Hero

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The news screamed it from everywhere; from store windows, from homes, from radios...even the printed headlines in newspapers blared with enough force to make my eyes tear up as I turned my head and pushed through a crowd which simultaneously hailed and ignored me. I was lost, my head hurt so much, and no one would give me space or shut up about it.

"...twenty-three-year-old woman saved an infant when a man knocked a stroller onto the tracks..."

I covered my ears, gritted my teeth, squeezed my eyes shut... anything to keep it out, to *not know*. But even as my feet lurched harder, reached farther, the sound of it surrounded me, waxing and waning like the rushing of cars speeding down a road as I pushed my way through the city. I felt the presence of the towering offices and apartment buildings on all sides. The wash of heat from the bodies spilling out of and funnelling into stores was scorching, searing. I felt it all like one drowning feels the crush of water as they die.

"...rushed to Saint Apollonia's..."

It was too much, the suffocating presence of life. I was stumbling in my confusion, my frustration, losing the sound of my weak little sobs in the garbled tumult of the passersby. Unable to stand it, I pushed past a man with a small girl on his shoulders, unnoticed by either, and threw myself into the traffic-packe street.

"...being called a hero..."

The heavy breathing of a city bus crept upon me and I felt it pass in a tangle of confused breezes that grabbed at my snarled hair and whipped the tatters remnants of my dress around my thighs, baring unnervingly vivid scars to the iron-gray sky above. There was no horn, no warning; the driver didn't even slow. He just drove right through me.

Through.

Something crawled along my skin, a realization of something life-changing which I'd forgotten. I felt it like a shaking in my very veins, a trembling in my blood, and I ran from the street, all too aware of my own screams. I was shaking, stumbling, pushing past the endless wall of cars on either side of me. I staggered back into the crush of pedestrians, my chest aching, my head spinning, and as I put out a hand to steady myself on an
over-groomed maple planted through a line of black bars on the sidewalk, I heard the awful lies start once more:

"...as authorities pursued this man, Ed Stevens, for violation of his parole and possession of an illegal firearm..."

I shook my head, slumping to my knees.

"...chase turned deadly when Stevens ran into the subway and took a woman hostage, knocking her stroller onto the tracks..."

I could hear people screaming. Hear a baby crying out as its mother begged someone to save it.

"...twenty-three-year-old Ophelia Lune bravely defied Stevens' threats, and jumped onto the tracks, saving the child from the oncoming train by ...

I could hear metal screeching, feel heat on my face, sparks on my skin...

"...after being taken to Saint Apollonia's, Miss Lune unfortunately passed away last night in the ICU. We go live now to the hospital, where Susan Adams, the mother of the child saved by this heroic young woman, is being treated for minor injuries. Mrs. Adams? Is there anything you'd like to say about the events of today?"

I heard a woman call me a hero. I heard her thanking me. I heard a voice telling her to stop, repeating over and over, no no no. My voice, calling out the lie as I remembered the truth. I fell back, laying on the sidewalk, staring up at a world that didn't see or hear me. My eyes drifted shut, and I saw everything I'd forgotten.

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I don't know what drew me to the subway station, what had made me decide this was the way to go. I'd never used the thing before since I'd always taken the bus, so all I knew of the trains was what I'd seen in movies. They were big. They were fast. They were practically unstoppable.

Looking down at the tracks, their black backs protruding from the concrete, I wondered if it would be easier to avoid them or not. Wondered if they would really electrocute me.

People started screaming, and I heard a man yelling. I ignored them, inching past the yellow safety line, pressing my toes against the edge of the concrete platform. There was a lump in my throat, solid and heavy as a rock. I tried to swallow, to catch a breath, finding a liberating wonder in the knowledge it was one of my last. My chapped lips parted like a crooked
rip in the ruddy canvas of my face, and the sound of inhalation was like the obnoxious scraping of a vacuum over an empty space.

I heard a woman crying, begging for something. I didn't turn. *Let her cry*, I thought. It would keep people away. Keep anyone from trying to stop me. Not that these strangers had any reason to want me around, seeing as my own family and so-called friends couldn't even make that claim.

I wiped my palms on my ragged jeans, then pushed up the sleeves of my sweatshirt to my elbows. I didn't care who saw the puffy red lines etched into my left arm, the claw-marks I'd torn into my own skin with a box-cutter I'd stolen from that dead-end shipping job. I didn't have to worry about anyone showing mock-concern for something that only made them push me farther away.

More screaming. I closed my eyes, forcing away the obnoxious persistence intruding upon my moment. My moment. This was finally my time. No more being overlooked at work, no more being ignored at bars and clubs no matter how nice I tried to look.

Taking another breath, tasting the sweat and metal around me, I realized there would be no more waking up alone, no more starving so rent could be paid. No more lectures on what I should have done, on how I'd screwed up. I wasn't going to just be the go-nowhere middle child anymore. It was my turn for the spotlight. My moment.

And what a moment it would be.

I heard the sound of plastic scraping along concrete and looked across my right shoulder. I watched as a navy-blue stroller printed with little teddy bears rolled past me, over the edge, onto the tracks. A baby rolled onto the concrete divider, reaching out from a spittle-stained blanket with its fat little arms, screaming until its ugly little face was more purple than red.

The screaming was what got me. It was ear-splitting, and made the long-time ache behind my eyes a thousand times worse. What did this little *rat* have to scream about? Its life was perfect. It was waited on hand and foot, it had no responsibilities, no fear of consequences or regrets of failures—academic, romantic, or financial—the way I did. I'd gone without despite my attempt to do right by some now dead part of myself, whereas it got every new thing it wanted before it even understood how to consciously want.

Growling, wasting one of those last breaths I'd found a moment and reason to treasure, I jumped down from the platform, ignoring the yelling behind me. I picked the thing up, sneering at it as the lights from a
train down the tunnel illuminated its red-patched skin and too-light hair. It reeked to high Heaven, and the weight of its soiled diaper hung from its back like a deformity. I felt my fingers digging into its back, my thumbs pressing on its shoulders. It kept crying and I curled my lip. The sound of a train storming closer caught my attention and I took one last look at the little wad of skin and shit that I'd picked up, making a decision.

There was no way in Hell I was going to let it die before it had been given a chance to suffer as much as I had. No way I'd let it die before it could have its heart broken by everyone who'd ever promised to love it, before it could cry itself to sleep because it was hungry and poor and invisible despite every cry for help. No way I would let it die free of the pain I'd been forced to feel every day.

Turning, I threw the thing onto the platform, watching pedestrians dive for it like football players for a catch. I laughed. No one looked at me.

The train's horn blared and its brakes screeched as its wheels locked up, sending sparks into the air around me. Still no one looked.

Lights seared me with a cold white.

Then it didn't matter if they were looking or not. I got what I'd come for.

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"...authorities have Stevens in custody, and a memorial service is being held in honor of the young woman who bravely gave her life..."

I was laughing now. Laughing at the news, at the people walking past me. I was laughing at the bricks behind my back, the carrion perched in the trees, waiting for something to be left in the street for them. I was laughing at the steely sky, laughing at the wounds on my legs and arms, at the blood on my ruined dress. I was laughing when night fell, my voice hoarse and strained, my face disfigured from injury and mood. I couldn't help it. I was being called a hero, being hailed for being a wonderful person, being put on a pedestal...and all it took was dying. I was getting treated the way I'd always wanted and it was all a lie.

My feet carried me to the station—still closed for cleanup—as my mind processed the wonder of what had happened and I sat on the sidewalk as people carrying cups and tapers wandered around, singing hymns and lamenting my untimely demise. I saw no one I knew, not my parents or siblings. Not my so-called “friends.” Not my co-workers. No one..."
but strangers with some skewed notion of who I'd been.

I sat there for two hours and looked at everyone who passed, but no one I knew ever showed up, except the mother whose life I'd unintentionally kept whole. It actually stung a bit, knowing no one really cared; being proven right. Even though the reports of me being heroic were a lie (as the suicide note taped to my toaster would confirm), it would have been nice to see someone familiar, someone other than Susan Adams and her ugly little baby.

I stood, ignoring the words calling me a hero, ignoring the adulation. Without really knowing why, I made my way to Saint Apollonia's, where in the morgue I found what was left of myself—a torn and mangled right leg jutting out at an all-too wrong angle. Broken ribs caved in and bruised from impact. A right hand ground into unidentifiable pink meat. A half-crushed skull barely perched atop a spindly little neck that somehow hadn't snapped. The mess was splayed across a bright metal table, open, obvious. The bastards at the morgue hadn't even put a sheet over me. What total fucks.

"Hey there," I said softly, stepping forward, looking down at the broken and bruised body that used to be me. I tried to smirk at the thought of it: the hero being lauded lying in a basement, reduced to a gruesome wreck. Though I hardly looked less gruesome myself. Every lurid injury chiselled into the body was somehow represented as a scar on me, the soul that remained. And I thought I'd hated my body before. I suppose my little bit of peace in death was being in one piece, at least, even if it was a scarred, bitter piece. Shaking my head I looked into my strangely contented face. I found it odd that it was so intact. I didn't remember shielding it.

"Well, you're not going to Heaven because you killed yourself," I said and reached out, touching my own bruised cheek. I was surprised to feel it just how cold it was. "And you're not going to Hell because you saved someone else while you were at it. Congrats. You're right back where you started."

I sat on an empty table, staring at my broken body until even my thoughts were silent. I closed my eyes, laying back on the table beside myself, and reached out to take my own dead hand. Taking a breath I didn't need and accepting that this entrapment was my own literally damned fault, I closed my eyes.

"Welcome to Purgatory," I whispered as my body lay silently beside me, both of us washed into obscurity by the glaring white of the overhead lights.