to return to at the end of the day.

His careworn face broke into a wan smile as his thoughts wandered back to the time when his adoring family used to greet him with open arms when he arrived home from work each day. Back when his wife Shannon would drop whatever she was doing to favor him with a sweet peck on the cheek (or a saucy pat on the tush), and their daughter Andrea would leap from her spot on the floor amongst her Barbies and race toward him, nearly bowling him over with an eager hug. Then he and Shannon would make dinner together while their daughter Andrea proudly displayed her latest kindergarten masterpieces. After dinner, the three of them would play board games together, or watch the sunset and chase summer fireflies around the backyard until it was time for bedtime stories.

Somewhere along the way, though, that pigtailed little girl that used to sit atop his shoulders at the Fourth of July parade, her chubby hands sticky with Popsicle juice and cotton candy, had mutated into the fifteen-year old blur dashing out of the house every night, pausing only to exchange venomous words with her equally sharp-tongued mother.

And it wasn't just Andrea who was different now, either. Shannon, his once loving bride, had been replaced by the cynical and distant stranger that he still shared a bed with—though only out of habit now.

Paul found himself lamenting the disintegration of his family often, and all he could do was shake his head in disbelief at how slyly change slithered into one's life;

until one day, a man looked around his dinner table to discover he shared his home with strangers.

He did manage to extract a sliver of solace in the fact that they weren't the only family he knew of that was drifting apart. Just like every other American teenager, Andrea's life was now centered around her friends; she didn't need her father anymore—except for the occasional handout from his wallet. And his marriage to Shannon had fallen into the same trap as countless others; after so many years of juggling careers, parenthood, and other obligations, their time for each other had dwindled away to nothing. He was beginning to wonder if both of his most important relationships were beyond reconciliation....

At least he had his memories, though; no one could take those from him.

He arrived at the bus stop at 6:30 on the dot, just as a pair of headlights stabbed prisms through the sheets of rain. The bus lumbered up to the curb, its lighted display above the windshield spelling out the word GOLD. Paul had been a regular passenger on the Gold Line ever since he could remember.

The bus' brakes squealed in protest as the behemoth eased to a halt and the doors belched outward with a hydraulic gasp. Paul stepped aboard, anticipating the customary noncommittal grunt from the bleary-eyed driver with the smoker's rasp that usually worked the evening shift.

Instead, a fresh young face with piercing blue eyes that matched his crisp uniform greeted Paul from the driver's seat.

Paul blinked at him in surprise. Then he noticed that aside from him and the new driver, the bus was vacant; which was quite unusual for 6:30 in the evening, especially considering rush hour had about another 30 minutes left.

"Good evening, sir. Fare, please." The new driver's voice was almost musical. He smiled at Paul, his teeth an unnaturally brilliant white.

Paul could hear the windshield wipers drumming rhythmically, sweeping silver fans back and forth across the fogged glass as he stared at the man in a silent stupor, his fatigued brain trying to reconcile these changes in routine. The driver repeated his request.

Paul blinked a few times to clear his head. "Hmmm? Oh, I'm sorry." He dug into his coat pocket and slid a dollar bill into the fare slot, his eyes flicking nervously toward the bus driver. He scanned the spot above the windshield to check for the driver's nameplate, but the slot was empty.

"Please take your seat, sir." The anonymous driver gestured toward the clock on the dashboard. "I have a schedule to keep."

Paul chuckled nervously. “Of course,” he stammered. “Sorry.” He stepped gingerly down the aisle and settled into a seat a few rows back, his eyes never leaving the driver.

The doors suddenly jerked shut and the snub-nosed dinosaur lurched away from the curb into the rainy night. An awkward silence descended like an ominous fog. Paul felt compelled to break it.

“So how long have you been driving the Gold Line?”

“Ever since I can remember.”

Paul’s brow narrowed. “That’s strange...I’ve been riding this route for about ten years now and I don’t recall ever seeing you before.”

A knowing smile touched the driver’s eyes. “I’m not surprised.”

For some reason, the driver’s reply thrust an icicle of panic into Paul’s chest. His eyes darted to the pull cord that rang the bell signaling the driver to stop. If he pulled it now and got off, maybe he could find a pay phone and call Shannon. He could make up a story about missing the bus, and ask her to come pick him up. She would most certainly voice her aversion to venturing out on a night like this, but he debated taking that chance.

His fingers had almost reached the bell cord, seemingly by their own volition, when he jerked his hand back. He looked up guiltily and found the driver’s eyes studying him from the rearview mirror.

Returning his gaze out the window and into the night, Paul caught his own pale and weary reflection staring back at him from the glass. He couldn’t believe how old and tired that face looked. And how frightened.

Paul could feel the bus slowing, the brakes screeching to fight inertia and bring the vehicle to a halt. He felt a flicker of relief; another passenger might make the bus ride seem less surreal.

The doors hissed open and a figure in a long white raincoat stepped aboard. Paul was unable to determine the new rider’s gender because the hood concealed the owner’s face. The driver smiled at this new passenger before pulling away from the curb and resuming his route.

Paul’s eyes narrowed.

The new passenger didn’t pay the fare.

But before Paul could consider this further, the mysterious new rider passed by him down the aisle, treating him to a faint whiff of perfume that a distant part of his mind recognized. It was a sweet, floral scent that always reminded him of summer. Summer picnics, sunshine, and...

Shannon.

It was the perfume that Shannon used to wear a long time ago.

Suddenly, Paul found himself swept back to a summer afternoon right after they had been married. The newlyweds had decided to head out to the country for an impromptu afternoon picnic; eventually finding an ideal spot secluded in a shallow valley near a stream and beneath twin oak trees. After they had finished their lunch, they wound up making love in the shade of those trees. He remembered the hum of the insects...the soft caress of the tender July breeze...

A muffled crack of distant thunder shook him out of his reverie, his cherished memories of that bygone summer shattering like glass. Paul shook his head to clear the vision, marveling at how something as commonplace as a fragrance could conjure up such powerfully vivid memories.

He looked up and caught the driver staring at him again with that same knowing smile.

Feeling even more self-conscious, Paul turned his head to check on his fellow passenger, especially now that the familiar perfume had piqued his curiosity.

He found her seated across the aisle from him, about three rows back; her face still shadowed by the hood on her raincoat. Suddenly, as if on cue, she pulled the hood back to reveal a smooth, oval face framed by long chestnut curls like a velvet waterfall. Familiar bright green eyes met his and his stomach plummeted.

It was Shannon.

But not the Shannon he had left this morning. This was the free-spirited young woman he had made love to after that summer picnic so many years ago. The Shannon that loved and embraced him in spite of his faults. He had almost forgotten how beautiful she was.

A tender smile lit up his bride's face as she crossed the aisle to sit beside him.

"Hello, Paul."

But all he could do was gape at her in silence until—for a reason he couldn't explain—Paul found himself on the verge of tears, a lump clogging his throat. Then the dam broke and the tears came; tears that lamented the passage of the countless years of routine and obligations that had eroded a chasm between them.

Without a word, Shannon reached for him and cradled his head to her chest, kissing and caressing his forehead just like she used to.

Paul vehemently denied the impossibility of this vision and instead let a wave of serene ignorance wash over him. He felt like he had finally returned to the comfort and safety of home after a long and wearying journey.

He had just closed his eyes when the bus lurched again, slowing to another stop.

“What’s going on?” he started to say. But the angel beside him placed a rose-petal kiss on his mouth and directed his gaze up toward the front of the bus.

A shorter figure had now boarded; and before he could comprehend what he was seeing, a familiar voice called out to him, “Daddy! Daddy!”

A five-year old Andrea was bounding down the aisle toward him and Shannon, her blonde pigtails trailing behind her like party streamers. She had light blue ribbons in her hair that perfectly matched her cornflower eyes. He could even make out the sprinkle of freckles across her pert nose above her beaming smile—which looked perfect to him despite the small gap left by her first lost tooth.

“Look what I made for you in school today, Daddy!” She called to him, proudly displaying a construction paper masterpiece.

Paul hopped out into the aisle and swept Andrea up in his arms, twirling her around. She laced her smooth, tanned arms around his neck and peppered his face with eager kisses. Ignoring the fact that her clothes were dry despite the rain, he cradled her head on his shoulder and held her for what seemed an eternity, more tears coursing down his flushed cheeks. These tears mourned the bygone days of tea parties, bedtime stories, scraped knees, and the “tickle-monster”.

Shannon had risen from her seat and now entwined her arms around both of them; the trio locked in a perfect embrace that Paul prayed would never end.

Then a quiet chime broke the silence.

Paul looked up to see the sign over the bus driver’s head lit up.

STOP REQUESTED.

The driver turned and smiled warmly at Paul.

“Last stop, Mr. Evermore.”

Paul Evermore could feel the bus slowing to its final stop.

Red and blue flashing lights splashed phantom shadows across the marble and glass façade of the Bainbridge Building. Paramedics wheeled the gurney through the gaping onlookers and hoisted it into the ambulance. Hushed murmurs rippled through the crowd as someone overheard the paramedics declaring the heart attack victim’s time of death at 6:30 pm. No one there knew anything about the late Paul Evermore, but if they had seen his face under the stark white sheet, they still would have recognized his smile as one of contentment; a smile that he would enjoy for an eternity.