

# Emily Hostutler

## Superstition or The Conductor

“Sir, you will need: a yam, a white votive, a black votive, Borracho powder, Cast Off Evil powders, 7-11 Holy Oil a charcoal rin’—for safely burnin’ it all up. An’ finally, a representation of sumpthin’ dat symbolizes de cravin’ you wish to cast out, sumpthin’ from de source. Firs’ you purchase de objects from my store. You mus’ wait until de wanin’ moon and cast an spell I include for free wit de purchase of de Santeria items. You come back de following week at same time, an’ I customize an incantation an’ blessin’ for you. Finally, durin’ de next wanin’ moon, you again return de store and purchase a Macutos. Dis powerful amulet you will carry with you always fe stave off de evil dat caused your cravings, and den, you will be free. If you do not follow de directions exactly as I convey you, deh will be a grave consequence. I kyan tell when I look on your eyes dat you believe, and eyes dat believe are essential for de magic work. I kyan offer you crucial price.”

Moses had been keeping an eye out for his “Shortie.” For the past two years, and every subsequent morning for the unforeseeable future, his deep brown eyes reflected the many uniform lines associated with the SEPTA Regional Railroad: rusted rail tracks, beige pleather aisles, bold parallel directional arrows, consecutive foggy oval windows and thick rubberized overhead cables. The lines, often overwhelming to him, burned like a screen saver into his retina, forcing his brain to reconfigure from multi-channeled into a singular neural pathway: Point A to Point B to infinity, day in and day out.

The West Trenton Local begins its daily sprint in New Jersey, at a station originally established by the Reading Railroad in 1929, situated in Ewing, or the armpit of the “Armpit state.” The line extends out from the pit and through the rural suburbs of Pennsylvania, then barrels through the many layers of Philadelphia until it arrives in University City. The passengers of the WTL span a vast socio-economic cross-section from the pastoral Amish teenagers to the teardrop-tattooed-recently-incarcerated aging hoodrats. Their vast collective physicality, figures and colors juxtaposed together, burst through Moses’ linear haze.

His favorite example of this “bursting effect” took place exactly one year into his employment with SEPTA. It was the day a small dirty-blonde haired boy with a *Muppets Take Manhattan* lunch box boarded in Woodbourne (Stop #3) with his young mother. They took a seat across from a wrinkled, shrunken older man in a green-striped suit wearing thick spectacles. While his mother, adorned in Rockabilly garb with jet-black hair coiffed into an oversized pompadour, chatted away on her cell phone and stared out the window, the boy and the old man became aware of one another. The deeply pleated hands of the hearing-impaired man began signing to the little boy.

The little boy smiled and returned the signals with a made-up version of his own sign language, as if he encountered old deaf men everyday. The two strangers played this way, communicating only with gestures, until the boy was rushed off at a later stop. Moses had

witnessed the spontaneous exchange between the two when he punched their senior and child-designated holes and eyed the oblivious mother's TransPass that day. The moment touched him, provoking nostalgia in him that he couldn't exactly place. By the time the clipped white circles of paper had touched the ground, he realized it was only another bought of nostalgia for a time that never existed. These waves of false *déjà vu*s had become more frequent over the last year, but overwhelmed him nevertheless. Emotions were still new to him, as was the profound change that had rapidly manifested both externally and in the deep subconscious levels of his psyche. Since he had gotten clean and sober, Moses was a living entity for the first time in many years.

He now fully embodied the persona of the old-school classic man-of-the-rails. He once envisioned this idyllic black man as a child while scribbling in a steam engine-themed coloring book. He would select a crayon called Sterling, and then imagine a rounded train conductor winking at him, calling him by his name, and sharing brief legends while taking his ticket. Moses once heard that when you get clean, you return to the age and mentality that you were when you first began using and drinking. This was more than a stunted maturity. Moses indeed returned to that time, but upon his awakening, he had also recovered every known identity and ambition that went with it. Suddenly he was catapulted into a future that didn't match the imagined one of his youth. Fossilized as child in the mid-50s, he slumbered through the Civil Rights movement and the Sixties subculture. Apparently, his deepest self-induced coma was during years that were better to sleep through anyway. Moses noticed that many people held misperceptions about the addict, or at least about him. He saw this romanticism in his sponsor, who perhaps should have known better, and other outsiders when he was first getting sober. They would ask him unanswerable questions like, "what prompted you to start using in the first place, what are your deeper issues?" They asked him to get honest about what he had lost by choosing the junk over everything else. "What are your 'isms'?" They assumed that the years he had spent homeless in abandominiums were the result of a long, slow progression. Counselors prodded him about his relationships with others. Surely, his life had spiraled out of control resulting in loss after loss—there must have been a cause, a reason, for the fall. But that wasn't how it went.

Simply, once he had found the unmatched pleasure provided by dope and booze, he spent the following years as a full-time consumer, fumbling around between the highs. He never had a marriage or kids to lose; there had never been a high-roller job to blow off. He had made a commitment to that lifestyle so early on that he missed his coming of age. And then one day, thirty-five years later, Moses walked out of the brown stone half-way house at the corner of Frankford and Somerset and filled out an application for SEPTA at Suburban Station (Stop #21) in Center City. He wasn't "Mo" anymore. Now plump and greying, Moses was the Conductor: a shepherd of commuters, a transportation facilitator, and an exceptionally humble hard worker—an archaic thing, trying to grasp, or connect, with the contemporary.

He hadn't seen her at any of the meetings recently, his Shortie. He also hadn't seen her during his a.m. shift in many weeks. Today, like every other day, his run had begun as a haze of machinery and chilly wet air. He was pushing buttons, manipulating brakes and watching the reflection of his thick mud-colored neck and chin bend in the foggy aluminum gadgetry of the 7:03 a.m. local. This first shift was his particular favorite, the one Shortie frequented. For Moses, even in their stupors, the morning rush of commuters was always a vibrant and eclectic group. From 7:03 a.m. to 8:22 a.m., the daily melting pot was a silent symphony of inner thoughts, regrets, secrets, daydreams, and unforgettably expressive faces on people who likely believed themselves to be expressionless.

He had developed a sort of mental filing cabinet of regular passengers, like his Shortie. He would manage this index system in between his ticket clicks; doling out transfers, opening and closing the train doors, checking his watch and the sound of his own muffled loudspeaker announcements. The passengers provided something less monotonous to think about, something to prevent him from thinking about the past. If he sat still with himself long enough, the regret trickled in. Much like with the nostalgia, he would remember the potential for things that never happened, like the emerald-eyed, skinny ashen-faced girl that asked him so sweetly,

“Well, dontcha wanna go wit me to the sock hop?”

She had been too simple, still a baby girl. Taking turns sipping from a stolen bottle of stale cognac with the boys was instead his date that evening. Moses shared the innocence of the girl despite his resistance to it. One’s coming of age cannot be cheated or skipped over, and now in the post-millennium, Moses returned to it. His whole identity had diminished to a crying out for the world to take him to the sock hop.

When he was on this first run of the day, he had grown to anticipate certain morning regulars; instead of being simply passengers, they were more like characters in a play for which he had been given front row seats. Before he knew it, he was pushing his red speaker button and announcing:

“WEST TRENTON LOCAL TO 69<sup>th</sup> STREET TERMINAL, have your tickets and passes ready pl—“ He clipped off early and was the only one hearing the *ease* part.

As he had anticipated, his most reliable commuter had just barely made the route. Often dressed in signature purple prints, a feisty woman in her later years who always referred to him as “Reds,” pounded on the nearly shut exterior of the door.

“Hey! Hey! Help me up here Reds—hop to it, hop to it!”

It was the two frail arms reaching up to him from under one of her many wide-brimmed hats that appeared to speak to him. He did not remember this particular hat and made note of this on the mental card he had been developing for her. He reached out to help her, and even though she asked for his help she would inevitably refuse it. She straightened up in the hydraulic elevator-like entrance of the cabin before making her way through the second auto-shut door to her favorite window seat. The double door system, and the claustrophobic passageway to the train always reminded him of oppressive institutional entrances.

“You look lovely today, new hat?”

She either did not hear him, or ignored his question as he held the door after her. While the hat lady held the first position in his interior catalogue, she was far from the most intriguing. There was the (once skinny) pasty thirty-something woman whom he had never considered attractive until she gradually began growing outwards. She was a sporadic passenger, but he guessed by the severity of her facial expression that whenever she was on this line she was on her way to a place of incredible significance. There were others like her too, although most passengers carried gazes of the apathetic variety. *Were they headed to jobs they hated?* Besides the dominant body of going-to-work stares, there were unlimited styles of scrutinizers, daydreamers, and squinted eyes of confusion. There were the drained caretakers talking loudly to their parents with resentful glares. Hundreds of teenagers who all looked alike and often shared the same catalogue space in his mind; their eyes were always turned inward: fixed on the self. White men in white shirts with gleaming white teeth who peered into their magic glass screens while eating Power Bars. College students with gaping mouths and highlighters and heavy overflowing messenger bags with deep, hopeful, wondering eyes. Overweight perverted oglers who stared provocatively and sweated profusely

while acting out a variety of inappropriate self-stimulation rituals.

Sometimes Moses was so convinced of the ogler's inherent creepiness that he would spend his evening clicking through thousands of images on the Megan's Law search engine looking for a match—his attempt at modern heroics. The most haunting gazes radiated from the empty, ambiguous and grey eyes that bulged from empty hollowed-out faces. Often those expressions came from those without tickets at all, or tickets they had found on the ground. The desperate ones would try to pass off trampled dirty receipts that resembled tickets, or they would attempt to reuse “transfers” that were intended for a different line. It was these soulless eyes he understood the most. He'd had them himself once; he was sure of that. Shortie had them too.

Shortie stood out to him not only because of her dead stare, but because she was the only patron who had ever crossed the threshold of regular passenger to real life acquaintance. Shortie became special when he started seeing her at meetings; if he had never seen her at meetings, he could never have been sure any of his passengers even existed. Their five to ten seconds of interaction when he glanced at her monthly TransPass at 8:06 a.m. graduated quickly from mental Rolodex of habitual behaviors to spiritually significant.

He remembered first seeing her board at Jenkintown (stop #14); a raw smell radiated from her oily white-girl dreadlocks; her sunken skin was melting away; her cat-eye eyeliner smudged as she jittered—he identified with her down to his marrow. As different as their skin and forms appeared around their bones, they were both former junkies, or at least he was a former junkie. She was still using when Moses first saw her: scamming and scavenging. Even though she was dope sick and sweating, she would attempt to flash her “bedroom eyes,” hoping for a break on the fee. He gave her more freebies than any of the others, even before he came to know her outside of his sphere; he had an unexplainable fondness for her. But on the days when she was really high, he resented her and would kick her off early. On those days Moses almost—*almost*—envied her, as she would nod into oblivion. Her whole body would sometimes hit the seatback in front of her, the sound of her forehead clapping at every stop, even if the train had coasted with deliberate and slow precision. She hit it in her ankles and neck too, places he'd never even shoot up.

“Look little Shortie, you look pretty bad today and again no ticket? I'm kick'in you off at Wayne Junction (stop # 17).”

He'd leaned down so she understood him, and he could almost smell the remnants of the dope that had entered the ant trail of dots dangerously patterned around her main artery, above the collarbone.

“Come on, come on, just one more stop. You don't understand—.”

*You don't understand.* He would grin at this. He couldn't tell her, and he didn't want to. Besides, her gray eyes would haze over like a blind dog, and she would fall back into the haze of junkie purgatory before he could respond to her anyway. The conundrum for Moses was the awareness that he was free from the horrible life of the withdrawing apparition, yet was equally jealous that she still got to feel that first wave of warmth. Regardless, he knew in his gut that his former life, one that was buried underneath the commuter files in his mind, was never worth returning to. He embraced the structure of his job, its lack of drama, and its simplicity. Simultaneously, it provided him with a space to slowly learn how to re-integrate into the flow of the universe.

“Langhorne Next, Langhorne Next.”

He had time between stops to be alone in the only semi-private space on the train and do his own gazing. In this space, separating the entrance from the platform to the train, and then the train

to the cabin, he would give himself permission to daydream before the train became impacted and bustling. These moments of solitude were priceless, and today his mind was just on her.

The day he saw her at the 4021 Club Easy Does Group, he recognized her as familiar but chose to react to her as a complete stranger. Breaching the boundary of passenger/conductor and her change in physicality from panhandler to sober-person was jarring for him. A hat covered her dreadlocks, her makeup was appropriately subtle, and her grey eyes had been replaced with sparkling blue sapphires. She appeared years younger than he assumed she was, and this made him feel a little uneasy and guilty. *Was this really her?*

“Hi, I’m Moses, I’m an addict.”

“Hi Moses.”

When it was his turn to introduce himself, the collective “Hi Moses” echoed in choral unison off the wood-paneled converted West Philadelphia home. He looked to her in this elongated moment for signs of recognition but there were none. For the entirety of the meeting, he caught only fragments of other peoples’ shares:

“I’m gonna get my son back, one day at a time, I put one foot in front of the other, they say sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly”

“God is good.”

“All the time.” (*In unison*)

“I’ve been feeling some type a way about somin...”

“I am on fucking Step Four and...”

“My cravings are not getting better, I guess I am not in the middle as they say...”

“Next stop Somerton, next stop folks.”

Moses recalled the embarrassing disappointment that had weighed on him during that meeting with an intensity and accuracy that was typically reserved for larger life moments, such as missing a pass at the most important football game of the season when you’re fifteen, or after he decided to shoot up the first time when he had promised himself he would only ever snort. On the black and white checkered tiled floor his buddy Randy, a starkly pale, white boy with a crooked spine, had whispered to him remorsefully,

“You know bro, it will never be the same again—your life I mean.”

Moses hadn’t digested the weight of that comment at the time. He was instead struck by the irony of his unlikely partner in crime, and the checkeredness of their skins paralleling the tiles of the tiny bathroom. The simple inevitability, of the relationship of lightness to darkness, the polarity, represented his addiction perfectly; he either went all the way or he didn’t, there were no grey-scaled in-betweens. He had made the decision and had felt the reddening heat come into his cheeks: a combination of ecstasy and humiliation.

The similar tugging in his gut now, over Shortie, couldn’t represent the same thing. But it was likely some brand of resentment toward her. This feeling he couldn’t place was aggravated throughout the meeting, as she continually didn’t acknowledge him with her new crystal eyes.

The meeting space was a stuffy one. A mist hung in the air like cigarette smoke in a room full of smoldering half-extinguished butts. The dust cloud in middle space haloed the heads of the circle of drug addicts. There was something dingy and oppressive about the room, the stained folding chairs and the loud maple floor. In all the meetings prior to this one, he had marveled at the life and hope contained within the space. The stories inspired him, as did the sheer survival, the honesty and authenticity of people who had once been liars, con artists and sometimes murderers. Shortie looked so clean, white and naïve. She had belonged so well on the train; he had understood

her pain then, but in the sacred space of recovery where people really had it bad, he felt she was a tourist. This distracted him, and a bitter taste began to creep from his throat into his mouth. It tasted just like dope.

Pacing the aisle between Jenkintown (stop # 14) and the Elkins Park (stop #15), he spotted a sprout of blond dreadlocks peeking over a seat facing the back of the train. This is the stop where she often boarded. *Had he been so lost in thought that he didn't even watch her board?* The train was filling in now, and he didn't make it all the way to the reversed seats before he had to return to the door and prepare the train for the next stop.

"Elkins Park, Elkins Park next."

Moses thought back to that meeting as his pulse elevated. She had spoken that day. In the pause, between shares, right before she raised her hand and introduced herself, his stomach had rumbled loudly. The groan was significant enough for his friend Joe C seated next to him to smirk. The sound of her voice was that of a siren in the gruff of the wild; the soothing and rhythmic sounds had enchanted the group, or had enchanted him. He hadn't made out a word she said that day. There were lots of "Uh huh girls" and "Share thats" but he never really listened to the content of what she was saying. He was struggling to keep her in the catalogue and, therefore, not really know her. Moses had even thrown out a "Say it, Shortie," feigning his appreciation of her private thoughts and struggles. His pre-pubescent reaction to her was confusing yet felt inevitable; Moses had no idea what it meant or what he was longing for, but her simple acknowledgement of him might have resolved it all.

"Fern Rock Transportation Center, Fern Rock."

His walk down the aisle was hurried and almost panicked. The guilt of what he had done after that meeting, and the weeks following, when she had appeared at almost every meeting he attended, threatened to compromise his crafted, conductorly disposition. He had abused the time between stops with his daydreaming and was falling behind schedule. However, he had to say hello to her; he was convinced that confirming her eyes were still crystal blue and clear would resolve all of his building anxiety.

"Hey there Shortie, long time no see—"

"Sir, excuse me, *Sir!*" A hand tugged at the back of his blue piped uniformed leg before he could finish greeting her. She might not even have heard him. He hadn't seen the hand coming because he was in the reverse seating section. A slight vertigo overcame him as he turned back around to respond to the commuter. Riding backward is always unnatural. They were approaching the city now. The buildings were funneling closer on either side through the windows, creating the illusion of twilight approaching, even though it was actually morning—as if someone had hit the rewind button. In the time he could have been saying hello to Shortie, Moses had instead had to explain to a confused commuter that he would have to pay for a transfer in order to take the subway at the next stop. Moses had lost his rhythm. For a conductor, the pace and accuracy of a run functions much like the repetitive base riff of a classic jazz song. Although it is chugging along in the background of the song, subtly and almost undetectable, the riff is an essential component of the song. Without this backbone, the rest of the melody sounds empty. Dominated by treble. Distorted—off tune.

On the days he missed the very precise timing of his announcements or when he didn't have enough time to collect all the tickets, Moses felt like an incomplete song. Heading back to the door to prepare for the coast into the next station's platform, he was obsessing about getting himself back on track. Then he did something he had never done before on the train, he tripped. The moment

was preceded by a loud crunch and pop (the startling pop of a car tire running over a milk carton) and then down he went, his right foot slipping first toward the door, then his left. It was a graceful skid, one that allowed enough time to hear a collective gasp from the more alert passengers. When he finally stopped sliding he found himself with his heels against the door and the culprit, an empty Aquafina bottle, neatly attached to the arch of his booted right foot. Moses cursed under his breath. That bottle had been floating around the cabin for weeks, haunting him. His failure to take the time to clean it up had resulted in the uncomfortable embarrassment he had just suffered, and now he heard the passengers one by one chime in:

“You okay sir?”

“Damn! Ole’ head busted his ass!”

“Take it easy man.”

“Do you need help? —Someone help him for God’s sake!”

He brushed himself off, waving away the multiple hands extended to him, and in an act reminiscent of his former aggressive, less-composed self, he kicked the squashed bottle. When he did so, he forgot that the bottle would now remain a floating hazard.

The episode had cost him; he had run out of time to check on Shortie and had to manage the large influx at Fern Rock (stop #17). Fern Rock, although it has no ticket office, acts as an interchange of six different transportation lines from which one can reach virtually any place in Philadelphia. The earth’s magnetic field can be charted in what some mystics refer to as ley lines or power points. These points can be mapped on the earth’s surface and are thought to cluster in places of spiritual significance. Moses had overheard a discussion about the ley lines in Harry’s Occult Shop, a store he had visited that very day after he had first seen Shortie at 4021. Although it hadn’t occurred to him today, often he had thought that if train stations charted their own version of a cosmic map, Fern Rock would have the most concentrated intersection of ley lines.

Fern Rock marks the official transition of suburbia to megalopolis. The perpetually dimly lit station is by no means ornate. Overhead catenary lines dominate the sky scape and there are three platforms, two islands and one side platform that welcome several regional rail lines and the subway. Each of these structured tiers cast angular shadows on the others, so that when the passengers wait for the train, it always appears to be twilight. There is a bus stop, and a large, always-full parking lot. The surrounding area is a poor, albeit stable, community. 1920’s-style row homes in poor condition line the streets surrounding the station. The incoming foot traffic is always hurried and aggressive, and the passengers are always at odds. Just as Moses climbed behind the last passenger, he suddenly found himself held up.

“What’s the hold up Bud?”

“Some kid spilled his coffee everywhere,” a large square shouldered and tailored back responded to him, without even turning around. The timing would be off by a few minutes now, and Moses would have even less time to make it to the back of the car to visit with Shortie.

While kicking the empty coffee cup and other abandoned objects under the seat to clear the aisle (not including the bottle from earlier), he caught just a glimpse of his usual round face and five-o-clock shadow. Now it was framed by abandoned broken warehouse floating by in the background. But then he honed in on something. He had to squint across a row of bobbing millennial teenage boys to see it, but etched into the dirty glaze of the window across his reflection was the word *cursed*.

There was nothing really strange about etched graffiti in train windows—Moses had memorized most of the etch art on several of his runs, but now he had his last visit to the witchcraft apothecary, Harry's Occult Shop, on his mind.

After his regular Monday and Wednesday meetings, Moses would head over to the Market Street Subway line then transfer to the Broad Street Subway, get off at Broad and South, and navigate by foot the cracked cement of the run down sidewalk. As he would every week, on his way to Caribbean Delight (a food hut he frequented), he would pass the gigantic familiar mural plastered on the sidewall of Harry's Occult Shop.

The mural's focal point is a twelve-foot tall masculine angel, with a blurred out face and wings that span the entire length of the row-home style building. The faceless alabaster angel has a fist raised into a pump, while his other hand holds a long staff topped with a cross. Covering the bottom half of the angel, so that it looks as if he is rising out of it, is a gothic stained-glass window. The window is impressively saturated in color and is an extremely believable depiction for spray paint, on which is painted a pictorial of a black Jesus. Jesus is holding the same staff as the angel above him, but also cradles a small white lamb—a lamb that Moses had caught himself associating with Shortie. Below this icon-esque window, where South would be located on a compass, is a large slithery and intricate graphitized word. A word Moses has never been able to decode. In each quadrant where N, E & W directionals might be, there are also three other words similar in style, but these are also still illegible to him. In the top right corner, faded, and obviously existing years prior to the contemporary religious tribute, is the sign for Harry's. In vintage typography and white lettering the words "Since 1917, Harry's Occult Shop, We Aim To Help" are easy to overlook.

Typically the scent, traveling several blocks from the Caribbean joint, would make Moses start to think about what he would order when he arrived there. But the hours following his sighting of Shortie at the meeting, triggered at the first sight of the mural, instead gave him a distinct and disturbing full body hunger. After several years sober, he had been fairly confident that he would never return to the temptress sauce that enslaved him for so long. But for some reason now, an urgency, much like that he battled in detox and isolation, overtook him. The craving wasn't like a typical dope craving though. He had been meeting with his sponsor, going to meetings, following the book—all of his actions, from a psychological perspective, indicated he would never return to his habit. He was taught that most relapses start long before the user succumbs to his or her addiction (they are planned, anticipated, or are part of a gradual decline in behavior), but this compulsion was sudden: an undeserved attack: an assault on his psyche. Shortie's failure to recognize him at their first encounter outside of the train had unsettled and flustered him. Somewhere inside himself Moses was becoming convinced that their encounters were significant, a sign of something larger than the train, or his sobriety, or their contrasting colors. Stunned by his own vulnerability and sudden loss of appetite, he sought comfort in the shop. He walked into the unassuming chime-adorned door as if he had always intended to go in.

On that first visit to the store, his eyes had adjusted slowly, just as they do when walking out of the brightly lit outdoors into a dark and cluttered space. The store was larger than he had imagined, three or four rows of stack style bookshelves occupied the center of the cement-walled interior. The walls on either side were lined with occult shop staples: powders, candles shaped like clawed hands or women's bodies, cone-incense, hollowed out skulls, tarot cards, pentagram jewelry and lizard-skinned pipes. There was no counter or salesperson in sight. As he stepped further into the shop to inspect the inventory of Santeria paraphernalia, Moses felt both ridiculous and intrigued; Ridiculous, because he could still imagine himself talking smack and loitering with

his old boys on the corner where he used to hustle. Before his habit had humbled him, he would have openly balked at such a store, perhaps even stopped in to heckle the owner, for no other reason than to show off to his friends and to be a smart ass. However, the part of him that was intrigued he attributed to “softening” as he dried out over time, but also to his earliest recollections of his mother.

Although she died before he was even an adolescent, his most vivid and recurrent memories of her were her rituals, wherein she would light candles and hum hymns in a corner of the house that resembled an altar. Although his childhood was hazy, the iconographic photos of Saint Mary that his plump and devote mother would pray to were still graphic imprints in his mind.

“God is good,” she would say. Her dark eyes and skin would glow from the match she would be lighting, and she would turn to him for the correct response.

“All the time, Momma, all the time.”

Moses never inherited his mother’s faith, even though he recognized his survival was a miracle. He believed in the tangible, Good Orderly Direction, his work, the massive power of the earth, blackness, and steel machinery—like the train. Although he believed himself to have no faith at all, especially not his mother’s deity, he had been brainwashed by his attendance at countless meetings that he must believe and depend on *something* in order to stay sober. So he supplemented his perceived faithlessness with something he thought to be distinct from it, and that was superstition. Much of his superstition was subtle. His mental catalogue of passengers, for example, seemed much more compulsive and methodic than superstitious. However, there was an underlying causality. Although it was not always obvious even to Moses, it was intrinsic to his need to continue keeping tabs on everyone. Simply, if he did not keep them ingrained in his brain they might not go on, or he might not—either or. On some deep level, he believed that his commitment to memorizing them somehow affected their existence. It would never occur to him consciously that it was possible that the collapse of this system, enacted by Shortie’s agency outside of it, was what was tearing him apart and provoking his cravings.

“Wayne Junction next folks, Waaaaayyyyne Junction.”

Moses had barely recovered from his fall and the spilled coffee setback as he opened the door at Wayne Junction (stop#18) for the boarding passengers. He squinted and stood on the tips of his toes to make sure he could still identify the dreadlocks peeking out of the seatback at the other end of the car. They were still there, and he felt reassured that he had time to get back on track *and* get to check on her before she would get off. This suspended animation of the outline of her body at the back of the train convinced him that she wasn’t sober anymore. Her stilled posture must equate to her nodding out.

“Brother, kyan I help? I am yahso in de back.”

The counter of the shop was oddly positioned in the rear of the store, and Moses hadn’t even noticed it. He had been entranced by an array of bath salts in glass test tubes on a rack on the wall; one tube was a cleanse for wealth, another for passion, and most were for vague notions or trivial states of being, like “weightlessness.” Moses followed the accented voice to the back of the store. Moses wasn’t surprised to find a bald, deeply wrinkled man whose posture was bad and whose ethnicity was hard to determine. He had an islander-esque accent, but Moses could not determine where he was from. Something about the man was authentically peculiar and enchanting, just like the shop itself.

“Brother, why is dat you are yahso? If you is lookin’ for Janis she isn’ doin’ readings today—she has de gout. Besides her clients, I know every face dat come in here, puttin’ away for di tourists, but

I know dem faces too. You be looking for a specific spell?”

Moses acted as if it was completely natural to request a spell from a stranger in order to cast out the unbearable craving that had been provoked a few hours earlier. What felt like moments later, Moses had found himself eating his favorite beef pie at Caribbean Delight while staring at the black bag of powders and candles across the table from him as if it were a long lost brother. *Why not?* There was no reason not to follow through on the old man’s incantation and subsequent instructions. Superstition compelled Moses, but the augur’s warning of dire consequences should he not follow the directions precisely disturbed him. Intellectually, he understood the ridiculousness of the spell, the money sought by the man at the counter, and mostly his own pathetic desperation. Emotionally, he was unspun—as he had during most of his active addiction—he acted out of panic.

“Temple University Next, Temple”

The college students always line up at the front of the train car preemptively as it is still moving. Moses typically prepares by limiting ticket collection to the front car after Wayne Junction (stop #18) and waiting in-between the doors so as not to get stuck behind the rush once the twenty-somethings begin getting up to de-board. For this reason, he again could not reach the back car in time to see her. While standing on the platform ushering out the anxious students and chanting “West Trenton Local to University City,” he again returned to thoughts of the previous months. After first seeing Shortie, and having the spell cast that evening, he had continued to see her at what felt like every meeting he attended, and she continued to not recognize him. Once she was clear and sober and someone that Moses resented, he failed to see her on the train at all. However, as time passed it was as if Moses had not wanted really to be recognized at all. When he spotted her in fresh clothes and new outfits he would seat himself in the rear of the meeting or what his sponsor would refer to as “the aisle of denial” or “inventory row.” He would keep his fellowshipping after the meetings brief and skirt out quickly under the guise of resting up for his early morning shifts. He would rather reject her than be rejected. In the meantime, he diligently followed the spell, yet his cravings for drugs only worsened.

He had waited patiently for the waning moon, and when it arrived, he loyally returned to Harry’s Occult Shop for the second stage of the “incantation.” The old man was out on the day he promised to say the incantation, and Janis hurried through the customized blessing that had been promised. Before she allowed him to leave the store, she pitched him on the power her personal readings could have in his life. Despite the declining reputation of the shop and the spell, Moses was determined to follow it through to the end. On the day of his regular 4021 Club Easy Does It meeting, which was the same day he needed to return to the shop to purchase the Macutos, or the amulet that he was to carry with him always, Shortie was not at the meeting. This did not particularly disturb him, but as he made his commute toward South Street, he was overcome with an intense relief. The peace that overcame him as he rode as a passenger himself on the subway to Broad and South was intoxicating, and the awareness came that he no longer had the urge to get high. The underground safe lights of the subway tunnel flashed in his peripheral, and it occurred to him that perhaps the spell was truly working.

“Market East Station, The Gallery at Market East.”

The time between Temple University (stop #19) and Market East Station (stop #20) was approximately six minutes, one of the more lengthy distances between stops. Before stepping into the car to begin his descent into his rapid ticket collection routine, and with the intention of finally putting to rest his curiosity and facing Shortie, he instinctively reached into his left pocket to fondle the amulet. Rolling the blue and white beaded Macutos shell between his first and second fingers

had become second nature almost instantly. He had continued to reach for it even on days after having thrown the amulet away into the tracks between the narrow dark crevice that separates the train and the platform at University City (stop # 23—the final stop). He had felt particularly guilty that day about the absence of Shortie. His compulsion to throw it away had come on suddenly between shifts, and he had acted rashly. He began to suspect he was somehow responsible for her disappearance. Maybe the spell was casting *her* out.

Returning to his duties with an uncomfortable shudder and with increasing fear of the potential consequences of the broken spell, he made his way down the aisle. Moses even had enough time to check in with his regulars, make mental notes about their changes, comment to them, and nod and smile. His timing was impeccable and with just a few minutes to spare he had reached the reverse cabin and the head that he assumed belonged to Shortie. Tapping each aisle end with his palms lightly and alternating his right and left hand, he slowed to a stop when arriving at her back. Just as he was about to round her left shoulder and look down to see her eyes, he stopped himself. The head did not seem to sense his presence, it did not turn and was motionless, stuck in the very same position it had been when he first became aware of it.

“30<sup>th</sup> Street Station Next, 30<sup>th</sup> Street.”