

The train's only job is to stay on track. Not deviate. Complete its revolution.

It takes seven minutes and thirty nine seconds for the train to go around the tracks. The front car, a miniature version of a steam engine, is the color of bile and tows eight passenger cars, each equipped with five small benches. Each bench seats two people or, as is the case sometimes, one really fat one. Caroline has been a conductor at the Salty Dog Train ride, the most popular attraction in Paradise Park, all summer. She needed a summer job—an excuse to get out of her house, which she affectionately calls The Bog.

In the ticket booth, Caroline reaches above Rusty's bald spot, into the cabinet, for a red and white striped conductor's hat. None of the hats fit her wide head properly so she comes armed with her own metal clips to put the hat into lockdown.

Across the tracks, past the scaled-down soccer field, Tom operates the merry-go-round. Today is his first day back from work after his accident.

Rusty put his hands on Caroline's shoulders two weeks ago. "I have some bad news, kid. It's Tom. Flipped his car four times. We've gotta pray our hardest for him."

According to Rusty, he still has window glass embedded in his arms. Pieces surface, like crops in a garden, ready to be picked.

The stiff horses are going around in circles and Caroline looks on as Tom pinches and pries at his skin, trying to retrieve hidden shards.

At home Caroline takes off her overalls in her bedroom and her pubic hair spills out to her thighs where it hangs like tassels on a loincloth. Her breath quickens, her throat feels like an empty swimming pool. She hesitantly reaches down to touch the hair to make sure it's real.

This morning she was just a regular girl with regular girl body hair.

She pulls on a pair of sweatpants and rushes into the kitchen,

drawing the shades. Luckily her mom isn't home. With the scissors from the knife block Caroline cuts the hair off. It rests in her palm like wilted flower stems. She washes it down the sink and runs the disposal. The blades turn, chopping the hair into a fine clump of mush, swimming through the pipes out to sea.

A large terrarium takes up most of the kitchen table.

"Great," thinks Caroline. "They've infiltrated."

Her mom is a biologist for a local university specializing in toad and frog reproduction and used to make a big deal about "not taking work home," but later it was as though work became her addiction and frogs her version of crack. Now there's a small lab set up in her home office and aquariums and terrariums rest on most available surface. This new one makes habitat number twelve.

The note on the table reads, *Won't be home in time for supper. There's canned soup or meatloaf you can microwave. Hugs and ribbits, Mom.*

Caroline lowers her face to the glass to peer at the toads. Three fat ones sit, looking like craggy stones, their bellies pulsing. One rotates its body a little to the left. Lucky to be hairless.

"Next stop, New York City!" Caroline's passengers cheer after she makes the announcement into the intercom. She picks a different destination every ride, studies her bedroom carpet, shaped like a map of the U.S. New York, half covered by her laundry hamper, is always a crowd pleaser.

"How can we get to New York if we're just going in a circle," Christopher, a Salty Dog regular, asks his mother, who holds him so tight it looks like she may smother him.

Caroline checks to see whether everyone is seated before turning the switch that starts the engine. She presses a yellow button. Passengers' voices echo the sound of the whistle and they begin to chug along past the pony rides. The track weaves and climbs, lurching towards Tom's post at the merry-go-round. The proximity excites her. He's helping a girl put her feet in fake stirrups. The train keeps moving.

The pubic hair seemed under control this morning. Maybe it was all a hallucination. Maybe someone slipped something in her soda at work.

Caroline scratches at her inner thigh. Last summer she had

poison oak. It covered her legs in faded pink splotches, like the cartography of some unknown world. Her mother dipped her in calamine lotion and milk baths that always stung before they soothed.

“Once, we took a trip to the ocean. Your dad got bit by a jellyfish. I had to pee on him to take the burn out.”

After the ride, Caroline goes to the bathroom and takes off her overalls. She pulls down her underwear and the hair spills out to her knees; hangs like the limp, synthetic strands on a baby’s doll. She has to hold it up with two hands while she urinates—has to make sure it doesn’t accidentally get flushed down the toilet, pulling her skin off with it. Toilet scalping. She is finding new hazards every day.

“All aboard!” Rusty yells outside to the growing line that snakes around all the way to the Disaster Simulator. It’s Caroline’s cue to get back to her post. She quickly gathers the hair and stuffs it back into her underwear. It bulges unevenly. It slips out the sides.

“Stay!” Caroline pleads as though the hair was a naughty puppy. She puts her overalls back on, thankful they are bulky and leave enough room to hide her secret.

At home her mother looks small, sleeping alone in the king-sized bed. Caroline can’t remember what the bed looked like when her father shared it. He left when she was four.

“The man’s a genetic mystery,” her mom told her whenever Caroline used to ask about him.

The toads that her mom now calls The Three Tenors croak. In a neighboring aquarium, fresh tadpoles swim around like misplaced musical notes, their tails flagellating. She wonders how something can go from tadpole to frog with no effort.

Caroline’s mom doesn’t know that her one and only daughter doesn’t plan on going back to college. Her grades were mediocre and her motivation non-existent. Her mom expects her to be a scientist or a doctor.

“You may never get to the truth but you should always investigate,” Caroline’s heard her mother say while peering at frog cell division under her high-resolution microscope.

The pipes whine as the water pours into the bathtub. Since there’s no bubble bath she pretends the green dish soap from the

kitchen is the real stuff and gives it a good squeeze as she fills the tub. The bubbles make a thick foam—the kind she once saw spewing from the mouth of a rabid squirrel in the park at the beginning of summer. The ranger was called and he shot it once in the head.

“Have to keep the people safe,” he explained.

Caroline examines her bare chest in the mirror.

“Pear or apple shaped?” she once read in a magazine. Caroline thinks that she looks more like a strawberry, plump at the shoulders with large legs that narrow into small, unsteady ankles. She takes off the rest of her clothing and the pubic hair unfurls, thicker than before, past her thighs. Caroline tries to hold back tears.

Wrapped in a towel in case her mother wakes up, she grabs a knife from the kitchen block: the scissors have proven useless. The knife clinks against the aquarium and the tadpoles scatter and then re-group. In the bathroom, Caroline begins cutting off chunks of the hair, straddling the toilet, hoping the hairs will fall down on target, to be flushed away, no evidence left behind.

The hair first showed up in the seventh grade, dark, emerging one stringy strand at a time. Then, more hair arrived, gathering at the surface of her skin like ants to a dropped piece of cheese, covering her pale pubic area with scraggly locks. Her period came a week later.

After that, pus-filled pimples started appearing on her face and back. She would pick at them for hours, pretending she was a surgeon—would even put them on a glass slide under her mother’s microscope in secret—amazed to see a part of her up close, viscous and creamy.

Caroline imagined her pimples as tiny fish eyes covering her body. She’d pretend she could see behind her. Watch her back.

Now, dark hairs scatter the tile of the bathroom. Caroline wets a wad of toilet paper and tries to pick them up. By the time she makes it to the tub, it’s no longer warm, which wouldn’t matter a lick if she were amphibian.

“Today, we’ll be visiting the Everglades.”

“What’s that?” asks Christopher, who has chosen the seat directly behind Caroline.

“It’s in Florida,” adds his mom.

“It’s like a swamp,” says Caroline.

“Trains can’t ride through swamps.” Christopher crosses his arms in disappointment.

Caroline starts the engine. “This one can.”

“Are there frogs?”

It always came back to frogs.

“Carrie, can you go get Tom’s timecard?” Rusty asks when she returns from her loop. She used to hate when he called her that, but now she sees it as a term of endearment.

“Want some popcorn?” Tom hands her his time card from the back of his red pants pocket. It’s warm, almost moist, like it could be torn without making a ripping sound.

She shakes her head. They stand there in silence watching the horses go around and around, up and down. Her eyes stay focused on the one with a purple saddle and a golden flared mane. Tom pulls up the sleeve of his red shirt and fingers his left arm, back and forth, like he’s strumming a ukulele. His flesh is covered in cuts and dried blood. She’s about to ask him what it felt like to flip his car and spin out of control, but then the music stops and the horses slow.

“That’s my cue.” Tom walks back to his station, but his arms pump as though he is running.

The hair itches as Caroline rides the bus home. She covers her lap with her jacket, sneaks her hands under the wool fabric and starts scratching vigorously. She feels the hair through her overalls, gathering in uneven clumps.

The man across the aisle shakes his head and gets off at the next exit.

At home she lies on her back on her bedroom carpet, unclips her overalls and slides them off. The hair covers Kentucky and spills down to Tennessee. She grabs a section of foreign mane and moves a larger kitchen knife, a serrated one this time, back and forth in a sawing motion, switching directions only when a frog croaks. It’s a game of restraint. The hair breaks away. If she were creative, she could make something with the hair—a lanyard, a bookmark. Instead, she carefully pulls a clump of strands away

from the bunch and hides the rest in the trashcan. She wishes she could talk to her mom about these things, but she never can seem to find the right time.

She listens for clues that her mom has returned—coffee percolating in the kitchen, aquarium lids sliding on and off. Nothing. She holds the saved strands out in front of her, like one might carry a mouse by the tail, down the hall to her mother’s office, wearing only a t-shirt and underwear. Without the excess hair she feels lighter. She pulls a laboratory stool from under the desk, and flips the red switch that starts the motor of the high power compound microscope. A fresh slide clinks as Caroline takes it from a small cardboard box. She isolates three strands of hair and places them on the slide.

The frogs croak. It’s like Chinese water torture.

She puts a bendable plastic film over the slide, sandwiching the hairs. Magnified, the hairs look like prehistoric worms found deep in the ground. Barbed ridges rest on top of one another, like armor. The frogs sing in a drunken chorus.

“Anyone home? Great news! I harvested a blastocyte today!”

Caroline quickly turns off the microscope and hides the slide in her hand. Panicked, she gathers the rest of the hair. As she hops off the stool she glances down and sees the newly grown hair already overflowing out of the top and leg holes of her underwear, cascading down her legs, tickling her shins.

“Aloha! We’re going to Hawaii today!” Caroline presses the whistle button twice, excited by her selected destination.

When she woke up this morning, the growth seemed to have stalled, the follicles perhaps depleted from yesterday’s spurt.

“That’s an island.” Christopher reminds her. “You can’t get there by train.”

The conductor isn’t supposed to talk back. “If they sass you, they sass you,” Rusty always tells her when she complains.

They chug past a field of wild flowers, then over a small bridge and through a tunnel where kids’ screams reverberate in cochleae.

After the ride she gives the wheels and cogs a once over to see if there are any *visible signs of fatigue*. Halfway down the cars she sees a shiny something on the wheel and reaches down to fish it out. Just a tangled balloon ribbon. She carefully unravels the

ribbon and pulls it loose. Her hands are again covered in sticky black oil.

“You look like a car mechanic,” Christopher says, waiting in line to ride the train again. Luckily her shift is over.

“Hey, Caroline, I want you to meet a new member of our team.” To Rusty’s left is a girl who resembles a Popsicle stick, tall and rangy.

“This is Candy. Funny thing is... he’s going to be selling cotton candy. I didn’t even think of that until now.”

Candy’s smile is wide. She pops her blue gum.

“She’s just starting out. I thought you could be a mentor to her. Teach her the ropes. Show her where the locker room is. I’ll go and get the candy maker... for Candy.” Rusty shakes his head laughing to himself.

She walks Candy to the dressing rooms and shows her the uniform. Treat Girls wear red velvet hot pants and a white tank top.

“I was pushing a cart over by the pier, but I guess sales were low so they canned me. You like it here?”

Candy sits on a bench tugging at her knee high. The overalls coupled with the hair are making Caroline overheat. Caroline wants to change out of her uniform but doesn’t want to run the risk of Candy seeing the hair when she takes it off. She angles her body away from the new girl and drops the overalls to the floor. The metal clasps clatter as they make contact. Hair plunges down to Caroline’s ankles.

“I know someone who can fix that.”

Caroline feels her jaw tighten.

“You’re not the only one, you know. We have it in my family too. My great aunt, my sister. Go to the pier, to the nail shop. Ask for Fang-Fang.” Candy snaps the rim of her socks, once on each side, before leaving Caroline alone.

At home, when her mother is asleep, Caroline brings a flashlight with her to bed and turns it on under the covers, like she’s camping. She takes off her pajama bottoms and wriggles out of her underwear. In bed the hair clings to her legs like ivy wrapped around an aging building. She thinks of it as an *other*—like that plant in that musical that takes over and terrorizes the town. But her own hair doesn’t sing, just lies there like moss on a rock, existing. In

Biology class she learned that a single strand contains the entire genetic makeup for an organism. She reaches down to touch it, first singling out strands, following them from where they emerge from the skin to where they end. There are no straight lines, each hair has its own crooked path, individual, like fingerprints. She grabs hold of the entire mass and moves her fingers over it—a horse’s tail.

Caroline finds a knot and reaches for the hairbrush on her bedside table. She moves the brush in deliberate strokes through the hair. She comes across a lump and sits up quickly and reaches down with one hand. With the other, she grabs the flashlight and focuses. It’s a brilliant blue and black tree frog mid-metamorphosis, tail still present, halfway between two lives. Her mother doesn’t work with these frogs, they’re only found in the Amazon. There’s no place to return it. She jumps out of bed and turns the light on to check and see if there are others, but it appears to be the only one. She puts her fingers around its abdomen, opens her bedroom window and flattens her palm. The frog leaps to a nearby branch.

After work the next day, Caroline makes her way to the pier, not sure how she will explain her problem to whomever helps her. She walks quickly past a barbershop with the candy cane pole rotating out front. A bell tied to the door tings as she enters the nail shop. Inside, ethyl ethanoate wafts over the room. Women tend to women, painting nails and toes loud colors, buffing calluses off feet, and cutting cuticles.

“You want Fang-Fang?” A beautician shouts. Caroline wonders what gave her away. She nods. The woman points to the back of the salon where three chairs sit outside a door marked, “Private.” A woman holds her daughter’s hand. She has tears in her eyes. Her mother passes the girl a tissue from the wrist folds of her long-sleeved shirt. Caroline takes a seat next to them. The door opens and Fang-Fang emerges. She looks at Caroline, then the girl.

“You first,” she says to Caroline. “Look like a quick one.” Before the girl’s mother can protest, Fang-Fang leads her into a room that smells of incense.

Fang-Fang wastes no time. “You take off your pants and put these on.” She hands Caroline a sheet to cover herself up with,

like she's at the gynecologist, and then leaves the room. Caroline does as she's told, but the hair pushes its way out of the paper, ripping it like a present opening itself from the inside.

After a staccato knock the woman re-enters, wearing surgical gloves. She takes one look at Caroline and draws a deep breath in and releases it slowly, mindfully.

"I'll cut it off, then wax it. Big job. More money."

Caroline nods.

Fang-Fang pulls out small shears and snips quickly with the precision of a gardener working on a topiary. Caroline doesn't want to look. Just wants the whole procedure over with. After the hair is shorn, out comes the hot wax. Caroline likes the way it burns as it's applied, stinging in one place first then radiating out to the surrounding skin. But the ripping that sounds like Velcro feels like a dive into a pile of stinging nettles.

She looks at the lettering on Fang-Fang's nametag and thinks of a vampire sucking her blood.

Fang-Fang sweeps the bundle of hair from the floor and puts it in a plastic bag.

"We'll donate this. For kids with no hair." She lowers her voice to a whisper. "Won't tell where it came from." Her smile erupts into a laugh.

Caroline imagines some sad cancer patient, small and suffering, being given a wig of her scraggly pubic hair. They're lucky to have it. Let the hair be someone else's problem.

Fang-Fang gives Caroline a handheld mirror and leaves the room. She lowers the mirror and angles it upward so she can see her new image. The hair is all gone. She strokes the bumpy, bare surface, relishing the skin-to-skin contact.

As she leaves the room the girl on the chair looks at her, asking with her eyes if the treatment was bearable. Caroline goes to speak but she doesn't know what to say. Words get stuck coming out and instead she emits a wheezing groan that causes the girl to fold into her mother's arms.

A week later, it's timecard day again. When Caroline reaches Tom, he's pouring kernels into the metal popper.

"Stand back. This thing gets hot."

Caroline's not scared. But then he rolls up his shirtsleeve and

any lines rehearsed in her head vanish. His fingers move up then down his arm as the corn begins to pop, sporadically at first and then in synch with the kernels cooking. He stops at a spot halfway between his elbow and wrist. He pinches the skin. Caroline watches. When the glass emerges, she feels a rush and a dryness in her throat. He momentarily lets it sit on his skin before flicking the piece onto the ground. She wonders how something so fascinating to her can be so casual to him.

“You want this or what?”

How long has he been standing there with the timecard? Caroline takes the paper from him as a couple orders a large popcorn “to share.” While he’s distracted she scans the ground for the piece of glass, carefully picks it up and puts it in the front pocket of her overalls.

At home, Caroline rushes to her mother’s microscope and hits the switch. The motor runs and it heats quickly. Pulling a slide under the light, she carefully places the glass from Tom’s arm on the glass surface.

She lowers her head to the metal eyepiece and adjusts the coarse and fine focus knobs till the image moves from blurry to clear. The glass is more opaque than she thought it would be. It looks like a geological site, with its own ridges and cavities. There are no droplets of Tom’s blood as she had hoped. But she is surprised by a small fissure in the upper right hand corner that extends halfway down the glass and wonders if the crack occurred while inside his arm or at the time of the accident.

The glass is a recorded history.

She wants to tell Tom about what she’s discovered about his glass—tell him how beautiful she thinks it is. She wants to spend a night prying at his arm and saving the pieces.

A catastrophe that almost was.

It’s sweltering outside. A true summer day. The body hair is back, now down to the floor. The money she spent on Fang-Fang yesterday was a waste. Stepping across her room, Caroline feels something soft and squishy under her toes. She lifts her left foot. Brown. Frog droppings. There’s a trail of poop that moves up the east coast of her carpet to the bathroom. In the bathroom, there’s a note on the sink.

*Off to my conference. Be back in three days. Watch over my babies for me. Sorry about your tub. Mine's full. Love, Mom.*

Caroline slides open the shower door. Inside, an orgy of frogs sit restlessly. As she slams the door shut a frog attempts to make its great escape and gets crushed at the belly in the door. The legs stick out. She's heard they're considered a delicacy in some parts.

Back in her room, she rushes to get dressed. She now has a practiced routine for stuffing the hair into her overalls. She grabs it at the base and begins turning it, moving her working hand down the tresses. Once she hits the bottom she begins to twist the hair into a tight bun. She performs this hand dance with alacrity, relinquishing herself to her condition. Once the bun is in place, she puts on the heavy overalls.

"Today, we are going to keep it close to home and go to... Paradise Park," she announces to her first batch of riders on this crowded Saturday morning.

"That's not fair," yells Christopher, sitting in the car directly behind Caroline. His mother nervously spins her wedding ring.

Caroline reels around to look at him. She's had enough of his whining. "And it's gonna be a fast one."

The train leaves the safety of the station and begins its circular path through the park.

On the first revolution, Caroline sees Tom with his arm around Candy. The two are laughing, their bodies pressed up against one another. Caroline needs more details. She takes the train around a second time.

"Round two!" Caroline cranks the lever into high gear.

"I want to get off!" Christopher says, then starts to cry.

Caroline cranks up the speed as high as the lever will go. The train creaks and moans in ways she's never heard.

"Mom, what is that?" Christopher asks.

She feels it before she sees it. There's a gash in Caroline's overalls and the hair is out, loose, making its way into the rest of the train. It engulfs Christopher and then his mother, their voices muffled by the aggressive strands. It moves towards the back of the train without discrimination. The train is now a hairy express.

Families around her are running away, screaming, holding their children, dropping their cotton candy.

As she chugs past the far side of the soccer field, the red lump that is Tom gets larger and larger, as does Candy, standing next to him, head tilted, smile ignited. She snaps her knee-highs and puts both hands on Tom's arm.

The hair has wound itself around the wheels and the train seizes and stops. They look up at all the noise. Candy starts to run, but the hair catches and then engulfs her.

Tom stays still. It's what you're supposed to do if a shark approaches you in the water. The hair rises above him next to a sign that reads, "Ducks Crossing." And then, he's gone.

Caroline steps out of the train and walks towards the pavement in front of the carousel while the hair continues to spread out over the entire acreage of the park, wrapping itself around trees, billowing over buildings, swing sets, a park ranger.

Forest animals, sensing the danger, make a dash for higher ground.

Some make it.

Caroline, seemingly floating on the unforgiving tresses through the carnage like Botticelli's Venus, pushes through the hair covering the ground till she finds the spot next to the sign where Tom once was standing. Reaching her hand down, like a kid hunting sand crabs at the beach, she fumbles for broken glass, picking up the shards one at a time and placing them in her overall's double chest pocket. There's no telling what she might discover when it's examined at two hundred times original size.

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