

Alex Clermont

Small Steps

I start to tell them my story. “Hello! I’m so sorry to interrupt your train ride today!” I shout, but shouting hurts my throat and makes me a little dizzy. I have to focus, so I picture the photo I have of mommy when she was a kid. She’s wearing cute little pink pants in it, and a cute white jacket with ponies on it, and pink boots that don’t have any ponies, and a pink scarf to keep her warm, and her jacket has fur around the edges of the hood and makes her look like an Eskimo baby.

She’s smiling and thinking about it makes my head feel better. It makes me want to smile.

Talking to the photo, and everyone else in the train car, I say, “When I was fifteen I ran away from home because my parents abused me! For a year now, I’ve been homeless! On my own with no help! I had a job bagging groceries, but it didn’t work out cause I have a hard time concentrating without my medicine, and I don’t always have it with me! I refuse to sell my body for money, so I’m here today asking for help!” That’s all the story I have for them.

I keep looking at the photo of the little girl in my head, but from the side of my eye, I see a man sitting in one of the corner seats. He's holding his nose closed with stubby, fat little fingers. I can feel the muscles in my legs get extra tight as they get ready to rush me at him. But I hold them back. I shout, "I know I don't look very good! I know I don't smell very good! But I'm trying my best with what I've got! If you can find it in your hearts to help me out with even a few pennies, I could get something to eat!"

Now the story is over. I let go, just for a second, of the Eskimo girl and shuffle through the train car with an empty coffee cup in my hand. I want to either scream at everyone about how horrible everything is, or just collapse on the floor because sometimes when I'm sad even breathing makes me tired.

I been riding the D line for a few hours, but if I just get some paper money I'd probably have enough for a sandwich and a soda. Honey ham after the next stop. Maybe turkey with swiss. Usually, I don't like having to choose because you never know what can happen when you go one way but not the other. Every day when I move left I almost always can't tell if I should've gone right instead. I hate it. This time it's different though cause either sandwich would be good.

I hear coins hit the bottom of the cup and I say, "thank you" to the old lady who put them there. I make a second trip around. I'm a little more hopeful because when people see even just one person give money it's like they know it's safe. Like nothing will happen to them if they help me. So a penny turns to a quarter. From the construction worker leaning on the doors I get a dollar bill and a nod. "Thank you so much," I say. I get off at the 174th street station.

The story I told them, some of it might be true depending on who or how you ask. The details aren't really that important anymore though. I need a sandwich—even if I don't know which one yet.

I leave the train station and walk to Felipe's. Bird shit on the awning covers parts of "Felipe's" and completely hides the word "deli" so that for a second I imagine it's some super secret store named Felipe's that sells, like, spy equipment or special drugs that give you superpowers. You get the good stuff if you know the right people. Otherwise, just deli meat. Though, even if that were true, I'd still only be getting a sandwich.

When I walk in I see Felipe keeping a close eye on me. Sometimes I move a little slow. That bothers some people. Maybe it bothers Felipe. I don't know. He doesn't really talk to me, he just asks, "What do you want?"

The deli stuff is protected by thick glass. Behind it are meats and cheeses standing up straight in plastic wrapping, and with fake flowers around them, and on fancy plates that make them look like prizes. I look close enough to almost touch my forehead to the glass. After staying there for a few seconds, I said, "I dunno. I was thinking ham, but I was also thinking turkey. Can I..." I pause to collect my thoughts, "Can I get a taste to see which is better?"

His lips get really tight like he's trying to keep his insides from leaving through his mouth, but he says, "Okay." Felipe walks to the sink to wash his hands but his eyes stay on me cause he thinks I'm gonna steal the salt and vinegar potato chips. If I run, I wouldn't get very far. And where would I run to if I did?

Fuck him, I think to myself, but my face doesn't show it. I'm not trying to hide it, but my face isn't always as fast as my thoughts. By the time I move to make a frown or something, he's handing me a slice of ham. I eat it

and it's good. He hands me the turkey. It's good too. I try to process the difference in goodness as Felipe (is he Felipe or is that just the name on the awning?) folds his arms with a tough look.

Soon, he gives up on me and walks back to the register. Still tasting the salt of turkey and trying to compare it to the memory of sweet Ham, I see someone run in. He's wearing a black ski mask, and a long, black, dirty rain jacket, and dirty blue jeans, and not too dirty blue and black sneakers. He points at Felipe with something that's inside his raised right jacket pocket.

He yells, "Gimme the money in the register! Now!"

Felipe says, "What the fuck?..."

The man in dirty black and blue fidgets and keeps turning his head left and right, making sure that no one was sneaking up on him.

He says, "I said gimme the money!"

"Show me the gun."

"Gimme the motherfucking money?"

"Show me the motherfucking gun!"

The man keeps shifting and fidgeting, until Felipe yells, "Man, get the fuck outta here before I call the cops you son of a bitch!"

The man runs right back out.

I look at Felipe, who is shaking his head, and say, “Can I get the ham on a roll with provolone cheese?”

He asks me to show him the money first. I do and he makes me my sandwich. I also get a lemonade and some sour apple lollipops. I leave and walk to the underpass. My steps are slow, but I know where I’m going so there’s no rush to get there.

I think about my story again. The things that are true about it anyway. The things that I wish weren’t true. Details still didn’t matter, but it’s something to think about on the slow walk. I unwrap the lollipop. The tart sweetness feels strange in my mouth but with each suck, it feels a little better.

What was true was that it’d been a year since I ran away from my foster parents. What was not so true was that I hadn’t sold my body when things got desperate. *Why should I think about that?* I suck a little harder on the lollipop then bite until it cracks between my back teeth.

I only needed money *that* bad two times. That's almost nothing.

There’s also stuff in between true and not true at the same time, so it’s complicated.

I get to the underpass when I hear someone holler from behind me, “Hey Lucy!”

I turn around to see the man in dirty black and blue. His mask is off, and as he walks closer, I recognize his face.

“Rico?” I ask.

He says, “Suave” as he takes off his jacket and sits down on the concrete. “It’s getting hot. Spring is finally springing.”

I point in the direction of Felipe’s and ask, “Was that you in the store up there? Trying to rob the place?”

“Yeah.” He sucked his teeth. “That shit didn’t work.”

“Did you actually have a gun?”

“Nah, just a plank of wood from the construction going on over here.”

“Why did you think that would work?”

“Wasn’t sure it would. Was gonna find out. Shit, I need money and working the trains isn’t popping. People ain’t as sympathetic to me as they are to someone like you. You’re more, shall we say, *aesthetically pleasing*.”

He says the words in a long stretch like he’s trying them out for the first time. Like you do with a new pair of fancy shoes when you wanna know if they fit.

I sit down near, but not next to him, and ask, “What do you mean?”

“C’mon. Do I have to spell everything out for you? You white and I’m black.”

“I thought you were Puerto Rican.”

He sucks his teeth again and asks, “You seen Gerald?”

“No.”

“Well, I’m a lay in his spot for a few.”

I don’t respond but only look at Rico as he shifts his body around to make himself more comfortable. He cushions his back with Gerald’s big coats and an almost black yoga mat that’s still sky blue in some places.

Rico’s been around for about a month. He seems kind enough, but you can never tell about these things. He helped me out last week when I was hungry though, so I pull out my sandwich and say, “You want half. It’s ham and provolone.”

He reaches over and grabs the half sandwich out of my hand with a quick, “Thanks.”

Rico eats it slowly. I grab my bookbag off the floor, next to Gerald’s spot. I put my half of the sandwich in the bag before settling back to my own spot because I decide I’ll eat after Rico goes to sleep. It’s one of those small choices that I wish I didn’t have to make because I want to eat now, but I don’t know if Rico’ll be looking at me eat. I’ll be more comfortable eating later by myself, but I’ll also be more hungry. Like most choices, you go with what you don’t like the least.

I keep digging in my bag after I put the food away though. Rico looks really curious, but I act like I don’t notice. Under a water bottle and empty medication bottles, I pull out the only photo I was able to keep with me through the last few years: my little Eskimo mom.

I stare at the face in the photo. Her round cheeks, and chubby chin, and stringy blond hair, and big baby doll eyes. I breathe in deep and try to think about the features that I never saw in person. My mom was pretty in real life too, but I never knew her when she was a baby, of course, only as an adult. Sometimes I think about what it

would be like if I could go back in time and meet her when she was my age. I like to think we would have been friends, but you can't be sure. Sometimes friends are the people who just stick around.

Rico asks, "What you looking at?"

"A photo."

"Yes. I can see that. I mean, what's it a photo of? That is to say, what are you looking at in the photo?"

I hesitate a little but answer, "My mom. My birth mother."

"She dead?" he asks, still chewing on ham.

I say, "She didn't take care of herself ... She used a lot of drugs when I was little. Last time I saw her, I was eleven, and she was pretty sick."

"From what?"

"She didn't take care of herself."

"Can I see?" He asks as he reaches over and grabs it before I can say no. His face wrinkles up a little. "This her kid picture? Why you carry this?"

I shout, "Give me back that picture!" and jump at Rico. I snatch the picture from him with one hand. With my other hand, I punch him on the side of his head. He catches my fist right before I throw another punch and yells, "What the hell is wrong with you?" but I don't respond. I just stand over him. Breathing through my

mouth, I pull my fist away and sit back down on the concrete floor where my bag and other coat are. The photo is in my left hand and I hold it tight to make sure he can't take it again.

I don't answer Rico's question because I can't. I just wanted the photo safe. And he shouldn't've taken it anyway! It felt like he was trying to steal my feelings. Like, steal my smile.

He yells again, "Well?" I just look at the photo and let my breathing calm down a bit. "You fucking hit me. You better tell me something or we out. Can't nobody hang with someone if they can't trust'em."

Even though Rico was new, he and Gerald had gotten close and Gerald had been around for a while. It's hard to get by without people looking out for you.

I say, "You shouldn't have grabbed my photo without asking."

"I did ask."

"But you didn't wait for my answer."

"You don't always talk quick enough. I thought you were cool with me seeing it."

I look down for a moment, then say, "I'm pretty sure she's dead."

He asks, "That why you out here? Momma dead?"

"No. I was put with foster parents because she couldn't be a good mom anymore. After a few years, I left."

"Did you punch them too?"

“No. They were all right. I guess. They just weren’t who I wanted them to be. I ... I missed my mother.”

“So you out here instead? Smart choice.”

“I didn’t want to be around people I had to pretend with. Acting like they were my parents when they weren’t. They maybe could’ve helped my mother get better, but they didn’t. Fuck them. I’d rather be on my own.”

Rico turned away. He started putting his clothes in a pile, getting ready to lay down on them. Getting ready to sleep. I try to say, “They wanted to replace her, but they weren’t her. They didn’t laugh big and loud when something funny happened. They didn’t hug me tight like she did. Maybe they tried to be her, but they weren’t.” but it doesn’t come out clear.

He makes a sound like “Ummm.”

It’s not a good idea to get too close to anybody, but people need to know you well enough to sleep around you. I think Rico has that much. I don’t hear any more from him, though, whether he’s sleeping or not, I’m not sure.

The last of the sunlight goes down as I sit there. It’s dark when I start hearing Rico snore, which makes me sleepy. I decide that it’s a good time to eat. I’m faster than Rico and after the last bite I nod off.

The next day is another hard day of riding trains and going up and down stairs; I stay at the library for an hour or two to use the bathroom and drink from the water fountain; I get some soup at the church; I dig around the dumpster behind Burger Bros. after it gets dark and find a small garbage bag of soggy French fries, cooked meat patties, and condiments that I eat from until I’m full; I try to get a shower over at the Lafayette Avenue drop-in place, but something’s wrong with the plumbing. I’ll try again tomorrow, I think.

For most of the day, though, I didn't think about much.

Actually, it's not that I'm not thinking, but I think about this thing, then I think about that thing. None of it too important and some of it is so important that I try not to think about it too much. I'm just here. Gerald started calling me a mess a couple weeks ago when I ran out of the medication I got from the clinic. But I don't think he's right. I'd rather be me than some kind of weirdo version who can't remember what it was like when someone tucked me in and kissed me goodnight.

I lie down on top of my puffy jacket and use my long coat for cover. The weather is getting warmer, but I still need the extra cover.

Sleep is easy tonight, and soon I'm running through the streets naked and shouting. Dreams are like that. You could be doing something that seems totally crazy, but when you're dreaming those things feel natural.

Because I'm naked, I feel like I'm supposed to be cold so I run towards the center of the city. There's a ball of fire that's there, and it'll keep me warm. I know that somehow it'll give me food too, and give me clothes, and keep me safe. It's like a weird video game with things being thrown at me from the tops of buildings and I have to dodge them. A long kitchen knife falls from the sky like a cartoon anvil and just misses me.

I keep running while dodging pieces of shattered glass, needles and grabby hands. I'll be okay once I get to the center, but I wake up before I get there. It's still night, but I can hear Rico walking way off into the distance, then pissing on the grass that separates us from the Sheridan Expressway.

When he walks back, he asks, "You crying?"

I say, "Yeah. I had a weird dream."

"Bout what?"

"I don't know. Dreams aren't always about something."

"Yes they are. Especially when you don't think they are. Were you falling? That's means you feel like you're losing control. I like the dream when I'm flying or swimming in a pool. Pools mean, um, abundance. They mean I'm gonna get something."

Still crying I say, "I was just running."

"That means you scared of something. Or you don't wanna deal with something." He looks at me for a few seconds then bunches up his thick, bushy eyebrows until it looks like some weird caterpillar. "Look," he said, "I don't know what happened before with that photo, but I didn't mean nothing by it. I don't know why the hell you put your hands on me, and you lucky I'm not the type of dude to hit a girl, but I didn't mean any harm. You can chill."

"I know. I'm just..." Tears are still coming down my cheeks, but I'm not sobbing or anything. "I'm just tired. I just want things to be good again."

"With your momma?"

"Yeah."

"But you said she was no good and now she's dead."

I don't respond, but go into my bag and grab her photo.

Rico says, "Ummm. I see. Well, I'm heading to the train. Looks like winter ain't dead yet and it's feeling cold tonight."

After Rico leaves, I put the photo away and go back to sleep. I wake up to the sun, like the morning before, and the new day is the same as the last, except me and Rico find some fruits in the back of a grocery store. The day after that I steal some pre-made sandwiches from the back of a food delivery truck.

Each day continues to repeat with only some changes in place and the food. I move myself along until it really is spring. No jackets needed. Gerald took a bus to San Francisco when it got warm. Rico was in and out of shelters, but he stuck around. I never liked the shelters. A giant room full of people all looking at each other's stuff and trying to figure out what they can take. You have to get in at 6 p.m. and if you're late, too bad for you. I don't need to be told when to sleep or how. That's what I tell myself my first time there, so I sleep by myself when Rico isn't at our spot near Sheridan.

When the weather gets really warm one day, we go to Morningside park with our cups and signs.

Rico says, "Yeah, I drink. But I don't do nothing more than that. I still gotta function out here. I still wanna dream."

I ask, "Do you stop dreaming if you do crack?"

"There's worse things out there. But yeah, crills will fuck your whole head up. You can't really dream after that. And when you can't dream anymore, it's time to die."

We sit on a bench with cardboard signs Gerald used to use. With some really wide marker lines, mine says:

Please help! I'm a human being in a life that

just took a few wrong turns. THANK YOU!

- Gerald "Yardbird" Tobias

Someone drops a quarter in my cup and walks away as I say, "Thank you." Then, both me and Rico hear shouting coming from the grassy spot way over to our left. We turn our heads and see a really angry looking woman. We can see her screaming at some kid, probably her kid, about breaking a phone. We listen as she calls him "stupid" and "clumsy." Rico just sucks his teeth, shaking his head left and right a few times. But I start feeling angry, and my arms, and neck, and jaw started to shake a little.

The little boy's head just keeps bending lower and lower as his mother, or whoever, keeps yelling mean things about him. It's almost like I can see the words falling on him and making his head too heavy for his neck. I jump up. I run at her growling like a dog, "Rrrraahrrrr!"

Did she have to be so mean? Didn't she understand that he was just a kid? Why couldn't she just love him? She sees me coming when I'm only about a few feet away. I'm about to swing at her when I feel Rico grab me by the waist.

He yells, "Calm the fuck down!"

I scream at the mother as she grabs her kid and runs, “He’s just a kid! He’s just a kid! He’s just a kid!” I’m throwing my hands trying to grab her, as far as she is, until I just get really tired and let go.

Rico puts me on the ground and says, “We gotta be out, or cops are gonna come and throw your ass in a psych ward or something.” I pull myself up, and we both leave the park with our signs and cups. People look at us as we walk. They talk in whispers, but I can hear at least one old lady call the police and I moved faster.

We stop at 128th.

Rico says, “Yo. You need help. Like, for real.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “It just made me so angry to see that kid being...”

“But why do you care? Leave that crazy momma alone. It ain’t your problem.” I don’t know what to say, so I don’t say anything. Rico says, “I can’t hang with you anymore. I’ma do my thing, you can do your thing. Take care.”

He walks away to the train station with whatever money he has in his cup jingling as he leaves. The sounds get softer, and then stop when he turns the corner and disappears. I lean my back against the wall and sit down on the floor. There’s construction going on. I sit under some scaffolding, in its shadow. It’s nice to have some shade. Someone else seems to think so too and is sleeping on the floor.

I look at the man or woman on the floor and think about this thing, and then I think about that thing. None of it is good, so I pull out the photo of my Eskimo mommy and look at it. This time it doesn’t give me the focus I want or even help me smile a little.

I don't see the cute baby face anymore, but the one that I knew in real life. She was an adult and she loved me but she wasn't always a good mom, even though I was always her daughter. Even when she was angry I was her daughter. Even when things got bad, I was her daughter. When I was inside her and she didn't try to keep me healthy, I was still her daughter. She didn't always understand that though.

I start getting mad again, but this time I try to control it. I let my body shake, then my arms, then I put all that I have into my hands and tear that photo into tiny, little, small pieces. I yell as I throw them out onto the sidewalk. It's like a paper rainstorm and when they all fall they look like little parts instead of a whole kid. The smile is still whole but I don't look at it too long before the wind blows most of the pieces away. I watch them as I sit there next to my turned over coffee cup with \$4.78 still in it.

I have to get myself together. That's what I decide. I'll sit around for a while until I feel I can stand up again. When I can, I'll get on a train and go uptown to get whatever I have left under the bridge. I'll get something to eat at Felipe's. I'll ask to use his phone. Maybe they'll answer when I call. Hopefully, they will and I can head back home.