

Clara and Al

Clara caught a train down a line she hadn't travelled in years. She was on her way to meet a blacksmith, to design a new screen for her living room fireplace. As she watched the suburbs go by, memories from long ago swam into of her mind. Suddenly she sat up, pressed her face against the window, and gawked at the back of a derelict building as the train whooshed past. Something caught her eye; something that couldn't possibly still be there. The train pulled into the next station, and although it wasn't her stop, but she decided to get off and go back to the building to check what she had seen.

Once out of the station she traipsed along the side of the tracks to the tumbled-down warehouse. She gingerly climbed over mounds of cracked bricks and picked her way around rusted metal to the rear of the building. And there it was. 'Stay rude' in stylised graffiti across the rear wall, in letters four feet high. The giant words surrounded by a technicolour array of stars and angles. Disappointment filled her; it wasn't hers. Someone else had painted this recently. As she thought about this, Clara felt awed that someone copied her graffiti, keeping it as fresh as when she had first sprayed it on this wall ten years ago. The style was all different, of course, but that wasn't a bad thing. Clara's bad 80's punk design was gone, replaced with a more imaginative and detailed work of art. But the words were the same. The message survived.

Clara stood there, staring at the graffiti, and was transported in her memory to her life back then. She had arrived from Columbia as a 19-year-old, ostensibly to study at university. Instead she had found a new life, full of freedom she had never experienced but often dreamt of, freedom not always within the law. She had found a crew to hang with - her pack. Together that band of fifteen or so youths had inflicted wild undertakings on this part of the city. They performed urban exploration of abandoned buildings, tunnels, and sewers. They lit fireworks in stairwells of office buildings and tenements, and partied on the roofs. They tagged everything they could.

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That's where Clara met Al. He was just one of the pack at first. He was quiet, but always there, going everywhere the pack went. No-one knew when he joined them. Hell, Clara didn't even notice him for her first couple of weeks. Ultimately, she became aware of him due to his lack of fear. Nothing seemed to scare him. Not heights nor the risk of getting caught nor surfing on fast-moving trains. And like her, she laughed as she recalled, he couldn't tag for shit.

Clara fell for him slowly, but hard. He said he was madly in love with her from the moment he met her, and that was why he followed the pack. Memories of their adventurous sex life flooded her mind and heat spread through her body. She pictured them making love in empty train cars, in dark underpasses, and once even on the roof of an office building on a hot summer night. It was always passionate. He was always attentive to her in ways that made her feel special, important, *seen*. All the things missing from her life in Columbia.

One day the pack was crossing the train bridge over the river, as they had a thousand times before. A train came. They took refuge amongst the trestles to let it pass. Somehow Al lost his footing and went over the edge. The river was little more than a creek at that time of year, and the fall killed him instantly.

Clara had stayed with the crew for a couple of months after Al's death, but eventually it lost its hold on her. This graffiti was the last she did. To remember Al. To honour him with his own words. Whenever they parted she would say 'See ya', and he would say 'Stay rude'.

But she *had* forgotten him. A tear escaped as the grief from the past filled her. Clara squeezed her eyes tight and took a few deep breaths, then sighed. I guess that's what happens when time moves on, she thought.

She had children now. Jessica, aged three, and Claude, aged six. She had been married to John for eight years, and they *still* loved each other. John was a financial manager; Clara worked

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part-time for a publishing company. The rest of her time she was a mother and a wife, taking care of her family's needs.

No longer did she surf trains, or break into buildings, or climb cranes on construction sites in the dead of night. Even the thought of doing those things gave her chills. She could not bear to think of how her children would feel if she were to die.

Like Al had died.

Clara let the sadness pass through her. She pulled her phone from her bag and took a couple of snaps of the graffiti. *Al's* graffiti, she thought. She was so proud it was still here, being repeated and updated by a new crew, a new generation of artists. And she hoped, wherever he was, Al was 'staying rude'.

As Clara put her phone away she glanced at the picture of her children on her screen saver. John knew about her past, about Al. But her children didn't. She smiled at the thought of telling them about the *other* Clara, the *adventurous* Clara. Not the boring mother they thought she was now. Then she remembered how risky she had been, and thought, perhaps when they're older. She returned to the train station, filled with melancholic joy at her discovery on the back of the abandoned warehouse, and the memories of Al it had brought back into her life.

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