

## UNDERGROUND

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When Emily met Roy in the subway station beneath Boston's defunct Combat Zone, they kissed. They hadn't seen each other for nearly twenty years. Stirred by the reunion, their lips parted and their tongues met. Roy quickly released her. "I have twins now, you know," he said. "Girls."

"Wonderful." Emily hadn't known, but the way he said this, almost a rebuke, made her glad the gummy light of the subway would dull the color flooding her cheeks. She studied his face. The light paled his eyelashes; once they'd been jet black and jagged and flew up against his lids as if unzipped, giving him a sudden, expectant look, which had sparked through her. They'd worked their way through art school as part-time guards at the Institute of Contemporary Art and if the galleries were empty, he'd push her into a pocket of dead space created by temporary exhibit walls and slowly close his eyes against her cheek and kiss her neck, dragging lines of saliva to moisten the white collar of her guard's uniform.

"Nice shoes," he said, smiling, his gaze not leaving her face. She wore red cross-trainers to comfort her bunions and calluses, buoy her spirit, as she ran up and down the stairs of the stations under her charge as coordinator for the subway's public art program. When he'd known her, she tottered around in a pair of spiky lace-up boots, even when on guard duty. Rushing to meet him this afternoon, she stumbled down the subway steps just as if she were still wearing those boots.

"You're skinny as ever," he said.

She smoothed her skirt and felt the hard bloom of hipbone. He had loved her body, drawing and videotaping its every inch, using the camera's lens as if to invade her pores. "I take it you're married," she said. They hadn't been in touch since he left Boston for Chicago right after graduation.

"She's an artist too." He sighed. "This gig couldn't have come at a better time. You wouldn't believe how much kids cost. What about you? Married? Kids?"

"Divorced years ago. No kids. Cats though, two." One croaked endless complaints, the other was small, black, and slick as a turtle bean.

"Still make art?"

This, too, seemed a slap, and once again she felt shamed, then angry that she allowed him to make her feel this way. She'd worked her ass off these last years. "I'm too busy helping everyone else try to get what they want. I think I'm better at that. I have more patience." Emily liked the public art process—it was so democratic, so unprivate, with its selection committees made up of art pros, business leaders, and community folk. The finished product was art everybody could shake hands with, cleansed of ego, scoured of the complicated personal.

"Well," he stepped closer, "I'm eternally grateful."

"It was the Committee, Roy. I had nothing to do with the selection. I'm just the grease that keeps the wheels turning." She didn't tell him he'd gotten the commission by default. There had been ten finalists and Roy was each committee member's third choice, the artist they could all agree on. But yes, she had lobbied for him, curious.

"You want me to believe you had nothing to do with getting me for this particular station?"

"Don't flatter yourself," she said, but with his lips so close again, she felt a small tug in her groin, like a thread being pulled, and was relieved to see her supervisor, Peter, accompanied by the Head of Construction, coming toward them.

"Here they are," she said, and introduced the men. The narrow platform filled with commuters staring dourly into the subway tunnel. Peter unrolled blueprints and a color copy of Roy's intended piece and set them on a bench.

"Not going to work," Peter said, and thumped the paper. The Construction Head stood mute, thick arms crossed.

"Let's not jump to conclusions," Emily said. The vibration of an inbound train hummed through the concrete platform into her feet, her shins. The train hurtled towards them, assaulting in its leap from darkness and in the way it came to a shrieking, urgent halt

in front of them. People surged in and out of the cars looking sooty and peeved. The doors slammed shut and the train pulled away, leaving an aftershock of squealing. A man remained, weaving toward the edge of the platform. Drunk, Emily thought. A homeless shelter ran a shabby building around the corner, a crumb from the neighborhood's past. Some of its clientele found their way onto the subway platform, attracted to the very edge where they'd teeter and stare into the pit. Can't you see the caution strip? Emily wanted to shout. But the feeble light faded the yellow line running along the platform edge. She felt a familiar shudder of helplessness and turned away.

"They have to curve." Peter pointed to the arch that framed the subway tunnel. Roy's proposal called for a series of straight, brightly-colored metal rods to be installed above the arch, the middle six rods ending just at the arch's highest point. "The electrical entry can't be covered." Peter pointed to the small doorway. The rods would make it inaccessible. He turned to Emily. "Didn't you give him the blueprints and specs?"

"Of course I did." By now, Peter knew damn well artists thumb their noses at constraints, but he liked to pretend Emily screwed up from time to time, maybe, she thought, to disguise his pleasure in working with her, a woman. A blunt man with a thatch of gray curls, Peter reminded Emily of a boy king given to expansive bursts of vigor and bullying. The way he wielded energy made her yearn to be shot through with his drive. Power, really. It was the power she wanted, his authority to act, his confidence that he could control the outcome of things.

"The drawings are just preliminary," she said. "We're trying to see what can and can't be worked out."

"I don't see them as preliminary," Roy said.

"Look." Peter poked the drawing. "Make it curve. That way you'll have a beautiful, jazzy echo of the tunnel's arch, and leave the doorway accessible." His words, much like hers, caused in Emily a mild surge of triumph.

"Not about echoing," Roy said, fingers miming quotation marks. "The counterbalance between the straight edge of the piece and the tunnel's arch is what it's all about. I want disruption, not harmony. Curving would destroy the piece's integrity."

Peter ran a hand through his hair, squeezed the curls. Ignoring Roy, he stared hard at Emily. "Listen, honey, you can't have straight on the arch. If you want straight, we'll

install it on the wall. But it can't extend more than three inches, or it'll never pass Safety."

"Can't be on the wall," Roy said. "The whole point is to push the work into people's way." He mashed his palms together. "Where do you look when you're down here? At the walls?" Roy gestured towards the transfixed crowd staring into the murky tunnel. "I'm not making wallpaper here."

Emily looked at the copy of Roy's work. When he presented his proposal to the Committee by video—he was in the middle of another project and couldn't come to town—he described his choice of bright, garish colors as an antidote to the spongy underground light, and a tribute to the neighborhood's colorful past. Subways needed art to ameliorate the dark, the heavy. The less challenging, Emily believed, the better. Simple, abstract shapes, metal painted with bright enamel worked best to shore up subway rider's psyches. A burst of color, just a stab would make them feel better, relieved however briefly, from the itch of pantyhose, burn of shaved cheeks, failure of deodorant during endless meetings, nag of drunks teetering on the edge of oblivion. Public art probably couldn't save drunks, but it could do something for the rest of the commuting world. Roy's piece would be perfect.

"What about hinging it?" Emily asked. "In this light, no one would ever see the hinges."

"Too heavy," Peter said. "You'd need special equipment to lift the rods."

"Just a small section has to hinge to make the door accessible," she said. Peter shook his head and thrust his chin towards the artwork's future site, mouth opening. Wanting to slap her hand across his mouth, Emily instead placed it on his shoulder. "Listen honey," she mimicked. "We understand the problem. Roy and I are going to kick around some ideas, then get back to you with a solution."

A glimmer of smile crossed Peter's face. "Soon, Emily," he said. "We've got to put this baby to bed or toss it."

From the corner of her eye, Emily glimpsed a burly blur pitch headlong over the edge of the platform. Her breath escaped in a short cry. The drunken man had fallen into the pit and was on his hands and knees. Muttering, cursing, he shook his head, then began to inch across the tracks towards the electrified third rail. People gathered at the edge, gesturing, shouting. "Over here, over here," Emily took up the call, and waved her arms. The man turned towards the crowd, eyes pierced with terror and the

will to survive. But his body, drunk and disobedient, continued toward the third rail. Emily wobbled and Roy grabbed her shoulders. Two men jumped into the pit, one wrapping hands around the drunk's ankle, the other grabbing his shirt. Emily thought she could hear it rip. Next to her, Peter sprawled on his belly, chest extending beyond the edge of the platform, arms outstretched. Someone held his legs to keep him from tumbling in. The men hauled the drunk towards Peter, and then he was in Peter's embrace, while others reached down to help lift the man to safety. Emily remained paralyzed at the edge, Roy's fingers digging into her shoulders.



Emily and Roy ascended the subway stairs into blinding, weightless afternoon. She felt unmoored and buoyant after the underground drama, as if surfacing from a leaden, breath-sucking dream. The drunk man's eyes had pinned her to the platform. He seemed far away, remote, as if viewed on film, but he'd been close enough for her and Roy to touch. An ambulance, lights flashing, siren quelled, rolled up to the subway entrance.

"Even now," Roy said, "never a dull moment." In the bleaching afternoon light, his jawline was still strong and covered with the stubble that had once scratched a map of desire across her too pliant skin. She touched her cheek as if the marks might still be fresh, and for a moment felt as if she were dematerializing, thankful for the shiny hardness of the neighborhood. Once a two-block playground of porn theatres, sleaze shops and strip joints, the area had grown sleek and cautious, cheerful, gutted and restrung with upscale bars, restaurants, new hotels and the China Trade Center staunchly defending the corner where they stood. The past emitted a stale, ghostly fume, like the smell of a singed cake long since trashed.

"It's weird being back here," Emily said. Not weird, disturbing, she thought, being back here with you.

Roy's head swung a wide arc as he took in the neighborhood. "Looks like the Conquistadors built right on top of the temples of the conquered." He clapped his hands together. "All cleaned up," he said. "Or fake cleaned up."

"Like us?"

He laughed. "The Avery?"

Impulsively she grabbed his hand and led him towards Downtown Crossing.

"All that's left is the street sign," she said, pointing. New hotels had sprung up along the short street, the bars sleekly visible through the plate glass. She envisioned the hotel's vanished bold neon spelling out A-V-E-R-Y, the hotel where she and Roy had spent her nineteenth birthday and where they'd first met Helen. They picked her up in the lobby.

"After what just happened, I need a drink," Emily said, "and we need to figure out what to do."

They settled at the curving, zinc bar with a view of the street, a strip of inflamed maroon sky caught in the late afternoon between building tops and window frame. Roy ordered lemon drop martinis. Emily took a big swallow, tart pooling with sweetness on her tongue.

"I love your piece, Roy, and I'll fight to make it happen. Peter's fair, but tough. We've got to compromise." She shifted her weight, trying to find a comfortable position on the metal barstool, recalling Peter's part in the rescue, while she and Roy had been rooted to the platform, witnessing.

"I'm trying to remember exactly where the Avery was." Roy rolled his swizzle stick along the bar, face turned towards the window. "I can remember walking into the lobby, but I can't remember where it was in relation to the street, the sidewalk," he said, still looking out the window. She followed his gaze. Already the sliver of maroon was fading into an echo of what it had been. In the over-cooled lounge, her skin felt clammy, her blouse bunched beneath her arms. Again the eyes of the drunk man pierced her, and an image of Helen emerged in her mind, sitting in one of the sprung-cushion chairs in the old lobby, arms flung dramatically over the chair arms, legs spread to reveal crotch-less panties. Emily shivered and pushed the image away, thinking instead about a warm shower and Roy and taking a room in this new hotel, now preening like Roy's Conquistador on the site of the old Avery. She studied his hand as it rolled the swizzle stick, the ring on his finger. "What's she like?"

Roy swung around, eyes wide, questioning.

"Your wife, I mean." She dropped her voice, feeling she'd asked something illicit. Maybe it was wrong for them to be here.

Roy laughed. "Very organized. For an artist." The napkins were large and white and he smoothed one against the bar, then extracted a pencil from his pocket and

began sketching. The rods materialized. Without color they looked banal, like pipes anywhere—exhaust, heating, hot water. Leaky. She found a pen in her purse and drew dotted lines across the pipes.

“Let’s make everyone happy and hinge,” she said. “If you lighten the material, use aluminum, they shouldn’t be too heavy. Even Peter would agree.”

Roy’s pencil hovered above the napkin as if he were weighing the reasonableness of her suggestion. It dropped to darken her dotted lines. “They should cut me a new door,” he said, his tone aggrieved. Familiar. “Go in from underneath where the tunnel starts.” He bore down until the lead snapped. “What the hell.” He dropped the pencil, arms folding tight across his chest. “Hinge.”

She rubbed her thumb over the pencil’s jagged end. He had been like this when they made art together in school. Even if working with one of her ideas, he would take it over, make it his. If she offered too many suggestions, he’d roll back, wounded, criticized, as if about to abandon the project to her. Like now. Like then, with Helen. It had been Emily’s idea to make the video portraits, to make Helen their project. But Emily couldn’t do it alone. She lost her vision without him, her nerve.

“There’s other ways to consider,” she said, sketching the tunnel’s arch on a fresh napkin. She hesitated, afraid of what might come. Then hoping to provoke, she drew the rods to echo the tunnel’s curve.

Roy leaned in. “You kidding? I’ll kick that ass to the third rail before giving in to him.” The faint wind of his breath touched her cheek; she smelled its sour sweetness.

“I’m with you.” She cross-hatched the rods to emphasize their fidelity to the arch, stressing the curve. “But it’s not aesthetic interference, it’s just technical. We’re all on the same side. Working for the same goals.” On the side of the bureaucrats. Aging, and drinking fruity martinis in the sleek bar.

“Fuck ‘em,” Roy said, and laughed. “Let’s get a little wild.” He reached across her to the stack of napkins, grazing her breasts.

Startled, she shifted away and felt the hard poke of barstool. She looked at him closely to gauge whether his touch had been intentional. He was busy sketching. “Amazing we both ended up in public art,” she said, and wadded her napkin, squeezing tight to keep her hand from shaking.

"Natural progression," he said, head bent over his drawing. "A relief to give up all that other stuff. The sturm and drang, suffering artist crap. The bloodletting. That's for kids. Necessary, but if you're lucky, as an artist, you get through it. And then you grow up, take responsibility."

With all the committees and collaboration, Emily wondered if public art was about being less responsible. They'd been reckless in a different way, back then. The Combat Zone had been their private canvas, theirs to chew and make of what they wanted, and she and Roy prowled the streets with the untethered morality of mongrels. Something bitter roiled up and stuck in her throat.

"Those portraits of Helen," she said. "What happened to them? Did you ever show them anywhere?" The video portraits had won all the prizes their final year in school.

"I did," he said. "When I first got to Chicago."

It wasn't as if she'd never thought of Helen in all this time, but she would arrive in Emily's mind in fragments, easy enough to scatter but now the tapes surged through her with the ache of a remembered dream. Shades of grey, grainy light, her face superimposed on Helen's, Helen's face merging with hers, then fading, their arms and legs indistinguishable, entangled like a nest of snakes, boxed in by the camera's frame, her breast side by side with Helen's, as they touched each other. Ribbon, apple red, twined through their hair, opening a gash in the grey light. Helen brought the ribbon the first time she and Emily were taped together. "You get the bigger piece," she said, and tied it into Emily's hair.

"And New York," Roy said. "Couple of galleries in SoHo and Chelsea."

"New York," she repeated, and imagined strangers viewing their work. Imagined strangers watching the three of them between shoots, when Roy turned off the camera. Roy's mouth on Helen's shoulder, his tongue gliding across Emily's clit, her fingers running the edge of Helen's lips, Helen's mouth on his cock, had made Emily feel part of a three-legged stool. She shivered, her nipples tightening. They always seemed to have bits and pieces of each other in their mouths.

"The work deserved to be seen." Roy etched lines into the napkin so the rods now fanned out in a circle, a muzzy plume coming from each as if it were belching smoke. The Hemilies, he'd titled the portraits. At their thesis show, everyone congratulated him. It was Emily's idea, but Roy was the one behind the camera all those months, shaping, creating. "The work was raw," he said. "Strong. And at the time, important."



"Student work," she said. "We were just messing around." Her eyes rested on Roy's drawing, imagining her relief when the cool, inert metal was finally installed in the subway. Had he talked her into getting in front of the camera with Helen, or had that, too, been her idea? But when she entered the camera's frame, she fell down a hole, opening herself, expecting to come out the other side transformed. An artist. By the time their thesis show opened, they thought Helen was probably dead. Emily didn't want the work shown. Roy insisted it would be the proper tribute. Opening night, the sight of her face against Helen's sickened her. Yet she was drawn to the tapes, getting lost in the images, fascinated by the way the ends of their ribbons came together as if reattaching. "It was personal."

"Gutsy. And your idea," Roy said, finally conceding her this, or maybe just passing on the responsibility. "You should've stood behind the work."

"But I wasn't the one behind the camera." Would she have done anything differently if she had been? They convinced each other the work would be saved from being exploitation by Emily's presence, her twinning image with Helen. This would transform it into art, a critique of portraiture, a reframing of the relationship between artist and model, and Emily stepped out from behind the camera. The last night they shot Helen, she was already nodding off when Emily half carried her from the room they'd rented at the Avery into an alley off Washington Street. Roy helped to steady Helen with one hand, shooting with the other. Emily entered the shaky eye of the camera after Helen leaned against a building and then slumped to the ground. Emily sat beside her, propped fingers beneath Helen's chin to lift it, Emily's frank gaze a contrast to Helen's shuttered face. She pressed her cheek against Helen's, felt it cooling along her own warm skin.

Finished taping, they hadn't been able to rouse her. Emily shook her, put her hand on Helen's breast, but couldn't feel a heartbeat, or the rise and fall of her chest. Roy hauled Helen to her feet, his mouth by her ear, urging her to wake. Emily shouted her name. Slowly he released Helen to a sitting position against the brick wall. He tugged her short skirt, hand sweeping bare thigh as if to extend the hemline. They ran through the Commons and across Charles Street, Emily untangling the ribbon from her hair and throwing it into a gutter. Finding a phone booth, she called the police with Helen's location, saying she'd come across an unconscious, possibly dying woman. The policeman seemed unimpressed by this news. She hung up before he could ask any questions.

Emily laid her fingers lightly on Roy's wrist. "What do you think happened to her that

night?"

"She was a junkie," Roy said. He picked up her pen, and Emily's hand slipped to the bar, the zinc cool beneath her fingertips. He bore down, making dark, heavy lines on the napkin. "She nodded off all the time. That night wasn't any different. How could we know?"

They'd known nothing, Emily thought, except for the desire to transgress. The first time they picked up Helen, on Emily's birthday, she lay quietly on the hotel bed, her stick arms and legs bruised with track marks. She was as compliant as the dolls Emily once played with, holding any position they cared to put her in. At first, Emily found this exciting, then freakish and disturbing. Helen's track marks looked like dirt smudges and Emily had an urge to put her into a bathtub for a good scrub, or hand her the wad of bills Emily's parents had given her for her birthday and then tell Helen to get lost. Roy wanted the three of them to have sex, and they argued in front of Helen, who continued to lie on the bed, eyes closing as if hearing a lullaby. Emily finally kicked Helen out of the room. But she and Roy were too angry to stay, and on their way out, they found Helen slumped on a lumpy chair in the lobby. She seemed to have forgotten she'd just been in the room with them and hiked her skirt to her hips. She looked so exhausted and frail that her feeble attempt to entice seemed remote controlled from some pimp's distant location. Emily and Roy were on the subway home before she realized her birthday money was gone. Astonished, she rooted through her satchel, her pockets, wondering how Helen had managed this. It had been Emily's idea to go back later and find Helen. And to make the portraits. Later still, Emily would catch Helen trying to steal many of her things: thrift-shop clothes, a small, hammered-gold mirror, art books, her high school lacrosse stick, dime-store silverware. Emily let her keep the mirror and the clothes. She liked to imagine Helen wearing them in the streets, liked to wonder what Helen thought about when she looked in the mirror, if, when seeing her own image, she thought of Emily.

"Do you still have the tapes?" Emily asked.

"I don't know. Probably stashed in my basement. What does it matter, now?"

She thought of the drunken man, the way she'd waved her arms, and remembered Peter sprawled on the platform, reaching into the subway pit.

"Shouldn't we have done something?"

"We did. We made art."

Emily had wanted to make the work with Helen into something provoking and political, artful, but she'd become confused, as if Helen had gotten into her skin, her very self. "How old do you think she was?"

"Old enough."

"We should've helped her."

"We gave her money, attention. She was practically living with us, remember?"

"I'm talking about that night, Roy."

"We called the police."

"We ran away."

"We were kids."

"We could've called an ambulance. Taken her to the hospital ourselves."

"I'm sure she was just fine."

"I looked for her. Later."

"It's done, Emily. Past." Roy's face was pale as he picked up the napkin. It hung between them. His marks had bitten through, almost tearing it. "This is what matters now," he said, "what we have to solve."

They paid the tab and left the bar, walking in silence toward the subway. Twilight had settled a dusky tinge over the buildings so they looked united in purpose, polite and impenetrable. But Emily's eyes were like fingers scratching back the layers, stripping the neighborhood of its manners until Washington Street became the long, neon-winking, poxed block of their youth. Beside her, Roy was silent, unapproachable. No longer in love, but still complicit. They came to the subway entrance and descended, intending to look once more at the tunnel's arch. The platform was almost deserted—a couple of kids with skateboards, here and there an office worker, returning home late, a young family, the parents exhausted and cranky.

The tunnel arch was as gritty and unyielding as it had been a few hours before,

determined to retain its freedom from color, decoration. Emily envisioned the rods, and respected the determination. Their one commanding feature—color—in a couple of years would be covered with greasy soot. The Transportation Authority had a minimal maintenance budget. Soon enough the art would disappear, all the posturing and squabbling, and all her efforts for zip. Particles of ash and dirt would rain down in all the stations, until the pretty colors, the simple shapes, the bright, artless cheer washed away. Still, Roy had clung to his vision, fighting with Peter as if the work mattered. At least this art was harmless. Lips pursed, hands in pockets, Roy stared at the arch as if sharing her thoughts.

“I lied,” he said, turning to her. “About the tapes. When my wife saw them, and I told her how we’d left Helen that night, she said I made her sick, that she didn’t know how she could be with someone like me. I got rid of my camera. Destroyed the tapes. I was afraid she would leave me.”

Emily felt herself rock, and reached a steadying hand to the subway wall. A few feet away, a toddler struggled in the arms of her father, about to let out a wail. Her older sister stood beside him, pulling his pant leg. “Your twins,” she said, thickly, “you never said how old they were.”

He held her gaze before speaking. “Seventeen. And they think they know everything. Can you imagine?” He sounded bewildered. With his pale lashes, his eyes looked naked.

Emily closed her eyes. Scrubbed free of make-up, Helen looked younger than Emily. She couldn’t have been more than eighteen or nineteen, Emily thought now. She could see how delicate Helen was, how fine her bone structure. Sometimes Helen would crawl into her lap and pretend to fall asleep, fingers curled around Emily’s thumb. Strong and shapely, Helen’s hands were the only part of her body she seemed vain about. The hands of a musician, say, or an artist. Helen. What kind of a name was that for a whore? The name of a girl from a family like Emily’s, maybe, full of expectations and opportunity. She had no idea where Helen came from, never asked what trouble had gotten her to the streets. Never tried to help her. Emily was too busy critiquing the history of portraiture, reframing the artist-model relationship. But that had fallen away pretty quickly, and then it was just two girls with elegant names falling into each other as if into holes.

In the tunnel, a light grew and gobbled the dark, signaling an approaching train, the thrum and vibration moving through Emily’s chest as if breaking up congestion. The train clattered into the station in a burst of heat and noise. It disturbed the

smothering air, and the headlight simplified the world into shadow and light. Doors opened. Commuters stepped out. Others entered the cars. When the train pulled away, the curtain of haze returned, and a small, insistent weight pressed against Emily. Beneath her fingertips, she could feel the swell of Helen's cheekbone, the curve of her shoulder, the still familiar texture and warmth of Helen's skin. But it was all Emily didn't know about Helen, could never know, that now surged through her like an awakening and made her long to reach into the muddled light to meet the muse, waiting to be made new.