Last Stop

Ever since he was a boy, Jerold loved trains, underground trains. Jerold had a fondness for subways that went back to his first memories when his Dad picked him up and held him to the front mirror of the first car so he could watch the lights being sucked in from the sides, the track disappearing underneath, and the station quickly approaching. His favorite part was when the end of the tunnel approached, where the outside patiently waited for Jerold, while he waited too, though not so patiently himself. He would count down from ten, trying to time it just right so when he said “One!” he and the whole subway was engulfed in the sun, greeted by brick buildings and paved streets. Jerold would wave frantically and always greet them back, “Hello New York! Hello Red Buildings! Hello Street! Tell your friend Sidewalk I said hello too!”

Jerold would do this every time he rode the Subway, and would look forward to it throughout the day, getting so excited that when his Dad, dressed in light brown khaki pants and an untucked gray button downed shirt, tired from a long day with computers, came to pick him up at daycare, Jerold would come charging at him.

“Let’s go! We don’t want to miss the Subway! The buildings and streets are waiting for us!”

His Dad would look down and laugh. “Well, we better get going! We don’t want to make them wait now, do we?”

Jerold would lead his Dad by the hand, and tightly holding his friend Bear-bear in the other, and pulling like a pit-bull say, “It’s Subway time, Bear-bear! Subway time! We can’t be late you know!” He would try to sprint down the stairs to the station, though his Dad always picked him up to avoid a fall and a cry and a ruined trip home.

At the turnstile Jerold would prop himself against his Dad’s legs while he took out a metro card
and swiped it with efficiency, making a satisfactory beep and click that would make Jerold giggle with excitement. In a combined effort, all three pushed through the rotating bars and made their way down to the tracks, Jerold's Dad holding on to him tight so he wouldn't go sprinting to the tracks to a tragic young death and a life of regret.

“Dad! Up for me and Bear-bear!”

And up they went as his Dad picked up the young Jerold and let him look down the endless tunnel of black. Jerold always wanted to watch the train appear; he shook with anticipation as the two circles of light got bigger and bigger while the tracks drummed louder and louder. Jerold shook Bear-bear.

“It's coming Bear-bear, our train is coming! See, the lights are growing, and the train is saying hi!”

Soon the train wailed, proudly announcing its presence. Dad pulled Jerold and Bear-bear back as the train rushed by, pushing a gust of wind as it came to rest and let out a breath. The doors welcomed everyone, though they weren't too patient for stragglers and if you didn't get inside after they whistled they had no problem shutting in front of your face or biting down on a leg or arm. Jerold always made sure he was in the first car, where he had a front row seat to the underground thrill ride.

“Let's go Bear-bear, we have no time to lose, we need conduct the train!”

And he, and Dad, and Bear-bear would watch the lights as they flew by left and right, dodging the train and slipping by unharmed.

Saturdays were the best days. With no daycare for Jerold and Bear-bear, and no computers for Dad, time was plenty and needed to be spent. And spent it was. The Subway rides home became Subway rides to anywhere and everywhere. Instead of the number trains Jerold would ride the letter trains. The letter trains went much farther and they had much more interesting shapes. They could take you to Coney Island, or to the Botanical Garden, or Jerold's favorite, the Transit Museum. To many, it was a collection of retired subway cars and buses in a decommissioned station, sometime nice
to check out at least once, twice if you felt inclined. But in Jerold's eyes, time had decided to stay still and hold onto the old Subway cars for everyone to see and ride. The trains from the old days rested calmly, relaxing after a lifetime of New York and New Yorkers. Dad would tell Jerold that they told stories about the times when they were young. They talked about being different colors, being red, blue, dark green. They would talk about driving outside in Manhattan, feeling a cool breeze that young Subways rarely got to enjoy. They talked about how everything was so much dirtier, and people would paint and spray them, and no one would bother to clean them. Some of them liked it though, and thought they were the cool subways cause they were different. Jerold wondered how his Dad could talk to Subways. Dad would tell him, “When you're older you will know how. Once you're my age you'll understand everything they say.”

Every birthday from then on was a celebration, as Jerold was now one less year away from talking with the Subways. One day at the Transit Museum, Jerold asked where do Subways go after the last stop. “Do they ever take a nap? Do they even sleep?”

Dad smiled, and told Jerold and Bear-bear how Subways go to a different place when they left their last stop. “They go to a place where there are lots and lots of trains. They go there and talk about the people they took, where they went, how smelly and loud people are. And when they get tired, they go to sleep.”

“Really!? What do they dream about?”

“They dream about a place where there are subways and trains of all different colors, that make different sounds, and go to places far away. They dream about going really, really fast, going up and down like a roller coaster, climbing up walls like an elevator, and jumping from track to track like they can fly. They take lots of people, even more than they do on the 3 train. They take them to places like up mountains, in caves, on beaches, even under the ocean. Their passengers are just as different, with people dressed up in costumes like it's Halloween. And all these people do is ride the subway, everyday, going to a new place every time they get on board. That's what subways dream about, they
dream just like us!"

"I want to conduct a Train one day. Only, I'll make sure it's a fun train. I'll take the train to places it never goes, live under a cave, on a beach, under the ocean! And everyone gets to ride free. But you and Mom get to ride first, and so do Luke and Chris and Greg. Bear-bear and I will drive to train together, and the train will never stop. Never!"

After a long day of spent metro-cards, Jerold, Dad, and bear-bear, took the long trip home. The sun began to slip behind the earth and burned the blue sky red. The moon began to poke its head out and spread the night across the sky and dotted it with little stars. Jerold would take a break from conducting trains and trying to talk to subways, and sat in his Dad's lap and quietly slept while Bear-bear took a break from conducting trains with Jerold. Jerold's Dad would watch the train pass by all the buildings and bridges, as the clanging of the wheels against the tracks set a consistent rhythm. All the while Jerold would be dreaming about the dreams of the subways, wishing their dreams would come true so that his own dreams would come true. Jerold knew it was only a matter of time, because in the future everything is going to be perfect, new inventions would make anything possible, and Subways will talk to him and ask him to be their conductor.

Those were good days, the "Subway Days." The days when Saturdays were "Let's go wherever you feel like going" days and Sundays were, "Not now, you have Church today," days. They were the days before "I'm feeling sick today Jerry, we'll go next week, I promise" days. When exactly the good days turned into occasionally okay days, Jerold didn't know. He did know when one of the worst days of his life was. After a long subway ride all the way from JFK airport, Jerold fell asleep in his Dad's lap while Bear-bear hugged and held onto his hand. Then, without knowing, Bear-bear let go, and being a toy bear and not an animal bear, he couldn't say anything. Bear-bear just sat there as Jerold slept and his Dad thought adult thoughts. When 116th street arrived and it was time to leave, Bear-bear just sat there and watched as the two walked out. No one noticed until Jerold woke up from his nap and reached for his little companion, only to hug to a blanket and a pillow. A frantic search followed,
couches looked under, sheets lifted up, corners search, drawers opened, but no Bear-bear. Then Jerold's Dad realized Bear-bear must have been left behind on the 1 train.

His Dad grabbed him and held him close. "Jerry, I'm sorry. I know you miss your friend. I will do my best to look for him. I'll ask the people working at the station. I'll keep my eye out for him. But you need to know that we all lose things. Things we love. But you can still think about them and remember them."

Time pushed them forward and soon those long days on the Subway became shorter, less frequent, and less exciting. The flashing lights and howling tunnels didn't seem as bright and loud. The Subways didn't roar, they just made loud sounds because they were just big loud trains. They didn't think, they didn't dream, they didn't talk, they didn't go up, down, anywhere or everywhere. They were just subways, you get on them, go from 100 whatever street to long-name road and back.

Years would come by and change things. Dad was told he could no longer work with computers at his office anymore, Mom got frustrated that Dad was home all the time, and Jerold was told they could live together and be unhappy, or separate and be happy. Jerold changed too; he got taller, he started to like video games, then he started to like girls and realized those who liked video games don't get girls too easily, so he started to like music and not doing homework and hanging out in Pizza parlors and Riverside park. By the time he was 15, the days of riding the subway every Saturday were now deep in Jerold's brain, hidden underneath Green Day lyrics and the smile of a girl named Laura.

Now when Jerold rode the subway, it was to make the trip uptown to 168th to see her, even when he had essays and math tests and other things that some thought as more important. No more conducting, no more train riding, just anticipation and waiting.