

W THE OVEN TALE PRESS



Night Trolley

By Sidney Stevens

She slips out the back door of a stone farmhouse. I float above on a summer night. It's a dream, but I swear I'm there with her. Almost like I am her.

Droplets of warm sweat collect on her temples and anxiety rumbles her gut. She pats chestnut curls springing from beneath her rose-pink cloche hat and straightens her crepe dress—a dress she sewed herself in the latest style with pink and ivory daisies on sea green background, belted at the waist with a draping calf-length skirt that flounces at the end. She feels alive and creative, pretty—all things she hasn't felt in a while. Glancing at an upstairs window, she briefly touches her heart, which thumps so hard it nearly drowns out the rhythmic night songs of katydids and crickets. Not loud enough to wake him or her darling boy, but still she must hurry. She's not chickening out this time.

She appears to be in her 20s, but could be mistaken for younger with her slight build, sneaking like a child in dress-up, satchel in hand, along dark train tracks that run just east of the farm she's leaving. She arrives winded at the station, nothing more than a weathered wooden shanty at the edge of town with raised planks for a passenger platform. She takes a spot beneath the single lighted lantern haloed by orbiting insects, just in time for the last train to Philadelphia, the 10:30. She'll be there by 11:45.

Momentary grief saturates her steady dark eyes as a hunter green rail car slows alongside the platform, squealing as it halts. The entry door opens and a uniformed conductor leans out. The car is attached by a pole to an overhead wire. "Independence Limited," is painted in gold below brightly lit passenger windows. Not a train at all, but a trolley. She can see seats inside, all empty, with advertising posters above, pitching Ivory Soap, Beech-Nut gum and other wondrous products she's never seen in her general store.

It's a dream, of course, something I've imagined in slumber. Just like this woman moving down the center aisle to a rear seat upholstered in green velvet. Just like the trolley she rides, the same one that grates past our house, heavy steel wheels on steel track, always at night, just outside my bedroom window, rumbling by for months now since I've come home to help Dad heal from his fall.

This world I've dreamed exists in another time. Before me. Yet there's a strange déjà vu to it all, more immediate and tangible, less like a dream or memory and more like she and I are sinking into velvet as one, inhaling the rich aroma of mahogany paneling. Tingles of anticipation and anxiety push through our veins, like electrical currents pulsating along nerve endings we share. There never was a trolley that I know of. And yet the deep buzzing hum that vibrates up through the floor is familiar, just like the signal bell clanging for startup and the car's clackety-clackety rocking as it accelerates. I know these things. Just like I know the roll of gentle hills behind the farmhouse she left, and the wild night chorus so like ones that have serenaded me since childhood, the tender midnight breezes of summer, the deny-grass coolness.

I hear her silent thoughts as the trolley bullets across black farm fields and slows through small firefly-lit towns—a jumble of jagged doubts mixed with perfect certainty that I can't quite unknit. Except—my God—she has no idea what she'll do in Philadelphia or where she'll go from there. She hasn't a soul to help her, no one she knows beyond here. There's something she's already missing—her boy—a heartbreak she carries between her ribs like tiny jabbing stones. But she's certain she's going somewhere better. Where she can be at peace, a place to be

herself before she loses hold of what's left. A place to create. There's no question she must go. She'll make it right once she gets there, mend the rupture she's inducing.

#

I rise at 8 to bring Dad his toast and grapefruit.

He mumbles thanks without glancing away from the TV, hypnotized by a blaring report on Reagan's new defense initiative that I doubt he's really following. I want to share what I've seen in sleep, but I decide against it, as I always do. Dad has never cared much for the intangibility of dreams, and rarely says more than a word or two since I've returned.

After morning dishes, I pull out my paints for the first time in months and set up an easel in the sun on our dilapidated wood deck. I want to capture everything: the vivid green of her dress, her aloneness inside the night trolley tucked hidden in back under the soft glow of Halophane lights that line the domed ceiling, the grinding of wheels rolling past our house in my dreams.

There's a real-life quality to my work, as there always is, and yet it bears a fantastical energy that's new. Her face registers a dozen human emotions, just like in my reverie, but also a deeper conviction that she is blessed. A calm wellbeing that eludes most humans. She literally glows. The colors I choose are those I encounter every day. The shapes I create are familiar. I replicate it all, the hues, dimensions and textures of her world. And yet everything shimmers with an imperceptible vitality. I've occasionally seen and felt this impalpable force myself when I take time to witness the trees and sky and stars without thought, like everything down to the tiniest atom is dancing.

It's something I've been reaching for since childhood. But I've never fully seized this movement—the world's impalpable underlying spark—and laid it down on canvas. I let it pour out, fascinated by its separate life force. Ethereal and transcendent, like it was conjured from some other mind, certainly not my own.

My art professors in Philadelphia would hate my adherence to recognizable forms, however dreamlike and distorted, my lack of cynical commentary on the emptiness of contemporary life. They'd scorn the pull I continually feel to bypass the human-made world altogether and render something vaster, an invisible animating power no church has ever adequately named.

I've tried painting their way, delivering jaded socio-political commentary via pop imagery and mundane objects. I've tried reworking my creative trajectories. But I'm forever tugged in another direction, drawn to things that visit before dawn, the wise counsel of nature, the validity and truth beating inside each being, sacred awakenings—all that teems with exquisite life force. These are the only subjects worth exploring. Try as I might to twist myself and my work to their liking, this painting, like so many others that sneak from my soul, is everything they don't want in art school.

Shame, like glacial till, scrapes down through my center. Perhaps I should have headed in directions the world expected of me. Marriage. Kids. A nursing career Mom prayed for. Did I wait too long to go my own way, afraid to follow what pulled inside me? Am I too set in my ways now at twenty-seven to learn from others, yet cracked too wide to fit back inside previous possibilities?

"Times have changed," I used to tell Mom. "Women can do anything now."

But it's not so, even in 1983. I'm still not a serious contender, and neither are my few female art school peers. Our professors don't say it outright, but I've surmised their judgment: we

paint like women, without weighty, avant-garde sensibilities, about subjects that lack density and heft.

I clench against the next wave of shame, but it never rolls in. I'm free for now from old abrasions. What I've captured here feels right. It surprises me—something I've never seen before. I can follow where it goes, just for me, free of grades and the art world's current preoccupations and male predilections. My revered painter gods might despise it, but I've brought to life the magic of my night journey with a woman as lost as I am.

#

Dad squints at my work beside me on the deck, sagging over his cane to ease the pain in his back. He's far from retirement, but may never go back to the plant. His silence is cautious.

"It's from a dream I keep having," I tell him. "A trolley passes our house—last night a woman got on."

His eyes widen for an instant. Is it fear or maybe confusion? Thick fingers warily rub white chin stubble. He turns without a word and shuffles back inside.

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"She left on the trolley, you know," he tells me one evening days later.

I freeze, clutching his dinner tray. "Who?"

"My mother." His head rests wearily against the back of his lounge chair, eyes closed. The TV is off and shades are drawn.

“I thought she died when you were six.”

He clears his throat, swallows. “That was Grandpa’s story.” His voice is barely audible.

“He couldn’t forgive her, and when I found out I couldn’t either.”

I slump to Mom’s chaise lounge staring at her walnut dresser across the room, ivory hand mirror still lying there unmoved since the morning she died nine years ago. There’s never enough air in this room, but he refuses to change a thing. There’s comfort in that, I know.

“Where did she go?”

Dad’s mouth tightens. I know that look. He’s said enough. I rise toward the door.

“Conductor said she boarded the night trolley here in Emerichsville,” he growls at me.

“Left us in August of ’31, and never came back.”

Wind rattles against inner windows I’ve kept closed forever. I need time alone, air to breathe. As I quietly close the door, Dad calls out, “Old trolley used to run along our tree line . . . shut down in ’52.”

Alone in the dank hallway, I know with day-blue certainty that the woman in my dream—my grandmother—slipped away on that trolley. My body presses against the wall to keep from toppling. I see it all now. The house she left—strangely familiar—was our old family farmhouse, Grandpa’s house. A house I lived in as a child, still two blocks away, sold years ago to a young couple who renovated it to more grandeur than it ever saw in its time. Trolley tracks I never knew, now the eastern edge of our yard, cut through old family farm fields I relished in childhood, long since crosshatched with tidy neighborhood streets planted with nondescript ranch homes like the one we’ve lived in since I was twelve.

I discover a book about the Independence Trolley at our local library, and suddenly its ghostly remnants are everywhere. Abandoned electric poles I barely noticed growing up still mark its once prominent path through modest farm communities, across pastures and through forests, snaking back and forth between Allentown and Philadelphia, day after day.

I can never leave Dad for long, but whenever I run to the store or pharmacy I steal away for a while to trace its route along asphalt streets now laid over old tracks, through familiar meadows and woodlands, over bridges and along country roads, across parking lots, through shopping malls, and behind housing developments. Vestiges that so completely escaped my awareness before are abundantly obvious now—an old trestle foundation near the park, a cut through the woods not yet fully erased by high brush and trees, street names like Independence Avenue and the Trolley Town Diner that quietly commemorate what most have forgotten or never knew. Right there all along.

Obsession helps dampen my longing for a life I can't seem to find. I made my escape to be a painter, to get unstuck from here. But I got stuck there, too, never burgeoning to fullness. Now I'm back again. Numbly between lives. The only thing alive is the trolley, calling me as it rolls by in darkness, tugging deep at my core. I can't stop thinking about it. Or her.

#

“Why did she leave?”

“Maybe she was like you,” he grumbles as I help him into bed. “Always wanting new things instead of caring for what she has.”

“I never left you,” I whisper to myself outside on our splintering back steps, watching twilight fade from lavender to deepening blue-black. I never meant to leave for good, but he knows I never intended to return either for more than a visit and certainly not this soon. What he doesn’t know is I haven’t anywhere else to go. He’s grown old from injury, before his time, sidelined with me, before mine.

#

She exits the terminal in Upper Darby, last stop on the trolley in a shopping district just west of Philadelphia’s city center. She makes her way out to the front portico and down wide steps to the dark sidewalk below. I feel her exhilaration, like fluttering feathers beneath her skin. I’m asleep but also awake inside her.

It’s near midnight and the streets are mostly empty except for an occasional pedestrian, men in shadow glancing her way, low engine rumbling of a few passing coupes and taxicabs, headlights beaming pathways on the wide boulevard before her, more automobiles than she’s ever seen at one time. She hardly notices, mesmerized instead by an unimaginably magnificent sight. Up and down the avenue, stretching perhaps forever, buildings and stores are lit up like a fairyland—closed for the night but still alive. A radiant dream world, like love’s gorgeous embrace made visible, almost too resplendent for this world.

Most wondrous of all is the sumptuous structure directly across from her, all four stories afire in multi-colored lights that begin flashing every few minutes in a bedazzling synchronized dance. Never has there been anything so sublime—a glittering ruby, sapphire and diamond palace. She can hardly breathe.

A chill creeps in as she stares transfixed. There’s a sweater in her bag, but she can’t pull her gaze away to fetch it. Weariness finally comes. There must be someplace to rest, maybe at a boarding house, but where among all these lights? Just a place to lay her head so she can consider her next moves refreshed. There are mountains to see in

the West. Highways ribboning across deserts. Oceans and canyons and prairies. Maybe a small cottage nestled in an alpine valley, a haven to catch her breath and create something of her own. Yes, there's her beloved son, a brilliant creation, and her farm wife's life nourished by the rhythms of seasons and land but unceasing, a husband who professes love, one she works to please. It's the life she's created. But she wants more. She is more. So much more. She's sure it will somehow work out. She'll be reunited with her son and surely her husband too once she finds her way. The sense of possibility nearly lifts her off the sidewalk. She might fly.

She awakens on an oak bench in the terminal's cavernous passenger hall. A slant of morning sunlight falls across her face from the giant skylight above, like it does for me this morning from my bedroom window. Shop girls and businessmen eye her as they scurry by for work. One man in a tan suit almost stops to see if she's okay, but decides to move along. A good woman alone, asleep in public. Manless. Childless. Perhaps not as good as she seems. Old future interrupted. New future unwritten. Like it is for me now.

She pretends to sleep, half-shut eyes following the sway of suit trousers over leather Oxfords and the parade of stockinged calves atop high-heeled pumps. She still looks forward to what might be, but the glow is fading in the glaze of a new day. Like it has for me now. How will we—she and I—ever catch our dreams?

#

I stand before my easel in the small, square bedroom where my paintings began. Nothing much has changed since then. Fading art posters and old sketches still hang tacked to dirty-white walls. The threadbare quilt Mom sewed for my tenth birthday still covers my twin bed. I'm still here, too. Same me, still reaching for more.

I paint my grandmother swept away by city lights, waking to her new world in a rail terminal fifty-two years ago. My dreams are so vivid there's little more to do than faithfully copy

them from memory. Borrowed memories that I've transcribed for her, glowing to life from her mind.

What if the night trolley stops rolling by? Or I drift off one night, ready to ride, and she's not there to help me aboard? Could her magic dissolve just as she did long ago?

#

Nestled between Mom's stoneware flour jar and mixing bowls, the gossamer edge of a yellowed newspaper clipping presents itself like a fresh blossom one morning. Perhaps she stuffed it there long ago for safekeeping, though I'm certain it's new.

Gingerly, I unfold a profile of Anna Seider, written in 1959, a self-taught artist I've never heard of, living north of Philadelphia, twenty miles south of here, alone on land she bought from her earnings as a trolley conductor, the only woman ever to work the Independence line. She purchased a trolley car that was about to be scrapped for ten dollars, divided it into three rooms and attached a porch and a fourth room with floor-to-ceiling windows for an art studio.

The photo is faded, but I recognize her. Short white hair. Simple white blouse neatly tucked into cuffed denim trousers. Black work boots. Same slender frame. My father's unsmiling gaze. I reach for the kitchen table to steady my mind.

Across meadow clearings and wooded groves surrounding her trolley house, this untrained artist—my grandmother—concocted massive beasts and giant humans from trolley wheels, track pieces, brass hand rails and metal gears that she salvaged, eventually opening her sculpture collection to the public.

Even through smudged newsprint I see their majesty, standing like silent custodians, arranged in groups, bending and pirouetting in unison, in love, strangely, gracefully electrified by some otherworldly motion. Kinetic beasts and humans unlike any that exist in reality or ancient myth, yet not entirely unfamiliar. Like primeval beings lingering in collective memory, revealing life's most divine impulses, enlightenment.

“Seider’s amateur work may not constitute great art,” the article notes, “but her make-believe menagerie has been delighting children and families for years.”

Tears well up, blurring old words. Even across time, I know instinctively her creations were never meant for young eyes only but for anyone capable of perceiving their soundless tidings and unseen stirrings. Entirely from the depths of her mind alone. Not amateur at all, but wildly, insuppressibly masterful—and forever misunderstood.

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“She came back after three weeks,” he mutters as I plant the article before him on the dining room table. Unsentimental eyes glance up from his game of solitaire. I can’t speak.

“Grandpa wouldn’t have her again—said she was unrepentant, taking back her maiden name and all. Didn’t understand her place.”

“Did you get to visit her?”

He shakes his head, mouth set hard against pain. “She wrote me letters, long ones, but Grandpa always tore them up before I saw them.”

I stare at her photo. Yes, it’s all there. I see it now—loss, regret, still lasering through time and decaying paper. Yet also continued faith in a road forward.

“You never saw her again?”

“Once after I was grown and married. You were too young to remember. She came by the house and tried to explain she needed me and family but also needed something for her. Begged forgiveness—said she made a mistake, but didn’t know how else to have both. She sat with you a while, admiring your paintings. I gave her one and showed her the door.”

Loss swallows me whole. Her loss. His. Mine.

“Why?” My voice hangs around us, screaming in my head. Questions I’ve left unsaid, unexamined. Rage unexploded. Hers. His. Mine.

“I was afraid to tell you—afraid you were like her.”

Yes, of course. He hung on, and still does, to love within his reach. So it can’t walk away like her love did. So mine won’t leave him, too, now that Mom’s has passed beyond reach.

#

By the light of my fluorescent desk lamp, I capture my grandmother’s return to her husband and son. They bar the door, pointing to a bramble path that ushers her away. I paint the trolley cottage guarded by behemoths straddling fields and forests. She floats among them reaching for her phantom son who can’t be reached. I paint her strong, sad eyes. I paint it all. From memory—hers and mine—which have intertwined now outside of dreams. They are my own, as much as hers, and I exist uniquely now beyond the touch of criticism or scorn.

I follow only what delights me, inspirations that fill my center darkness with light. What I paint is not the province of men or women, but of all beings. Spirit. Beauty. Boundless transformation. Creative grace. That’s all I heed now.

Invited into her memories, I'm learning to create without fear. I'm learning there is much to love. Love abounds. She was learning these things, too, even with so much left unfixed, unforgiven. She found a way to belong, a place to be, an artistry to reveal what matters. I'm learning, too. I paint it all.

#

Dad stops the truck at the end of an overgrown lane, barely two tire ruts left to guide us. He eases down from the driver's seat and hobbles toward a chain link fence. I struggle behind him through tall weeds. His cane gets tangled, but he refuses help. Fumbling with an old key, he springs open the rusted gate lock. There it is before us, all of it. Not a dream but real. The trolley house and her giants, coated now with grime and strangling vines, the abundant overgrowth and debris of years left untended.

We move through her realm together. The front porch she built is collapsed. Windows are cracked or missing. Roof tiles are gone from her built-on studio. But the trolley house remains, remnants of hunter green and gold lettering still visible. Mammoth creatures stand sentry across the land, soundless survivors, some with spindly legs missing, broken wings, lost snouts and arms, missing hands and paws. One has fallen altogether. Nothing is beyond repair.

Dad stands mute like these survivors, old eyes long past weeping. I wait for answers. So many answers left unspoken that he still won't speak, entombed behind dogged silence.

"Why did you keep it?" I whisper. It's all I can manage. One question to explain it all.

"A fellow offered to buy the place after she passed in '67. Wanted to keep it running, but I couldn't."

I watch his chest slowly expand and deflate. He is my father, but also someone I don't know. An abandoned boy. Motherless. Love collector and hanger-on.

“There was a letter from her toward the end,” he says. “She left it all to you.”

The world drops away in his words. Sunlight filters through leaves, releasing birdsong from above. Heat rises from morning earth. A golden butterfly flits along breezes carrying the scent of growing things, radiating with untamed life.

Mine, all of it—her beasts and trolley cottage, meadows and trees. Her love and wisdom. Tools to kindle a life. It's all in my bones, my soul. Kindred with hers. A cocoon. A gift, from artist to artist.

“She said you'd need it ... You'd understand.”

I do.

END