

During rush hour, taking the 7 up to Flushing was hell. And in this weather, when we've finally ascended the swirling tunnels and meet the the upper level of the streets and dilapidated buildings, the unexpected darkness made me sad and sleepy. And almost everyone at this hour looked the same way. So I made sure to sit on the side of the subway car that faced the buildings riddled with graffiti. They take up a couple of blocks, maybe even more. Sporadic artist signatures were vague and illegible but I admired the boldness of whomever drew them. They met your eyesight several stories from the ground and were wider than some of the warehouse windows. An indistinguishable likeness to the Notorious B.I.G showed some promise amidst the fog of graffiti, and its portrait spanned an entire corner of one building. I looked on, admiring the artists because of where they made their impressions more so than the impressions themselves. Every now and then I looked at my notebook and the doodles seemed safe and comfortable where they were. I couldn't imagine somehow climbing out of a window to show the world my imaginative response to boredom.

I didn't get a good seat for the brief view of the Court Square stop exhibition. I stood with my back to the tattooed buildings and watched the deep blue naked horizon become censored by the antiquated Silvercup studio sign, and then quickly clothed by apartment complexes. Sitting right next to me was a young girl and next to her was her mother. She looked exactly like the girl, only her appearance was much more conservative. Her lips were tight and smileless, eyes old and resentful, hair short and fluffed.

Her daughter, probably still in high school, couldn't keep her mouth closed. Her pouty little lips were on fire with gossip. She went on and on about some girl named Brittany and the sexy text messages that she accidentally sent to everyone in her Spanish class. Auditions for *Newsies* was coming up soon.

“Promise to help me tonight?” The teenager pleaded, desperation laced in her squeaky voice. “I’m thinking *Moment Like this* or, um, that Christina Aguilera song that’s out right now. It’s a duet but maybe I could just sing all of it on my own. What do you think, mom?”

Her mother’s dead eyes blinked drowsily. “Choose somethin’ easy,” she replied. Most of her answers were like that. Choose something easy. Mind your business about Brittany. You gotta do your homework before going to the party. Her responses were brief, straightforward, and lacked anything other than plain indifference.

Eventually, the daughter grew silent. It seemed like she had nothing left to say. By then, I was about two or three stops away from my apartment. I hoped that it would be a silent conclusion to an otherwise chatty ride home; but out of the corner of my eye I saw the daughter wind up for another story. This time her demeanor was serious, lips as straight and pursed as her mother’s.

“Um, you know,” she began. “Tiffany thought she saw that boy near the LIRR last night.”

I couldn’t help but stare at the girl. She must have noticed because she shot a glance at me. Quickly, my eyes looked straight ahead but my ears vigilantly wriggled. She had stopped talking and the mother, surprisingly, was undisturbed by her daughter’s comment.

Predictably, the daughter paused. She sniffled. The tiny silver loop through her left nostril briefly rose and fell. “She said he looked like the guy in the picture,” she continued. “Only, you know, a bit older. Which is probably right since those pictures they used are old anyway and -”

“Didn’t I tell you not to hang out with Tiffany?” The mom asked. She barely looked at her daughter, who by now had rolled her eyes and groaned.

“We weren’t hanging out,” she said. “This was at school. And Tiffany was hanging out near the Hunters Point stop the night before. She saw him wandering around. But, you know, she didn’t want to

bother him.”

Why didn't Tiffany want to bother him? The young girl made it seem like a Barefoot sighting, something to be admired but avoided. More upsetting was the mother's response.

“Don't be hanging out with Tiffany again,” she obstinately replied. Deadpan, unflinched, and apathetic.

Just as the teenager was about to launch into a tirade about not hanging out with Tiffany (which she most obviously was), the conductor announced my stop and opened the door. Quickly, I exited the subway train.

Bundling up the top of my coat collar, the girl's story resounded in my head. I waited for the sign to flash from the orange “Do Not walk” to the welcoming white icon immortalized in mid-stroll. Johannes had been missing for five months now, and I couldn't imagine how he could survive in this unforgiving weather. I couldn't imagine him alive. He was mute and, although he was the young girl's age, his learning capacity matched that of a toddler. I first noticed him at the 5th avenue stop. Plenty of missing person signs come and go, and I'm contrite to describe my disinterest in most of them. But, Johannes's disappearance seemed particularly urgent, given his mental state. The girl was right, he looked about 10 or 11 in the missing person photo. He had these deep chocolate eyes and a button nose. He didn't look like there was anything wrong with him, not like there is really anything wrong with him I guess. I didn't hear much about the disappearance on the radio or TV, although I don't pay too much attention to those anyway. But it seemed like when the world was looking for someone, it was looking for a blonde-haired, blue eyed child. But here in the city the search for a young black boy seemed more real and less cliché. Perhaps that was why it peaked my interest. That and the thousands of dollars promised to whoever found Johannes.

Finally the sign gave me the signal to cross the street and I obeyed. Instead of walking down the street towards my home, I made a sharp right and headed back up the stairs. I barely made the Manhattan-bound 7.

Most of what I knew was from following the missing persons bulletin, which also seemed to follow me. I saw them on the 7 train, at the major Woodside stop station. I imagined that there was another photo at the Hunters Point Avenue stop. Maybe Tiffany was still there, hanging out.

Before diving into the subway underground, I had a perfect view of the buildings near the Court Square stop. They didn't seem as poignant right then and there. Besides, if I hadn't been forced to change my seat that day then I wouldn't have overheard the conversation between mom and daughter. I should change my seat more often for that reason. I'd probably find out a lot more about the goings-on of the city and its inhabitants. Not that I should eavesdrop. I shouldn't eavesdrop. But, that sort of habit was involuntary.

It was when I got off at the nearly deserted Hunters Point Avenue station that I realized what I was doing and how stupid I felt for doing it. Hundreds of cops must be assigned to look for this kid. What could my flippant attempt to find a young boy contribute to a serious investigation? I sighed and pensively watched the air materialize from my mouth. As I turned around to head to the nearest exit, I inadvertently bumped into a group of youths heading in the opposite direction.

One of them, a young girl, sucked her teeth at me. "Move, bitch," she said. She muttered under her breath, just loud enough for me to hear but too soft to appear threatening. Nonetheless, the rest of her teenage friends began to hoot and holler. The girl grinned proudly; a rite of passage is to be a total asshole in this city, it seemed.

As I watched them walk passed me, my frustration was seething. By then my fingertips felt painfully frozen and my socks were wet at the toes. When I glanced across the way to the Queens bound side of the station no one was there, an indicator that a train had already come and gone. The kids continued to look back at me and laughed.

“Tiffany!” I heard myself yell. Freudian slip. I think I wanted to yell “bitch” back. I could hear my mom saying something about two wrongs not making a right. And maybe I felt guilty in cursing at a kid that didn’t belong to me.

Astonished, the girl turned around, as did her friends.

“How you know me?” She asked.

I sighed a breath of disbelief. This honestly could not be happening. I stuttered, thinking about what I should say. “I, uh, need to speak you,” I spat out. “I’m an investigator specializing in missing persons. I heard you may know of someone’s whereabouts.”

It was a pitiful regurgitation of the crime dramas I watched, but it seemed to work. As I approached Tiffany and her crew with some semblance of authority, they scurried towards the nearest exit, almost leaving the girl by herself. Quickly, she followed them. And, without a thought running through my mind, I ran after her.

My pace was much slower than hers. I was wearing a pair of Mary Janes with velcro straps. They glided well on the slippery surface of the subway platform but were not designed for running. At the end of the platform was a stairwell that lead above ground to the street. Her friends had already disappeared. Just as she was about to climb the steps, I leaped forward and pulled her down to the ground by her black faux leather jacket. We both hit the cold wet floor and groaned with pain. Tiffany soon came back to her senses and tried to wrestle out of her jacket. I grabbed her and bearhugged her.

While holding the flailing kid, a wave of consequences ran through my mind. Assault. Impersonating a police officer. What other laws were I breaking? But, it didn't stop me. Instead, I begged her to relax until, finally, she stopped.

Tiffany turned around to me. By then I was close enough to her that if she tried to run again I could catch up to her quickly. I was hoping it wouldn't get to that. As I pulled Tiffany up on her feet, her once dyspeptic expression melted into concern. Tiffany wrinkled her thick eyebrows, eyes dark and fearful. "What do you want from me?"

I hadn't thought about this moment; if anything, I wanted to tell the little girl off. I wanted to ask her why she thought it was okay to let a lost little boy run off without saying anything to her parents or the police. I wanted to shake her and tell her this was serious shit, and that poor boy must have been hungry or confused. Why didn't you do the right thing? But, that sounded more like a mother than an investigator. Quickly, I picked through the memories of *Law and Order* and tried to remember what a real cop would do.

Since Tiffany seemed scared, I looked around for a bench where we could sit. Then I noticed the nails on the wall where the bench was once bolted in and ditched the idea. Intuitively, I knelt down to meet her eye level and realized she wasn't that short and I was now awkwardly looking up at her, discomfort forming in my body.

"You know there's a little boy missing," I said. "Johannes..." Shit, what was his last name? Although my voice had trailed I looked at her affirmatively and faintly smiled. "Can you tell me when was the last time you saw him?"

Tiffany rolled her eyes. At that moment, I could see why the mom on the train didn't want her young daughter to hang out with her. She wore bright blue eye shadow and shellacked her eyelashes in

mascara. Her mouth was painted a glossy and glittery pink rouge. Her very mannerisms were spuriously mature. She wore hot pants and her midriff was showing. It wasn't immediately apparent, but being close to her now I could tell she was trembling. Maybe because of me, or because she made a poor fashion choice.

"I dunno," Tiffany answered. "Maybe, like two or three nights ago."

"Did you see him down here?"

Tiffany shook her head. "Upstairs," she said. "Around the LIRR trains."

"Was he on the tracks?"

She shook her head again. "I saw him walking around the street outside."

"Well, what was he doing?"

She simply shrugged her shoulders. "Just walking. He kept looking behind him and around. Just seemed weird, you know?"

I stood up. "Was someone following him?" I could hear my tone intensify.

"I dunno. Maybe? I thought I saw some guy with a big thing on his neck going in the same direction as the kid." Tiffany snickered. "Maybe that kid saw the guy and got scared. Dude looked like a freak."

I headed upstairs and was immediately hit with the chilling winds coming off of the East River. Tiffany didn't know much else. Besides the other information she had given me, the only key piece of the puzzle was that both Johannes-or a boy that looked like Johannes-and the stranger behind him headed in the same direction, east towards 27th Street. But that could all be for naught. When I asked her if she was sure it was Johannes, she didn't know how to answer. Although I had plenty more to say,

I simply thanked her and gave her a castigated look as she left.

Long Island City was largely industrial. Headed towards the East River was a sprawling section of warehouses and railroad tracks. In the opposite direction, passed Pulaski Bridge, were the restaurants and expensive, modern-looking apartment complexes overlooking most of the East River and facing midtown Manhattan. The prospect of finding either Johannes or the strange man Tiffany had described seemed perilous. I bundled the collar of my coat up towards my neck, and walked, almost hopelessly, toward 27th Street.

Motivation. I had to be pretty motivated to pursue what appeared to be a hopeless search. I wrestled a teenage girl to the ground for details. I supposed that would be the point of no return for me. The girl would go home and tell her family. They would call the cops, who would no doubt be surveilling the subway station for a woman of my plainly description. Hopefully, I looked enough like every other waspy woman that they may stop someone else for questioning. No, if I was going to return to the subway station I wanted to return with something worthwhile. A missing boy would be helpful.

I was on my own on the streets of Hunters Point Avenue, surrounded by old windowless buildings and vacant delivery trucks. The streetlights barely illuminated my direction. How could I even see Johannes in the dark? A gust of wind bitterly struck me, challenging my pathetic manhunt... well, boyhunt. At that point, my clothes felt particularly damp. I looked down and discovered my sweater and pants maculated with dirt and cold, muddy water. They were either badges of honor or signs of disgrace and sheer lunacy. At any rate, I shivered and pressed onward. The wind made my eyes water and it was difficult to see in front of me.

As I crossed 27th Street, I saw someone in front of me carrying a small plastic bag. It was a passing concern, fleeting, but I thought it was odd. There weren't any stores around that I knew of.

There weren't many apartment buildings or houses nearby either. I slowed down my pace and stayed behind the guy. We passed by a truck rental building with a parking lot in front of it. Coming up to my right was a large truck that cast a shadow on the floor next to me. The guy ahead of me turned around and, as he did, I quickly jumped into the shadow and got up as close to the truck as I could. My heart skipped a beat when the guy paused and looked around. Then, he kept walking. And I soon began to follow him again, noting the bulged excrescence sticking out from the right side of his neck.

We soon approached a bridge, the type that lifted for oncoming ships. Right before the bridge was an apartment building with a red awning. I thought that the man would enter the building and put my paranoia at ease; but he didn't. Instead he slipped through the opening of a fence right next to the bridge. Although every part of me wanted to run in the opposite direction, I ran towards the fence. Initially I edged along the building in case the stranger thought was being followed. When I finally approached the fence, I peeked over and caught sight of the man balancing himself over a steep bed of rocks. There wasn't a staircase or anything of the sort leading towards the rocks. He must have jumped down. It appeared that the apartment building was held up by rows of pillars spaced out between 3-4 feet. They left a void, a large expansive space mostly filled by more rocks. The stranger disappeared underneath the building.

By my estimation, the strange man and his noticeable tumor hadn't done anything illegal yet. But, it was clear that any guy living in the hollows of an apartment building that overlooked a river was probably not the type to keep good company. He was probably the type to keep secrets. I knew I shouldn't go any further with my search, but the growing fear in my belly also felt like I was close to the truth that I had stubbornly been looking for. I took out my cell phone out of my coat pocket and reluctantly dialed 911.

“Hello, 911 Operator. What is your emergency?”

“My name is Christina Bennett,” I answered. I spoke quickly and quietly. “I am at a bridge past 27th Street and Hunters Point Avenue. I suspect dangerous activity taking place and I need the police here immediately. Please hurry.”

I hung up the phone. I should have stayed on the phone, at the very least to confirm that the cops would be on the way. But, it was also highly likely that I had followed a bum who was trying to escape the cold. If this was the case, I hoped the operator would ignore my call and tend to other urgent matters.

I slipped through the opening in the fence and looked down below. It seemed like a long fall down to a bunch of rocks. But, nonetheless, I jumped. Aside from the pain in my ankle as I made impact, I made it in one piece. Suddenly, the rocks slid from underneath me and I almost went right into the river. I caught grip of the dirt and climbed back up. Then, I saw a small figure emerge from the space underneath the building. I remained low to the ground. Was that Johannes? Behind him was the silhouette of the man I had followed. He was pointing something into his back. It must have been a gun. Possibly a knife. I held my breath as I watched the man kick the boy into the water. The boy didn't fall into the river immediately; he hit the bottom of the rocks and rolled to the edge. He lied there, moaning and trying to move. My heart beat rapidly and before I knew it I leapt from my hiding spot and ran towards him. The man slowly climbed down the rocks and aimed what now appeared to be a gun at the boy's body. I jumped onto him and threw him down on the ground. I could feel his large tumor against my cheek and resisted the urge to vomit. Before he could turn his gun to me, I gathered some small pebbles and sand in my hand and threw it into his eyes. He shouted and fell back again. Gunshots went off like little firecrackers. The light exploded from the barrel and I moved quick to avoid being its target.

The man shot wildly into every direction. I jumped behind him and grabbed hold of his arm. I pushed it down away from me. My hands crawled towards his. I pried his thick, sausage-sized fingers from the gun, trying desperately to get some grip on the damn thing and end this once and for all. It was at that moment I saw the boy arise. Even in the dark, I could tell it was Johannes. He looked at me, straight at me. His chocolate eyes bewildered, sad and staring into my own. The gun exploded. Then, Johannes collapsed. His limp body rolled into the embrace of the river. The current was not strong enough to take it with him. I looked down and realized my hand was on the gun. My finger was on the trigger. Tears gathered at the edge of my eyes. Screaming, I finally ripped the gun away from the man and took aim. I could see his face now as I towered above him. His slanted eyes and bulbous cheeks. He quickly pulled his hands over his face. And, mindlessly I pulled down on the trigger. The gun went off. I missed. How could I miss? We both breathed some sigh of relief. I wanted this to be over. Then, he began to laugh. As he reached for me, I took another shot. A single trail of blood poured from a perforation in between his eyes. More shots were fired. As each bullet entered him, his body violently jerked. It took a moment before it dawned on me that I had killed someone. I looked at the gun in my trembling hands. Beyond that I observed the body beneath me. Would he move again? Was he still breathing? It was then I remembered the phone call. 911. The cops. If the operator sicked them on me, then they were on their way. A barrage of what-ifs overwhelmed me. I could have said I was acting as a heroine. I saved Johannes. But I didn't. I shot him. I turned around and ran towards him, praying that maybe there was still a chance. But as I looked down upon him, those same chocolate eyes looked up at me. And all that remained within Johannes was a void of unanswerable questions. There was nothing in the scene to work in my favor. And I knew my time was far too limited. My shoulders bobbed as the tears began to uncontrollably fall. Suddenly, I saw the flash of blue and red lights encroaching upon me. Quickly I

pushed Johannes's body into the river.

“I'm sorry... I'm sorry...,” I whispered, grasping his cold hand before finally letting him go. I also tossed the gun into the river. And I receded underneath the apartment building. I crept and crawled as far from the scene as possible until I couldn't anymore and fell asleep.