

COLLEEN O'MARA

Ordinary Men

MY BOYFRIEND AND I WERE ON A TRAIN LAST NIGHT, SITTING and watching the sad-faced commuters and the streaking tunnel lights as they passed by. There was a man who stood to the side of us, in the doorway. He appeared to be, at first glance, an ordinary man. But like most things in life, on further inspection, he was far from that. He wore a tan coat made of soft mohair and his tie was neatly in place. He carried, under his arm, a stack of newspapers. Not an odd sight on a commuter train heading from Oakland to San Francisco but then I saw his shoes. One, a running sneaker — the other a black oxford, scuffed and worn. His coat was tattered and stained and his eye was cut just at the temple. The left side of his face was bruised and I realized that the orange cone standing alongside him was his. He kept it by him as we exited the train onto the platform. There he began talking — to us.

“What is this shit? The whole world’s fucked up!” he said in a deep raspy voice. The voice of an old bum, or a weathered grandfather.

We smiled together kindly with uncomfortable grins — the kind that never cause your lips to part. He saw us and took us at our invitation.

“I want you to do something for me,” he said approaching us like a used car salesman. Speaking to my boyfriend, he said, “I want you to call Dansalla, Tanzania at 3 a.m. I know you will. Call there through the British Consulate.”

My boyfriend laughed and making a joke said, “but my calling card’s already at its limit,” thinking that this man would take the joke and leave us alone. But he didn’t.

“Well okay then,” the man said. “You be the operator and I’ll be the one calling.” We all laughed as the roar from the approaching train kept us from having to respond.

He followed us to our seats, cone and all, and sat across from us. “I have a



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submarine," he said, proudly.

"You do?" my boyfriend asked.

"Yes. I keep it for \$5. For cheap. That's a great deal," he said, the used car salesman returning.

"Where do you keep it?" I asked him.

"It's not mine!" he said defensively.

"Then whose is it?" my boyfriend asked.

"You know, anything that can be tied can be untied." He mimed with his hand the motion and I saw two frayed ropes being dismantled, loosened, freed.

"Now, you talk. Ask me anything!" he said to me, leaning back in his seat.

I looked at the man with his bruises and noticed numbers written on his left hand. I wanted to know how his eye was cut but instead I asked, "why do you have numbers on your arm?" He grew sober although I could smell the whiskey on his breath even from where I sat.

"Because they are my phone numbers and sometimes I forget them," he said with a dead face. He leaned down to the side and moved the cone so that it sat between his feet.

"I've been organizing a movement." The light was back in his eyes. He'd forgotten about the numbers. "Usually I talk one to one." He was speaking directly to my boyfriend now. "Not meaning to ignore you," he said quickly to me and then turned back to his male audience. "I pick up newspapers, then stack them under just one seat on just one train. Just one train so that they'll see them. They'll wonder why only one train and they won't know who did it," he said proudly, including us in his conspiracy.

"Ah," my boyfriend said, playing along.

"You see, they'll find them, then they won't know." He bent down for more newspapers under the seat and added those to his collection.

"Now, you talk," he said, turning back to me. "What was the name of the first boy you kissed?"

"Todd," I answered automatically and was surprised.

"What was your first teacher's name?"

"Mrs. Beckue," I thought but before I answered, his questions began shooting at me with high force and speed.

"What do you do? Where've you been? Where are you going? Enough now. You be the operator," he said and put his hand up to his ear like he was holding a receiver. "Ringy Ding Dingy. Ringy Ding Dingy. Ringy Ding Dingy."

Just then I noticed all of the people seated around us on the train. They were suppressing their laughter, holding their hands over their mouths.

"Does that mean that I'm in Tanzania?" I asked him, trying to be funny.

"No, you're here," he said. "The CIA know you're here." His head jerked to the side. "If they'd oil this track then the train wouldn't squeak on the curves.

You see, they used five-foot track but if they'd used four-foot, standard, this train could go to Florida, to Mexico, up to Canada." *Then they could be free* I thought.

"I also think that children could make place mats for the trains, color them in, then eat off of them. Merging the practical with the artistic." He sat back in his seat again like an old professor.

"Hey, that's a good idea!" my boyfriend said encouragingly. "You've got a lot of good ideas."

"I know," the man answered. "I'm full of 'em. I'm also full of shit." He smiled and I saw his teeth, yellowed and crooked. "Now, really," he said, the smile fading. "What do you do?" he asked with the same paternal tone that all of my father's law partners use when I see them at the annual Christmas dinner.

"I write." I said, trying to convince him. And myself.

"What do you write?" he asked.

"Stories."

"About what?"

"About people."

"What kind of people?"

"Ordinary people," I said, looking him straight in the eye.

He stopped for a breath then went on. "Do you write on bound?" he asked.

"Word processor," I answered with a smile.

"You should work on bound," he said authoritatively. Then you can donate them to your archives." He went on. "I used to type, you know." He motioned with his fingers, making them dance in the air. "I was good too. But they asked me what I was gonna be — a secretary?" His tone changed to bitterness. "I said 'Yes, if I can be.' It's all gone downhill from there," he said solemnly. His fingers, that moments before had been dancing, fell into his lap.

When the train stopped, we gathered our things. He grabbed his cone and told us to have a good night. "My name's Paul," he said. "Like the apostle."

He shook hands with my boyfriend. His hands were covered with grit and grime, scarred by the filth of the street. Colored by the stains that had rumpled his coat, cut his eye, bruised his face and given him these muddled fragments, these small pieces, these tiny morsels. All pulled together, all fitting side by side, linked into the semblance of sanity. But there lay the illusion and I noticed his cone which stood beside him loyally.

Street workers place them carefully in cities across the country. From New York to Los Angeles, they are meant as a warning, a barrier — something to stop people, to hold them back from getting too close to broken pavement, or to a deep, dark hole. A hole so dense that once enveloped, there is no escape. This man was warning us.

Too bad, nobody had warned him.