

Late To Work

A Short Story by Louis Cox

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1: At Home

Beep Beep Beep Beep ... Beep .. Shit is the only word to come out of a now conscious man's mouth as he hit his alarm on the head before it could let out another god awful annoying beep. For a moment he just lay there starring at the glowing red digits, it was 8:51 in the AM. And even though he knew he was already late for work, he continued to lay frozen with his eyes locked on the clock's face. Until finally he was able to see his own amazingly vivid green eyes in the reflection of the clock's face. 8:52, the switch of the numbers broke his trance and he leaped out of bed and waded through the swamp of dirty clothes and take-out containers towards the bathroom.

Nearing the slightly ajar door he could see the glow of the bathroom light around the edges of the doorframe (it had been a habit of his to leave the bathroom light on like a nightlight since he was 7.), until he was close enough to push open the door turning the soft nightlight into an eye scorching sun. He shut his eyes as tight as they would allow, and dragged his hand along the wall as he positioned himself in front of the sink, feeling his way around the unfamiliar setting. He looked straight ahead and slowly opened his eyes so they could gradually adjust to the unusually bright light of the bathroom. Finally revealing his own face starring back at him; he had short ever so slightly curled black hair, a nose that was straight but slightly pointy, small chapped lips and cheek-bones that added to his already prominent chin. After getting a close up of his face he stepped backwards to look at his figure. He wasn't fat, but the washboard abs he had once

worked hard for were now beginning to fade. Fortunately his arms were still pretty muscular and last he checked he was about 6' 1''.

But he had more pressing matters: he needed to shave. But there was no time. Assessing the situation, he felt his facial hair, smelled his armpits and moved his tongue around his mouth tasting the grungy bacteria stew. There was obviously no time to shower and he never really bothered to shave even when he had the time. So he reopened the medicine cabinet and found a stick of classic Old Spice deodorant that he rubbed under his arms. There was even less time now, but his tongue, teeth and breath tasted, looked and wreaked of the combination of Canadian cheddar, Spanish onions and Stoned Wheat Thin crackers he had eaten the night before. It was one of his favorite snacks, and it had seemed like a good idea last night. But this morning he discovered that it was in fact a, really, bad idea. It was bad, he knew he would have to take time he didn't have, so he brushed once, felt around with his tongue, sighed, and brushed twice.

He reappeared out of the bathroom that at the moment was like a cave in the jungle of his apartment. He hurried to locate suitable clothes. Of course the first thing he found was his shoes, the last thing he would be able to put on, so he put them aside and continued looking. He quickly located a suit he had bought at the Salvation Army a few weeks before; he bought all his suits at the Salvation Army. Navigating his way through the wreckage on the floor he put on his pants and socks followed by an un-ironed shirt that wasn't as white as it should have been. Next came the jacket, then the shoes. Except he had now forgotten where he had put them and he had to spend more time looking for them the second time than he did the first time. Last was the tie, he despised wearing a

tie, but his current job required one. He struggled to get his one and only red and black striped tie he had bought during his first and last venture into a Brooks Brothers store.

He quickly double-checked everything paying special attention to ensure his fly was zipped and looked back to the clock. 9:24, he was supposed to be at work 24 minutes ago. He was going to need a good excuse or a time machine. Unfortunately the latter was impossible since the time space continuum had not yet been cracked allowing humans to travel back and fourth through time. So he chose to think up a good excuse once he had boarded the subway and getting from point a to point b was in the hands of the MTA. He hurried out of his apartment, took the elevator downstairs in which a little girl with her mother began to giggle. He asked her what was so funny and she pointed at his unzipped fly that even after so much attention was still unzipped.

“X-Y-Z”, she said.

“Thanks”, He replied with a sigh as he zipped up, reasoning that this was a lot better then being told at work after two walks and a train ride.

Once outside he turned towards the front of the building he had moved into only two weeks ago. It was a new building and the front was ungodly awful with giant concrete words jetting out from the wall that read “The Lili Rose”. For a second he shuttered in disgust at the awful appearance of the buildings exterior. Moving on, he figured he was already late and there was no reason to rush him self to the train station. On the way he passed a few other people who themselves were obviously late to work and they turned to each other with a nod of understanding.

Give or take six blocks later he was at Borough Hall, and suddenly he subconsciously rushed down the stairs to ensure that he didn’t miss the train while buying

his metro card. He pulled out his wallet and removed three dollars to buy himself a ride to work and a ride home. As he began the process, his eye caught the sign that the fare had gone up to \$2 a ride since he last used the train. Looking back to his wallet he was forced to put back the three bills and remove a Lincoln to pay for the card. The machine spat out one of those gold Sacagawea dollar coins. He hated those things, because while they were technically equivalent to a buck, he never found himself integrating it with paper money. The coin found it self segregated from bills forced to live in the front pocket with the rest of the coins. If he ever got around to spending it he would be buying something simple worth no more then a dollar like a Sprite or a Hershey bar. Or even a 20-minute 10-10-220 phone call for the unbelievably low rate of a dollar. The metro card popped out of the machine. And he grabbed it. As he made his way over to the meat grinder he noticed out of the corner of his eye that the machine was asking him if he wanted a receipt.

He looked back and muttered, “Who the fuck has the time to ask for a receipt when they’re trying to catch a train.”

Swipe, Beep, “Please swipe card again at this turnstile.” Sigh, Swipe, Beep, “Please swipe card again at this turnstile.” Groan, Sigh, Swipe, Click, Light and James Zook was finally on his way to work.

2: In The Station

He dizzily pushed on the retarded shaped cell bars of the rickety meat grinder; moving it like an elderly Italian butcher struggling to turn the crank that powered pound after pound of raw meat through a machine as old as its operator. He could hear the faint screeching of a train hitting its breaks on tracks in an effort to slow itself as it neared the station. Instinctively he knew that it was coming from the opposite end of the station meaning it was either a Bronx bound 4, 5 (his ride to work) or a 2, 3 train. So this time he consciously picked up the pace and quickly got down the stairs onto the platform.

“God damn it!” These were the loudest words to come out of his mouth all day, loud enough that an elderly man sitting nearby had heard him. James was distracted from the old mans reaction as he watched the light in the tunnel turn right. It was the 2 or 3 train.

The elderly man firmly responded, “Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain young man”, you could tell by the combination of his tone and appearance that he did not take such comments very lightly, and was probably Irish Catholic.

“Sorry, I’ve just had a really bad morning”, James waited a moment in hopes that the old man would forgive him and tell him to just try and be more careful with his words next time. But he was completely silent, not saying a word, and showing no signs that he intended to say anything further. Having gotten off to a bad start James decided to walk down the platform towards the end where the back of the train would be. Like many others he had a habit of always sitting in the rear in hopes of there being less people. The

only problem was that he wasn't the only one in New York who thought this way, and usually the last cars would be just as crowded as the rest of the train. Note to anyone taking the subway in New York: everyone always goes to the back; the emptiest cars are in the front.

Waiting, waiting, waiting, James couldn't remember how long he had been waiting for the train on the platform. But as he looked around he didn't see very many people, this meant that everyone was already at work, or he had just missed the train and it would be a while before the next one. It was still rush hour and he knew that it wouldn't be that long, but any form of waiting was a long time to him. Finally to pass the time he decided to buy a Watermelon Sour Patch Kids, he had a weakness for sour candy. He picked up the bag and signaled to the clerk.

"75", said the clerk, returning to his other customers. James knew this was overpriced; most candy was only 60 cents. But he knew that this was how things went with any stores whose customers were based on a form of transportation. Airports, bus stations, trains, and subways made money by luring in commuters as they waited for their departure or connections. He reached into his front pocket and searched for the Sacagawea coin he had gotten out of that god-forsaken machine earlier. Wait a minute; it had a hole in it. He looked down to see the not-so gold coin stuck in the laces of his shoe. That was the price you paid when you bought suits from the Salvation Army.

He walked away from the newsstand with his head down, captivated by the bag of candy, eating one, then another, then two at once. A moment later he felt a cool breeze on his face; instinctively he raised his head to find a fast approaching light at the end of the tunnel. As it came in closer he squinted his eyes to make out the number "5". After

what seemed like an eternity his train had finally arrived. A moment later the mechanical banshee flew screeching past the platform until it finally stopped. “Biiing, Bong,” said the train as it opened its doors for passengers. James hurried into the subway car and found a seat next to some guy that he wasn’t really paying attention to enough to get a description of.

The conductor’s voice came on, “This is the Bronx bound 5 train making express stops. Bowling Green is next, stand clear the closing doors.” The doors began to close and the train let out another message to warn passengers, “Booong Bing”.

3: Breakdown

James yawned, leaned back in his seat, crossed his legs and muttered, “Finally, I thought I would never get to work.” Suddenly he remembered that he would have to make up a believable excuse for his boss to explain why he was so late. James wanted to hold off doing this as long as possible because he was not a big fan of lying in any form. But he was now on the train and he had promised himself this is where he would do it. So he began the long and arduous process of formulating a decent half assed lie explaining why he was tardy. James hesitated to find out what time it was, in fear of knowing just how late he was. But after peeking at the clock out of the corner of his eye, he was able to look directly at the time. It was 10:06AM on the game clock, making him now at least an hour late.

James’s system for making up excuses was to start with polar opposites and find a middle ground. One extreme being that he overslept, the other being a death in the family. Maybe he could say that his girlfriend had a death in her family, that way he could use the death excuse but without it being his relative. But before he could get any further he was rudely and suddenly interrupted by something. The train began to rapidly lose speed until it jolted itself into a complete standstill.

“Yo, what the fuck was dat?” a nearby passenger said in a sly voice.

“The train just stopped,” replied another man wearing a black Armani suit, “I hope it starts up again soon, I have to make a proposal for the board of directors at 10:30.

If I'm not there to make it, then they will have no choice but to go with Johnson's proposal instead of mine."

James sighed, rolled his eyes and said, "You have a meeting in 20 minutes? Well I was supposed to be at work an hour and 10 minutes ago."

Another man wearing a Triple 5 Soul hoodie who was standing behind the first one to speak stepped forward and said, "Man you fucked..." But before he could finish his sentence he was interrupted by the conductor's announcement, "The train seems to have broken down in between Manhattan and Brooklyn." Everyone in the car quickly shut their mouths and opened their ears to listen to the important information. "While we are in no danger, we are however too far away from either station. And are going to have to wait for a work crew to get to down here and correct the problem. ETA into Manhattan is unknown at this time but I will update you when I gain further information, I repeat we are in NO danger."

James's jaw dropped, "You have got to be kidding me, this is crazy, I've been condemned to never get to my job."

Krrrrrr, Krrrr, and the conduction's voice came back on, "In a few moments I will be moving down the train car by car locking all the doors as part of emergency procedure. As I said before we are in no imminent danger, so long as everybody stays within their designated car."

There was a long awkward silence that followed the announcement. James's eyes spanned the room stopping at each individual's face to read their emotions. The homeless man was lying in the far handicapped seats still sleeping serenely through this mess. On the other side of the train a mother with two children stood by the other handicapped seat.

James saw through the forced smile she struggled to maintain, knowing that if she lost her cool there would be no telling what the kids would do. The little girl was now crying with both arms latched on to her mother's leg.

The mother quickly thought on her feet to reassure her terrified child, "Don't worry honey, you heard the conductor man, everything is going to be ok." Meanwhile her son was bouncing off the walls thinking this was some kind of roller coaster and this was just part of the ride.

The silence among the people that were going to be stuck together for a very long time had become unbearable for James. So in his loud projection voice (he mastered after his 7th grade English teacher told him he needed to project more) he broke the ice, "Maybe I'm being paranoid but the more that guy says we are in no danger," he hesitated for a moment concerned that he might cause a panic, "The more I feel like we are in danger, like a lot of danger."

James looked around at every one's faces once again. The scene resembled that of an airplane going through a thunderstorm. Everyone knew the mathematical facts and statistics, assuring them it was nearly impossible for something bad to happen to them. Almost like some kind of "what if" meter was inside everybody's head monitoring the stability of their nuclear calmness reactor. Everyone's meter had just gone from yellow to red.

James moved quickly to cool the reactor core that was this subway car. "Just messing with ya", was the best thing he could come up with and he followed it up with an even worse display of fake laughter and smiling.

"Your awful at that," said the man who was sitting across from him.

“Ya I never was very good at telling jokes”, James had not been joking, “and I’m told it’s all in the delivery, which would make sense because I can never manage to keep a straight face when I tell a joke.”

“No, not that,” the man was doing an extremely good job at making James nervous. James had lost and he knew it. He looked downwards, wiped the grease off his forehead, gulped and taking defeat with dignity he looked up. His mesmerizing green eyes locked dead onto their enemies, his lips moved with pride and out came, “Huh?”

“I meant, your terrible at lying,” with this the man had landed the finishing blow, “Next time when you say the wrong thing just shut up to prevent any further damage.” Watching this asshole grin made James want to leap out of his seat and wipe, or rather beat, that smile off his face. James turned his attention to the man sitting on his left that had been acting strangely ever since the train had stopped. Instantly he was ready to get down on his knees and thank the lord almighty for answering his prayer with a gracious gift, the opportunity to start talking to someone else.

“You ok man?” he asked with a genuine concern for this mans well being. The man lifted his head and looked at James. For a moment he slowed his breathing so that it ceased to sound like a techno beat you might hear at a rave. Just hearing words of concern from someone relieved the symptoms of whatever problem he was having.

“Don’t worry about me... I get these all the time... I’ll be fine...” he was saying everything in between deep breaths of air. James was relieved to hear that the man knew what he was dealing with.

“Well that doesn’t look very fun. So don’t be afraid to ask if there is anything I can do for you, anything”

“I appreciate the offer, its nice to meet a good person every once in a while in this city.” He was now smiling; the affliction that had complete control over him only moments ago had vanished. Grateful to James for helping him in his time of peril he extended his hand. James grasped his hand firmly making sure to squeeze tightly (you know how men are about good handshakes).

“I’m John.”

“Pleasure to meet you John, my name is James.”

The man sitting across from James coughed really loudly attempting to regain the center of attention from James, or anyone for that matter. Everyone knew his cough was forced, but no one said a single word, they knew that this revenge belonged to James. James ignored the urge to verbally attack him with comebacks. He knew that by doing so he would be giving him just what he wanted, attention. Instead he said nothing and did nothing, he made it seem almost as if that guy was no longer on the train. Deep below the ground in the steel box prison, the man would be spending the rest of his sentence in solitary. He had won the battle, but James won the war.

4: Crazy Talk

“Uhhhh, ahh, ugh”, the noises appeared to be coming from the homeless man. Up until now he had been lying quietly without movement. Had anyone bothered to alert him of the situation they would probably think he was dead.

“I think the homeless man is beginning to stir”, said James.

“We should let him know what’s been going”, replied a much more calm and confident John. John stood up and started to work his way towards the homeless man. The man in the Armani suit saw what John was planning to do and got up from his seat, blocking John’s path. Since the break down the businessman had been a very busy little bee. He had set up mini workstation with his briefcase where he was: reading the Wall St. Journal, looking over several pieces of paper, writing notes on a PDA and transferring those notes onto his laptop.

“Excuse me”, John politely asked the man to set aside.

“I don’t know what you think is going to happen if you do this. But I for one think that we should let sleeping dogs lie. I’ve seen a lot of homeless men in my life, and they all have one thing in common...”

“What would that be?” John said rather impatiently.

“I was getting to it until you rudely interrupted me.” You could tell by his tone that he hated being interrupted (and probably had to deal with constant interruptions).

“Where was I, ah yes. As I was saying they all have one thing in common, they’re all mentally unstable in some way.” The man held up his finger to hold any further

comment at bay until he was through making his point. “We have had enough trouble this morning. Without walking up to it’s house and knocking on the door. There is no telling what problems the bum may cause. And I for one think that if its possible to let him sleep through this then we should.” He lowered his hand opening the floor for someone else to speak

John was surprised by the assault and he looked to James for backup. James came to his aid saying, “He obviously has issues, what do you expect, he’s homeless. But you can’t assume that he’s some kind of psychotic axe murder. And if he was don’t you think he might be a little more pissed off if he found out we were lying to him. We all have the same right to know what’s going on no matter how rich, how poor or how stable we are.” James took a tip from the businessman and held up his hand while he paused to breath and think. “Take John over here for example, he was just having some kind of panic attack. But now he’s completely calm, and if we had kept him in the dark then I’ll bet things would have been a lot worse when he finally found out what was going on.”

“You don’t know the bum will ever wake up or find out”, retorted the businessman.

“People always discover secrets being kept from them, it’s just a matter of time”, James said sternly.

“James is right”, said a very raspy voice. The comment brought a state of confusion upon the whole car.

“Who said dat?” asked the thuggish man in the Triple 5 Soul Hoodie.

“Certainly was not me”, replied the bewildered businessman, “was it you?”

“No”, said John

James had a formed good layout in his head of where everyone in the car was. Because of the direction and voice (he had not heard till now), he knew it had to be the homeless man. To everyone else's amazement. The seemingly comatose homeless man opened his eyes, sat up, turned his legs onto the floor, coughed several times, and struggled to his feet. He had been awake the entire train ride: and he heard every word, but why?

"I did", said the homeless man after which he coughed.

"Terribly sorry, I haven't formally introduced myself yet. My name is Yassin Anchel Andreev." Said Yassin after which, he began to walk towards James, "If I had to guess I would say that you're James, am I right?"

"Yes, I'm James", answered James who was now definitely sure that the he had been awake and listening the whole time.

"Then you must be John", said Yassin confidently, turning towards John.

"Yeah that's me", replied John.

Yassin smiled and asked, "I can see that you look like your doing much better. Are you feeling better? That was some attack you had."

"I'm feeling much better, thank you for asking", said John who was glad to have a second person show concern for him.

"Good", he now turned towards to the businessman, "I didn't catch your name, what is it?"

"Bob, Bob Lee", he said hoping to be wrong about this guy being mentally unstable.

“Well Bob, can I call you Bob?” bob nodded, “Well Bob, I think you will be glad to hear that I am in fact not a crazy bum. However what I am about to tell you may come off as a bit nutso, but again I assure you I am quite with it. You see I have encountered this problem while riding the subway before. And if all of you are willing to listen I can tell you how to resolve it.”

“HaHaHa, he is crazy”, laughed the man wearing the Hoodie as he mocked Yassin.

“Excuse me, but I didn’t catch your name either”, said an annoyed Yassin, “I understand your frustration about being interrupted Bob.”

“It’s Ngozi, and don’t you forget it”, he replied.

“Well Ngozi, next to every wheel on every car there is a little box filled with fuses. One of them has been knocked lose and all you have to do to fix the train is put it back in. All you people have to do is work together. There are four boxes per car, so if James, John, Bob, and Ngozi were to work together you could have this train working again in no time at all. But I warn you, make your decision quickly because the conductor will be here soon to lock you guys in.” Yassin sat down and crossed his legs waiting for what he knew would happen next.

James seemed to be the only one to take a word of what Yassin had just said seriously. He didn’t know why but for some unexplainable reason he believed him. Trusting his gut James sprung into action to convince everyone.

“John are you up to this?” asked James.

“If you think it’s a good idea James then I trust your judgment”, replied an uneasy John.

“How about you Bob?” James remembered something Bob had said earlier, “Don’t tell me your going to let those bastards go with Johnson’s proposal.”

James hit the nail on the head with that comment. And Bob got really excited and said, “Yeah, your damn right I’m not, lets get this hunk of metal moving.”

James looked over towards Ngozi who said, “No way man, your not gonna convince me to go out on those tracks.”

“Why? You to scared or something?” James asked with a smirk on his face.

“I ain’t no puss, I’ll do it”, replied Ngozi who felt he needed to prove his manliness to anyone and everyone he meets.

Yassin smiled and said, “good, to get out of the subway car all you have to do is wedge something in between the two doors and pull them apart.”

“Leave that to me”, said Ngozi pulling a butterfly knife out of pocket. He turned around and walked to the nearest door, swung open the knife and jammed it in between the two doors. The knife opened the door a few centimeters and he started pulling it apart with his hands opening it another couple centimeters. The other three rushed over to the door and with two of them pulling at each side they soon had the door open wide open.

5: Take Action

Four men who had never met before in their lives worked as one outside of the train. Each man opening a box inspecting the insides, reporting their findings then moving on to the same box on the next car.

“Nothing!” yelled James.

“Nothing!” yelled Bob.

“Nothing!” yelled John.

“Nothing!” yelled Ngozi.

“Next car!” yelled James.

They continued on several cars until they came to a car in about the middle of the train.

“Nothing!” yelled Bob.

“Nothing!” yelled Ngozi.

“Nothing!” yelled John.

“Holy Shit, I think I found it!” screamed James, “John come over here and look at this.” John sprinted over to James and kneeled down next to him. “See, that one over there.” John looked at where James was pointing, “I see it, it’s loose”, agreed John. James blinked, gulped, breathed in and out and pushed the fused back into its hole. Suddenly he heard a loud noise that sounded like the train was powering back up.

“We fixed it”, yelled an exuberant John.

“Quickly! Everyone get back to the car!” James screamed as he grabbed John and began running back towards the end of the train. James and John were the first ones back in. Followed shortly after by Bob and Ngozi who had to run around the back of the train to get to the door. Almost as if the door was waiting for them to get back it closed itself a second after Ngozi stepped through. They looked for Yassin who was sleeping or at least pretending to sleep again. They decided they wouldn’t bother him.

Krrrrrrrrrrrr, Krr, Krrrr the conductors voice came on again, “The train seems to be running again on its own. So we should be at Bowling Green in a few moments. Sorry for any inconveniences this may have caused in your schedule.” Moments later the train jerked forward and began gaining speed.