

Barclay Station

Fiction by Paul Luikart

Barclay Station was empty. The first train had not yet arrived. Light from the gray sky of the new morning seeped through the skylights. The concrete passenger platform was pale, uniformly white, with a spine of red benches down the middle. There were tracks on both sides. Barclay was only semi-enclosed and spring winds from outside pushed through. A strong breeze grabbed a white plastic bag and lifted it high above the railroad tracks, then forced it down as if it meant to tie it to the tracks, to commit murder in a cartoonish way. At the last second the breeze kicked the bag sideways. It flipped onto the platform, rolled toward the benches, hesitated, then scurried beneath them.

An old man walked onto the passenger platform from the doors that led out to the ticket windows. The dark doors flapped on their hinges behind him as he tottered forward. He was the first person on the platform that morning. The old man was short, dressed in a rumpled brown suit and he wore scuffed wingtips that were too big. His legs swung out to the sides as he walked. Every so often, he paused and sniffed, then kept walking as if he was nervous. He made his way to the red benches, sat down, and brushed the legs of his pants with the palms of his hands.

A brown fedora with a wide brim topped his head. The hat was pinched at the crown and there was a dark brown band with a blue jay's feather tucked into it. The man wore the hat perched on the back of his head and his short silver hair was pasted to his scalp. The man carried no brief case or any other bag, but he

toted a rolled up newspaper under his arm. He looked once around the station, then unrolled the paper, and rocked back and forth as he read.

In a few minutes, a pigeon swooped down and landed in front of him. The pigeon strutted along the edge of the platform, the feathers of its tail fan sweeping the concrete. Its chest was puffed and it shimmered, catching the light of the morning in purples and greens. The man stopped reading the paper and watched the bird. He made a clicking sound with his tongue and teeth and the bird stepped toward him. The man shoved his hands into his suit pockets and when he pulled them out, they were balled into fists like he was holding something. He pretended to throw. The bird flapped its wings and jumped, but when it realized the man had not actually thrown anything at all, it folded and refolded its wings and strutted off. The man whispered, "How nice it must be to have a piece of bread."

A wooshing sound had begun to fill the air around the man and the bird. At first it was only a low growl, sliding into the cracks of the morning's stillness, but then it crescendoed to a great roar and the great roar preceded the first train into the station. The brakes squealed and the train lurched and shuttered and stopped. The man squinted at it. It was ten cars long, the engine a dull blue and each car silver and striped on the sides with blue and red. Each car had a set of doors that slid back and, in the center of each door, there was a square pane of thick, greenish glass. The passengers' heads, silhouetted in the window, bobbed back and forth. They were black balloons suspended in a fog.

For a handful of seconds, everything was still. Then the doors slid back. Commuters poured out as if the train was a snake that had gorged itself into a

stupor and its prey, still alive, had burst through its skin. The commuters bore down on the old man with their long overcoats flapping and the clack clack clack of hundreds of shoe heels slapping the concrete. All heads were bowed and nearly everybody who rushed past held a glowing phone or a creased Wall Street Journal or a cup of coffee with steam puffing out.

The old man stood still and closed his eyes. When he opened them a young man with closely cropped, neatly styled hair, black-rimmed glasses, and a dark overcoat was walking directly toward him. The old man snatched his hat off the back of his head. When the young man had come within an arm's length of the old man, the old man reached out and touched the young man's arm and the young man stopped.

"You must be a kind young man," the old man said, holding out his hat. "You must help me, for you see my daughter is sick in a hospital in another country. I must go to see her. Please sir, help me if you can."

The young man said, "Sorry," and began walking away, but the old man grabbed the young man's coat sleeve and held it in his fist.

"Why not?" the old man said.

"I just can't."

"You can."

"No, I can't."

"You're lying."

"Let go of me."

The old man stared into the young man's face. It was a fine, handsome face. The eyes were pale blue and deep-set behind his glasses. The nose was

symmetrical, the chin and jaw square, the necktie done in a smart Double Windsor. The young man blinked.

“Alright,” he said. He set his briefcase down on the concrete and pulled a wallet out of the pocket inside his coat. He opened the wallet, withdrew a few bills, and dropped them into the old man’s hat.

“Okay,” the young man said, “There you go.”

“What do you keep in your briefcase?” the old man asked, “What’s so important in there?”

“Work papers.”

“Important papers, eh?”

“Yeah, important papers.”

“What sort of important papers?” The old man stooped and reached for the briefcase, but the young man grabbed it. The old man, still half-stooped, furrowed his brow and drew his cheeks back to reveal tiny, yellow teeth.

“You freaky old bastard,” the young man said.

He turned and walked toward the doors that led out of the station. The old man watched the young man’s back, the dark color of his coat blending into all the other dark colors in the crowd. When he could no longer see the young man, he grabbed the bills from the hat and stuffed them into his suit coat pocket. He did not bother to count how much money the young man had given him. The old man turned and nearly bumped into a young woman.

“Excuse me,” she said.

“Ah, young woman,” the man said.

She stopped.

“My hat is empty. I would like to fill it this morning with more than my head, you see. But I, like you, do not expect to receive money for nothing. What kind of a fool would I be? Instead, I will sing you a song. A beautiful song for a beautiful face.”

“Oh,” she said, “That’s sweet. I’m in kind of a hurry though.”

“Please come and sit with me. It will not take long. It would make an old man happy to sing a young woman a song. It has been such a long time since I sang for any one,” he said.

“Are you a singer?” she said.

“I am a very good singer.”

The young woman looked around. Another train had arrived on the opposite set of tracks and the passenger platform was flooded. She took her phone from the pocket of her overcoat, glanced at the screen and put it back.

“Alright,” she said.

He motioned for her to sit and when she did, he sat beside her so close that the edge of her overcoat touched the hem of his suit coat. The old man smelled like cologne and old newspaper.

“Okay, what’s the song?” She was smiling.

The old man looked into her eyes. They were wide, dark brown and they shined.

“It is a song in Italian I used to sing for Lydia.”

“Is that your wife?” she said.

“My daughter. But she is in the hospital now. In Italy, near Salerno.”

“I’m so sorry. She’s sick?”

“Very sick.”

The woman, unsure of the polite thing to say, said, “You must miss her.”

“I miss her greatly. Greatly,” the old man said.

“Has she been in the hospital very long?” the woman asked.

“A few months. I am trying to go to her in Italy. I must go to her.”

“Of course,” she said, “You will.”

The young woman studied the old man’s face, the soft eyes, the cheeks mottled with spots. There were deep creases from his nose to the corners of his mouth and she could imagine tears streaming through them as if they were canyons, the tears carving the canyons deeper and deeper into his face.

“Well, I would be honored if you sung Lydia’s song to me.” She felt a swell of compassion for the old man.

He turned to look at her again but something in his face had changed. It was blank now. Between the drooping lids and the long wrinkles of his cheeks, his eyes were set like black orbs. Suddenly she couldn’t imagine the old man’s tears. His stare was the only thing about his face. It was uncomfortable, menacing even.

“Money first.” He held his hat out and shook it.

“Oh,” the woman said again. She dug in her wallet, found two one dollar bills, and put them in his hat.

“That’s all I have,” she said.

“Don’t lie to me,” the old man said.

“No, I’m being serious. I don’t have anymore.”

“You go to your business every day,” he said, “You make lots of money. Some people have no money. You put some more money in my hat.”

The skin of the old man's face drew taught and he showed his teeth. A bubble of anger rose inside her and took the place of the compassion she'd felt minutes ago.

"I'm going to go," the woman said, "I don't appreciate being talked to like that."

She began to stand, but with a quick flash of his arm the old man clipped her on the side of her face with his hat. It was not a hard hit, but the woman was stunned and she landed back on the bench.

"You little fucker," she said, "You hit me."

"Because you not give," the old man said.

"You hit me," she said, this time louder.

"Be quiet," the old man said.

"He hit me."

"Be quiet. Shut up."

"Don't you tell me—"

"You don't lie to me," the old man shouted and he lunged at her.

He pummeled her waist with his fists but the blows were not hard enough to hurt. She screamed and the man thrust a hand into her face and clawed at her open mouth. She bit down on his hand and now the old man screamed. He could not tear his hand away and she bit harder, her teeth punching through the papery skin. The man screamed again, a high, thin wail. The woman struggled to stand up, but the old man would not let her go. He clung to her suit and to her hair. They rose from the bench knotted together, and the knot staggered to the side and tipped over.

The woman's shoes scratched the ground as she kicked her legs. The old man's breath came in clipped wheezes. He was on top of her. He continued to hit her and the woman grabbed the old man's suit coat with one hand and pulled him onto his side. With her other hand she grabbed his throat and the old man was gasping, breath escaping his wide-open mouth in a hoarse gag.

The woman felt herself grabbed under the arms and yanked to her feet. Somebody else dragged the old man a few feet away.

"What the hell is going on?" A middle aged man with reddish, receding hair stood between them. He'd let his coat fall to the ground and he held out both arms like a police officer stopping traffic.

"That little bastard attacked me." The woman was panting and smoothing her hair and her eyes were wild. The old man was lying on the platform in a heap.

"Is that guy okay?" somebody said.

"He's fine," the woman said, "That fucking bastard is fine. He attacked me."

"Okay, okay," the middle aged man said, "What happened?"

"I don't know, he said he was going to sing for me and he had his hat out, and before he sang he said I had to give him money and I didn't give him enough I guess and that's when he smacked me in the face with his hat," the woman said.

"He was going to sing for you?"

"That's what he said."

The middle aged man stepped over to where the old man was crumpled on the ground and stood over him.

"Hey, why did you attack this lady?" the middle aged man said.

The old man's body shifted but he did not say anything.

"Why did you attack this lady?" the middle aged man said again.

The old man said nothing.

The middle aged man walked back to the woman. "Did he hurt you?"

The woman ran her hands down the sides of her body.

"I think I'm okay," she said.

"She threw me to the ground. She bit my hand." The old man had risen to his knees. He clutched his bitten hand with his other hand and held it up so everyone could see. Dark blood flowed from the bite, down his wrist in little red streams and soaked into the white cuff of his shirt sleeve.

"Holy shit," somebody said.

"Why did you hit this woman with your hat?" the middle aged man said.

"I did not hit her with my hat." The old man stood.

"That's total bullshit," the woman said.

"Did you hit her?" the middle aged man said again.

"No."

"You lying bastard," the woman said.

"Did somebody call the police?" somebody said.

"I did," somebody else said.

"Let's all just keep going to work or wherever you're going this morning," the middle aged man said.

"You lying old bastard. Do you really have a daughter in Salerno? That's bullshit too, isn't it?" the woman said.

She began walking toward the old man. Her entire body quivered. The middle aged man stepped in front of her.

“Let’s just wait until the police get here,” he said.

“She is going to jail. She bit me,” the old man said.

“You lying bastard,” the woman said.

“Everybody relax,” the middle aged man said. His arms were out to his sides, and his hands were turned toward the woman as if he was about to grab her in a bear hug.

“Hey old man, are you listening to me? I am going to press charges and you are going to jail. You are going to jail,” the woman said.

She was pacing in front of the benches, the middle aged man standing between her and the old man.

“Do you hear me?” she said.

The old man slumped and his body seemed to expand and contract with his heavy breathing. He sat on the bench and stared ahead at nothing.

“Do you hear me?” the woman said again.

“You have to relax,” the middle aged man said.

“Answer me, you old fuck.” But the old man sat on the bench and stared straight ahead. The woman shot forward and the middle aged man caught her, but her momentum pushed them both backward and they crashed down onto the old man. His eyes bulged and all his breath popped out of his mouth. The woman reached over the middle aged man and slapped at the old man’s face and the old man, pinned to the bench by their weight, could not move. Her hand raked the old man’s cheek three times before the middle aged man stood and shoved her

backward. The woman was screeching now. Another man grabbed the woman by her arms.

“Why did you do that?” the middle aged man said, “Why did you do that?”

The woman began to sob, her bottom lip sucking in and out of her mouth.

“I don’t think this guy’s alright,” another woman said.

She was crouching over the old man’s body, which had slipped from the bench to the ground. The old man’s legs were twisted underneath him and his face, eyes half open, stared straight up at the Barclay station skylights. A ray of morning sun lit his face, erasing some of the creases and causing his face to radiate a golden yellow color. But his eyes were dull, the blackness of them now clouded and gray. A trickle of blood slid from the corner of his mouth.

“Anybody a doctor here?” the middle aged man said.

The trains had all emptied. There would be no new trains for forty five minutes.

“Anybody a doctor here? Or a nurse?” the middle aged man said again.

The sound of the woman’s crying began to surround them. She sucked in the air and expelled it in low-pitched moans. She heaved and bucked in the arms of the man who held her.

“We got the police on the way. We need a doctor. Anybody with medical experience?” the middle aged man said.

Nobody moved. Everybody stared at the old man except the woman. She threw her head back and the spring light from the skylights flooded her face. The light was bright now, as bright as it had yet been that morning and the woman’s face, soaked in the light, appeared to catch fire.