

The Crossing

By Mona Leigh Rose

Ricardo says you cannot hear them. They slink like cats, he says. Ricardo says you cannot see them, not like you'd see your sister waiting on the curb for the school bus. They're in the shadows, he says. That flick in the corner of your eye? That's them, he says. When you see that flick, if you turn fast enough you might see the tip of a shoe or a wisp of hair. When you see that flick, you must move closer, you must look behind the utility box, around the block wall, deep into the shadows. If you ignore that flick, she will wait, not moving, not breathing. She will wait for the train and then, when it's too late, you'll see her. You'll see her slide her body onto the tracks, under the crushing wheels, silently, skillfully, as if she's been practicing all of her life for this act. She will reveal herself at the last possible moment, right as the train is passing, right as her life is ending, right as your life is beginning. And then you'll be fired.

That's how it happened for Ricardo. He worked security at this crossing for seven months. Seven months of watching and waiting, seven months of double-time pay, seven months of being a man. Then the teenage girl crept out of the shadows and ended it all. Now he works at fast food for minimum wage. No other boss will hire him. He is dirty, tainted with her blood. Now he wakes up in the middle of the night, soaked in sweat, replaying that day, wondering if

there was a flick, wondering if he could have stopped her, wondering if he will ever be a man again.

I took over Ricardo's shift after the accident. Now I watch for girls who don't want to be seen, listen for boys who don't want to be heard. Teenagers who want to end their lives before they begin.

Every time it happens, the people and the newspapers tell us who, they tell us why: Parents who sacrifice everything so their children can have better lives. Parents who expect the impossible. Parents who are themselves geniuses, overachievers, the smartest in the world, who expect their children to do better. Children who grow up on the edge of the University, surrounded by the children of the smartest people in the world, who are told that if they don't do better, they're nothing. Children who sit in classrooms and libraries and tutoring centers under florescent lights for ten hours a day since they were three. Teenagers who go to the funerals of other teenagers who slid under the train. Young men and women who can think of no other option than to lie down under steel wheels to end the humiliation, the shame, of not getting into Harvard, of not scoring a perfect 2400 on their SATs, of not doing better than the smartest people in the world.

I know the older brothers of these kids. I played against them on the soccer pitch, rich against poor. I saw them around the edges of their town, when they crossed into my town. They wouldn't talk to me, wouldn't see me, wouldn't hear me. Now their younger brothers and sisters dive below the trains. They still don't talk to me or see me, but I'm the one who will save their families.

Mr. Johanson says the worst is around finals, and the worst of the worst is when college admissions go out in the spring. That's when they come to the tracks, he says. That's when you must be extra alert, he says. That's also when the loud ones, the strange ones, come down to the crossing, sit on the block wall and watch. They think it's sport, or a movie, or something to Tweet about. They think it's funny to place bets with their allowance money. Those ones are easy to see, easy to hear. I chase them away. They laugh at me. They don't understand.

The commuter trains, they slow at the crossing. I see the faces of the conductors as they pass. Their mouths tighten, their eyes dart, the creases on their foreheads deepen with each pass. The freight trains, they don't slow. Their cars and TVs and cattle are too important, must reach the markets. I don't see the faces of those conductors. Do they see me? Do they understand?

My grandfather, he doesn't understand. "*Los trenes trajo vida a mi pueblo,*" he says. "*Los trenes eran nuestra esperanza, nuestra manera de entrar a América,*" he says. He and his friends also waited in the shadows beside the tracks. They also crept silently toward the fast-moving trains. But they jumped onto the trains, they prayed to escape the crush of the steel wheels, they pulled each other onto the train cars and hid from the conductors. They rode the trains to freedom, to jobs, to a better life.

My brothers, they don't understand. "You're a crossing guard for spoiled rich kids," they say. "Yes," I say. "A crossing guard for spoiled rich kids who makes twice what you make." That quiets them down.

My mother, she understands. "You are doing good, Joselito," she says. "You are helping the sad *niños*, you are becoming *un buen hombre*. You are doing good." "Yes," I say to my mother. "I am doing good, and I will become a man."

Mr. Johanson also says that I'm doing good. He says that I'll be promoted, will be a supervisor, will stop watching for children who don't want to be seen and will be the boss of other men. But first, I must see the flick. I must look deep into the shadows. I must be a man.