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By Carleigh Baker  
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My marriage is ending and it's my fault. In the other room, Andrew is snoring. I'm on the couch. Here is the butterfly weight of polar fleece on bare skin, the entire length of my body unblemished by a goose bump. Try not to anticipate the cold. Squint at the dark window, listen for the rain, but only to harden against the inevitable. At five I get up: sweater, housecoat, slippers on the floor within reach. Pull them under the covers first. To turn on the gas fireplace is to risk making inside too comfortable. Kettle on while I dress for work: long underwear, fleece vest, wool sweater. Two layers of socks, even though that's not a good idea. Cuts off circulation, Andrew says.

Shell pants. Rubber boots. An old snowboarding jacket that was never used for snowboarding, Scotchgarded. A toque, and over that, a Sou'wester, from when Andrew and I used to go sailing. Gloves with the fingers cut out. My last layer, the standard issue *Metropolitan News* vest with a pocket in the front for extra gloves and tissues, and a plastic panel in the back for today's paper.

Stand at the window with a cup of tea I'll only get a few sips into, and listen to Andrew. In the summer months, this time of day is clandestine and peaceful, but in the winter, it's just lonely. It is raining—misting really—a wet that will sneak up on me as the morning progresses. Moisture will collect on the Skytrain supports over my head and drop down when the trains pass. Hit me in the face when I look up.

Down four flights of stairs in my rubber boots. Our suite is top floor, looks over the neighbourhood with a peek-a-boo view of the river during the day. I'll never afford something like this after I leave him.

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There are seldom any Skytrain cops on the first train of the day. They've never hassled me on the way home either; the *Metropolitan* vest seems to have some kind of cloaking effect. With it

on, I'm at the bottom of the food chain where I belong. Lana taught me to always keep an expired ticket, just in case. She says they're paying more attention to how guilty you look than the actual date on the ticket.

Lana is technically my rival; she hands out the *48 Hours* paper. She's good at working the system, which is very Russian of her, or at least that's what she says. I haven't met many Russians.

"Life is shit," she says in a Doctor Zhivago brogue. We're pulling papers out of the morning stacks and folding them in half. "You marry doctor, move to Canada, then husband leave to have sex with nurses and you must marry butcher so you can stay. And for what? Canada. Is not so great here."

Her conviction compels me to nod. She claims to be past her prime but she has full lips and high cheekbones, and may have a supermodel body under her parka and shell pants. It's hard to tell. Wool hat with a pompom, pulled down low.

"It's ridiculous, this." She says, pointing at the pompom. "That's why I buy, to wear for this job. This ridiculous job." She considers. "And because was on sale."

We're both ready for the first rush. It's more efficient to prepare a bunch of papers in your vest and pull from there; running out in the middle of a rush could mean 20 or 30 losses. We both get a stack of about seven hundred every morning, left in a zap-strapped pile by the station entrance. I'm lucky to give out three hundred. Lana does at least twice that.

An older man with a pompadour approaches us from the station. "Svetlana!" he calls, and she offers him her cheek along with a paper. I hold out a *Metropolitan* and he ignores it.

"Is Tom," she says, waving as he retreats. "Very loyal to *48 Hours*." She can't resist a little sneer. We are rivals, after all.

"Ni how!" She calls to the Chinese men, the same Chinese men we see every day, and they say *Ni how, miss* and bow a little when they take a paper from her. "Ni How! Have a nice day, Have a nice day," she says. And as they walk off, "Chinese man have money, but very small penis."

"Don't you think that's just a stereotype?" I ask.

She shakes her pompom head. "Stereotype is truth."

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I'm not leaving Andrew because I've met someone else. He didn't beat me up or call me names or cheat. I'm leaving because I don't want to work it out. We did try, once or twice. There's nothing to tell a divorce lawyer or my parents or friends, except maybe that he gave me too much. That's what he says, and I agree. I didn't have to work or cook or clean or worry about anything. Andrew took care of it all.

We both know that I can't leave until I have some kind of steady income. The Metropolitan was the only place willing to hire me right away, and not ask what the blank spot is on my resume from the last five years. They put me at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Street station, not too far from where Andrew and I live. Every morning, there's a man who sings opera in Italian as he walks down the path toward me. He never takes a paper, but he bows, and tips a nonexistent hat. A group of Korean girls in scrubs who all make eye contact with me and giggle, almost flirtatiously.

*The Metro girl!* Millworkers call out, on their way to Annacis Island. They still smell of sawdust, even in freshly washed clothes. If I tell them I'm having a slow day, they take two papers. On Valentine's day, one of the men gave me a carnation. I wore it in the zipper of my snowboarding jacket for a couple of hours, but I threw it away so Andrew wouldn't ask questions. Sometimes he picks me up in the car after my shift, even now that he knows it's over. This always gets a reaction from Lana.

"You crazy woman. You have good man, with car." She waves a *48 Hours* over her head. "And you leave. At least take car."

"I'm a terrible driver," I say.

"You crazy woman. You must take half."

"I don't want half." Lana would choke if she saw the stemless Ridel wine glasses and Denby cookware I'm walking away from. All these things that had seemed *absolutely necessary* at the time.

"Corrina—listen." She leans close, but continues to hand out papers with her right hand. "I tell you something." She takes a deep breath. "I—not actually Russian."

"Oh?"

"No, I lie to husband. He want Russian wife." She puts a hand on my arm and squeezes.

"Oh." We seem to be having a moment, but I'm not sure why.

"I am...Ukrainian." The word slips from the lips like a sigh. She pulls away as if I might smack her.

"He wouldn't have wanted a Ukrainian wife?"

"No." Lana sniffs. A big crowd just got off of the train from King Edward, people are streaming past us. We work blindly with both hands, dispensing the morning news like vending machines. Lana's regulars are disappointed to not be receiving her full attention but she ignores this. "Nobody want Ukrainian wife! Ukrainian woman are good for prostitute only."

"Lana, that's impossible."

"Is true." Her jaw is set, cheeks sucked in. She pulls a tissue from her *48 Hours* vest and wipes her nose. "But Russians are the enemy of Ukraina."

"Like the Canada and the US?"

She straightens. "You stupid in Canada, you ignorant," she says. "No offense."

"None taken."

"I give everything to get doctor husband." Her face darkens. "I give my true self. And then he sleep with nurses."

"I think I know what you're saying Lana," I say, and this at least is true. But it's not news to me. Only a crazy person would walk away from a man who treats you like a princess.

"Ahh Corrina," she says, shoulders slumped. "If you really understand, you will not leave good husband."

At nine-thirty, the rain turns to snow. Andrew's car pulls up, two lattes in the cup holders and the heat turned on high. I know he's angry, he hasn't stopped being angry, but he still does things like this. It feels too comfortable to settle in next to him, skin thawing with that prickly feel.

"How was it?" He smiles, but doesn't take his eyes off the road.

"The usual," I say. "Thanks for picking me up."

"You shouldn't walk home in the cold." He points to a bag in the back seat. "I'm going to stay at Tom's tonight." He pulls up to the house. "Don't you want the latte?" He says.

"I'm giving up coffee," I say. "And milk."

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He has started to move some of my things under the stairs. There are spaces on the shelves where my Chairman Mao teapot and the photo of me trout fishing with my dad used to be. The photo will come with me in my backpack. The Chairman Mao teapot, wall clock, and propaganda poster will sit under the stairs until Andrew gives them away. I don't remember why I ever collected Mao stuff. I pick up a sweater of Andrew's from a chair and sniff, trying to kindle some emotion, but it's no good. My eyes well up, but the feeling passes before gravity can do its work. If anything, I'm just feeling sorry for myself. An email from Andrew contains a few links to cheap apartments on craigslist. I should be the one to find a new place, since I'm walking away. He's even offered to pay for the first month.

I Google "Russian-Ukrainian conflict." My search produces radically different accounts, from Russia as the great patron of the Ukraine to its most bitter enemy, depending on who is telling the story. A page on the Holodomor—the Ukrainian famine in the 1930's—claims the Russian government starved the Ukrainian people in order to crush their independence movement. Millions of people died, but they didn't give in. Lana is right, I am ignorant. And spoiled. And probably crazy.

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Absolute silence this morning. No rain. No snoring. I can't bring myself to sleep in the bed when he's not here, even though my feet hang off the end of the couch. The silence is so thick, my ears feel pressurized. I take vigorous deep breaths. In. Out. In. Out. In. Out. No time for breakfast this morning, a handful of peanuts will do.

Andrew texts me while I'm on the train. *Found u a place. Think u should move out next wk.*

OK I text back.

*I'll help u move.*

*That's OK. He doesn't know I'm only taking a backpack. Keep it light enough to travel.*

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Lana always beats me to work; she only has to take the train one stop from Edmonds. There she is at mouth of the station, lips curled into a pout. She's holding a bunch of helium balloons.

"For you," she says, and presents them with a bow, and for an awful moment I think they're from Andrew, or maybe the guy with the carnation—but no. "Metro manager came by, left for you."

"What the hell am I supposed to do with them?"

Lana snorts. "Hold them while you give paper, and say *M for Metropolitan, your letter of quality.*"

"What? What does that even mean—"

"—No, excuse me, you must yell," She says. "You must yell *M for Metropolitan, your letter of quality!*"

"What?"

"Yell it."

"Lana is this even real?"

"Yell it Corrina," she commands, tying a couple of balloons to the hood of my jacket. "You want leave comfortable life, work here with losers—"

"—You're a pretty hot loser."

"I know," she doesn't blink. "Could have been hot loser prostitute, instead marry loser doctor."

"I read about the Ukraine last night," I say. "Holodomor."

"Russia take everything, but they can't break spirit!" She thrusts an arm in the air. "But don't change subject."

"M for *Metropolitan*." I take a balloon and tie it to her pompom. Another around her elbow.

"Well? I don't hear you yell." Lana ties balloons to both my braids and the string on the

Sou'Wester.

"CAN I GET A 48 HOURS HERE?" Somebody calls.

Lana points to a stack on the sidewalk "It not six o'clock yet, get it yourself!" And then to me—

"Well?"



I cringe. "M for *Metropolitian*, your letter of quality."

"Terrible." She snorts. "You want lose job? Go back to nice husband with car?"

"You can have him," I say.

"What?"

"You can have my husband, and his car."

"And?" Lana tugs on my braid balloons and I want to smack her.

"And M for *Metropolitian*, your letter of quality!" A group of power-suited commuters look at me and snicker. My throat hurts.

"Better." She says. "How you feel?"

"Like an idiot."

"Then this is life you choose."

Around 8am, the temperature drops a little more. I start to shiver. Sometimes this serves my purpose, since people feel bad and take a paper. It's a fine line, tip the scales too far towards guilt and they'll get annoyed and avoid me. If I can keep smiling like a trooper I'll probably do pretty well in the last hour. But the temperature keeps dropping until my head starts to feel light and the balloons start to droop. People trudge right past me with their coat collars turned up. A man swoops past Lana and me with his teeth bared, holding tight to his pregnant wife like he's her body guard.

"It's the newspaper beggars," he says. Neither of them make eye contact with us.

Lana stands still for a minute. "You want some ginger tea?" She asks me.

"I'm okay."

"Me too," she says.

I see Andrew's car pull up again, just before nine-thirty.

"Lana," I say, "I'm going to take off a few minutes early." I slip away from Andrew, into the station, taking the stairs two by two.

"But, good husband!" Lana calls after me. "You crazy! You cray-zeee!"

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The people on the train are staring. My phone is buzzing in my front pocket, and limp balloons hang from my braids. The heat is cranked, and my feet are sweaty from two pairs of socks. The train pulls into Columbia, the stop closest to home. The doors open and close, but I'm still riding.

Edited by:

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Carleigh Baker is an award winning fiction writer of Cree-Métis and Icelandic descent. Her work has been published in *subTerrain*, *Joyland*, *PRISM International*, and *This Magazine*.  
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