

Blood on the Tracks

I was almost hit by the train today. Almost, very nearly, Lulu too. Lulu is my German Shepherd, but she's got something else in her that makes her more independent. She has one blue eye. I call her the blue-eyed devil because she doesn't always mind. She's 2 now, but she still doesn't mind until I insist, after I yell, about the 3rd time. You can see her mind thinking about it—you can see it in her devil eye.

That's what I was thinking after I climbed over the tracks, jumped really—and looked behind me, saying desperately, "C'mon, Lulu, c'mon, Lulu, *Come on, LULU!*" while she had that look in her eye, like *Maybe I will*. I was scared, and it happened so fast, me stepping over the train track and hearing the sudden blast of the train's horn, which propelled me over the track and down the side of the embankment, but hesitating, and turning around, calling Lu.

Years ago, a man was hit by a train trying to save his dog. His dog had sense enough, finally, to get off the tracks, but the man was hit and killed. Someone is hit by the train around here every once and awhile, I'd say almost every year, but now that I don't take the local paper, I don't know for sure. Lulu did have sense enough, also, to jump down off the tracks and head towards and beyond me. The train stopped a short way up the track. That bothered me; I had caused the train to stop.

I was shaken. I don't know why I hadn't looked up the track before I stepped across it. I don't know where I was, but I wasn't in my body at that moment, as it was on remote control, and I was thinking of my purpose there, walking along the beach, still a mile or two to go before I reached my destination. It had been raining, so I was wearing

boots and a rain slick, with the hood up, and my headphones on. I just didn't look. I don't know why. It's not like me, the rule follower.

I like the walk, but it's about 5 miles from my house, maybe 7, I don't know, and I make it once a year, every year, to mark my son's birthday, March 15th, the Ides of March. Usually, I walk the whole way from my house, but the weather has been inclement, so I drive my car to the parking lot just beyond the trail, and cross the river, swollen with excess water from the excess rain, walk beyond the camper village just past the river, and begin the real walk on the bike trail after passing the state camp building, which is deserted because of the flooding. As soon as I approach the break between the bike path and the train tracks, I usually cross to walk closer to the ocean. It's wild here. The waves are quick and foamy, and the wind tugs at my sleeves, inviting me in. I think that's why I like it, but my walk has a purpose, and I am heading down the track to where my son was killed by a train, 2 weeks after his 22nd birthday.

You see the irony here. I can imagine the headlines in the local paper that I no longer receive, "Mother killed by Train on Dead Son's Birthday." There would be the usual drivel about my purpose there, the speculation about whether I committed suicide or not. If you don't know me, you might think it likely. *Mother, left depressed, older son committed suicide. Younger son an alcoholic. Recent retirement.*

My sister might point out that I would never hurt my dog, and that if I were planning suicide, I would have left Lulu at home. But Lulu almost died, too, for my stupidity. My living son would probably believe it. He doesn't know me. Addiction has stunted his awareness of other people, and he still thinks, as I did when I was a teenager, that everyone is like him or his brother. He believes that Gabriel killed himself.

I do not. My daughter, my daughter would be shocked and hurt, left practically alone in the world without me.

To be fair, Gabe had moods and depression. He was in therapy when he was about 13, and he told the therapist about his plans and means to kill himself, which resulted in a stay at a hospital, and an eventual move to live with his father. Even then, I didn't think he would do such a thing, but I think he romanticized death by suicide, and though he talked about it off and on throughout his life, he never actually tried it, to my knowledge. I understood the desire for an escape from the pain of life. I thought about it a lot when I was 19, after my brother had died the year before. I didn't consider the effect of my death on my family. I was 19 and only thought of my own pain. But Gabriel was no longer a teenager, and he didn't act unhappy—not like that.

He was fairly happy when he moved back with me, and was pretty upbeat until his break-up with his girlfriend, when he decided to drop school, and work until he had enough money to move back to Tucson. I supported his decision, and he was looking forward to it. So, there's that reason. And there's another.

About two weeks before he died, Gabriel told me about a dream he had where he was walking along, tripped, and hit his head. Then he saw the mask of death. Someone came along and beat death back, but he went with his hero on a boat to cross the ocean.

I remember I was upset at the time. I actually felt anger, which I realize now, was fear. Everyone knows that crossing a body of water in your dream is a sign of death. "Why don't you write your dreams down in your dream diary?" I almost shouted. He

smiled, and said, “Oh, Mom,” he grinned at me, “I will. I just wanted to tell you.” So that’s another reason.

Months after his death, a friend called up to tell me he had gone home from a brewery and had stumbled and fell, and cracked his head crossing the tracks. He woke up, lying across the tracks the next morning. He couldn’t help but think of Gabe, so he called to tell me. So that’s another reason.

I don’t think Gabriel committed suicide, but I don’t *really* know, as people have pointed out. But I *do* know. I know.

I kept walking slowly, now by the beach, walking on a black-topped area that used to be camping spots for Winnebagos and trucks and other camping trailers, but this area is now eroded to the point that it’s fenced off by a bright yellow gate, the same kind used in all the parks around here to keep traffic out. Up ahead there are more parking spots that are still used, and there is a huge motorhome at the end, but I don’t see any others. I am about a half mile away. I am aware that the train is still stopped, over there, to my right, but I keep walking, trying to ignore it.

I feel nervous, humiliated. There’s a guy in the window wearing a blue checked shirt watching me, and after I step through the yellow gate, adjusting my backpack so it fits through with me, I hear him yell something at me. I don’t want to talk to him. I know what I did is stupid. No one else can match the ridicule I carry in my own head, ridicule I’ve carried all my life, even after the original perpetrator of the ridicule died and is buried. I am ashamed of myself, because I feel the weight of the love of my family and friends, and also because I could have caused Lulu’s death. She may be a blue-eyed devil, but she’s my dog, and she’s dependent on me. I have no intention of walking up

to the man in the train and explaining what happened, because I don't know what happened, so I feebly give him a two-thumbs-up gesture, with a shit-eating grin, and I feel like I am channeling Gabriel, who often had that self-mocking expression on his face, which moved into a broad grin after. I keep walking. The man starts the train back up after I have passed and blows the whistle a long, hard, sharp sound, signifying his anger and frustration.

I am about a quarter mile away from the motorhome up ahead, when I see a car with its headlights on, approaching. I immediately grab Lulu, and we run and hide behind some bushy stuff on the edge of the beach next to the blacktop we had been walking. I lie flat, holding Lulu by her collar. She has been off leash since before we crossed the tracks, which is another reason why I crossed the tracks in the first place, to get her off the bike path and give her the freedom to roam. She loves chasing ground squirrels and birds. It's fun watching her run, the joy expressed in her body as she runs up and down the beach. She never catches anything, so I let her run.

The car passes us, and I check quickly over the top of the bush, seeing it turn around and head back the way it came. I lie back down again, using my backpack as a bolster, keeping my head out of the sand, soothing Lulu as best I can with, "It's ok, girl, just a little longer, just wait here, be still."

She's not still, but she's obedient enough to know that it's useless at the moment to fight me; I am strong enough to hold her, and she waits impatiently with me until I see that the car is gone, when I release her.

I sit on the sand, unwilling to get up. That car was sent to look for me, I am sure. A single person might go unrecognized, but my Shepherd is distinctive, and I know that

if we continue up the blacktop, we will approach the campsite office, which must be open or there wouldn't be the motorhome up ahead, and they will be waiting to lecture me. I cannot abide the thought. I am too old for this. I am too old to make this mistake, and I am too old to listen to the lecture. I decide to walk back to my car, parked at least 2 miles away, and drive to the beach exit, park there, and scramble up the hill to his death place.

I used to love trains, the great sound and clatter of them, the raucous whistle, the energy of mechanized movement, the wind they whipped around them, mystery. As a child I remember standing by the crossing with my sister and my brother, hearing the bells ring, watching the lights flash off and on, the gate coming down to prevent people from crossing, the singing hum of the rails before the train even appeared, and the assault on our eardrums by the train's whistle as it blew past us with a roar. We lived in Auburn then, 50 years ago and more, when you could hear trains before they arrived.

Now trains are silent. They run on tracks that don't clatter. I read somewhere that in towns the intersections are encased in rubber to prevent that sound, so the trains don't bother the residents when they pass. Silly, though. In town the trains blow their whistles in warning, and I can hear the trains circling around the town where I live, as they come close to the city and make themselves known. But they don't blow their whistle in the wilderness. That's why so many people die here. They don't hear them until too late.

I am 70 years old. I have been coming to this spot, Emma Wood Park and beyond, to the train tracks where Gabriel was killed, for 22 years now. He was killed on April 2, 2001. He parked his car at Emma Wood, and walked the tracks to the usual

hang-out spot, by the tracks and across the road and the beach access, where he and his friends often sat around, smoked dope or drank beer, or both. I don't know why they didn't sit on the beach. Maybe it was too damp. He was alone. At least, I think he was alone.

It was a Monday and I had taken a day off to finish my thesis for my Masters. I was sitting at the computer, and had just completed the last story and the phone rang. It was about 1 PM. The man on the phone asked me if I knew a Gabriel G. My sons have their father's last name, so it was confusing to see my name on his insurance card, which is what the man on the line was saying. I don't remember what else he said, but suddenly I was afraid, and I asked him what this was about, and he told me, and I screamed, screamed so loud I must have sounded just like a train whistle in his ear, but I couldn't grasp the meaning entirely, and kept saying, "Is this an April Fool's joke?" and he kept saying, "Is there anyone with you?"

I retrace my steps, this time, checking both ways before I cross the train tracks, and slowly walk the bike path, leaving Lulu off the leash until we reach the campsite check-in, which is deserted because of the rains, so I know no one is waiting there for me. I can't release this deep sense of shame, and I have to shake my head and tell myself, *for God's sake, it's not against the law to cross the train tracks!* But the shame comes from putting myself and my dog in danger, for being foolish, stupid.

When Gabriel died, I wanted to go myself. I had these visions of cutting. I am a wimp about pain, but I found myself visualizing falling on a sword, like Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, but in my case, a knife would have to do. I don't really think anyone has the right to dictate to another about suicide, but I always thought that once you have kids,

it's wrong. After all, having kids is like a promise that life is worth it, or you wouldn't bring them into the world.

I remember my sister saying, "Don't you wish you were dead?" and me thinking, *no, I am dead. I wish I were alive.*

I attach Lulu's leash, and we walk combined to the parking lot where I left the car and get in. I breathe a sense of relief, put my backpack in the seat beside me so Lulu won't sit there and make it muddy. I already prepared the car before we left the house, putting the back seats down, and placing the dog blanket over them, but even with all that room, Lulu prefers to sit in the passenger seat next to me. She's not very affectionate like my previous Shepherds, but she likes to sit and look out of the passenger door window. Maybe sitting lower makes it easier to see, or maybe it's more comfortable, I'm not sure.

I usually pack these things in my backpack:

1. A blanket to sit on—this one very thick because it's been raining for weeks;
2. A birthday card addressed to Gabriel and signed with love from Mom;
3. A votive candle, in this case, Jimi Hendrix with an immaculate heart, which I found in what we used to call a head shop, and which I know would have delighted him, spoofing religion, and loving Jimi;
4. A camping lighter—you really need the long barrel to fit into the candle without burning yourself;
5. Several food items that Gabe loved, vanilla wafer cookies, Cadbury eggs, peeps;
6. A forty ounce bottle of ale—I try to find Arrogant Bastard Ale, because it makes me laugh, and it reminds me of him;

7. A church key, to open the ale;

8. Flowers, usually daffodils or carnations and sometimes irises;

I have a little ritual I perform, where I light the candle after I have brought everything out and placed myself on the blanket near the tracks, near where he was last alive. Here I keep the dog on the leash because I do not trust her, and I place the card by the candle and sing Happy Birthday, and put the food out as an offering, eating some, letting the dog eat some, and I open the ale, drink some, toast Gabriel, drink some more, pour it into the ground. Then I do a short contemplation, remembering.

Once I was sitting there in contemplation, it must have been about 10 years ago, because I could still sit with my legs crossed, and I heard a funny metallic noise. Looking up, I saw a man in a strange vehicle which looked like a truck with train wheels on the track.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I am remembering my son, who died here,” I answered.

“Well, be careful, now. People get killed by the trains if they aren’t careful.”

I just stared at him, disgusted. He moved on, wheels screeching on the tracks.

I back my car up slowly, after opening the back window for Lulu, who likes to put her head out. I carefully drive out to the road that runs into the freeway, more careful than usual after my recent brush with death. It is only a mile or two on the freeway for the exit to the beaches, and I drive in the slow lane, waiting for the exit, but there are orange signs that say *ramp closed*.

This is strange, but I continue on, take the next exit, and head back, forgetting that I cannot access the beaches here heading south, and as soon as I realize this, I just continue driving until I get home, defeated.

I sit on the couch in the living room, light the candle, sing Happy Birthday to Gabriel, and drink the ale. The peeps and wafers and Cadbury eggs wait for Easter. I will give them to my daughter in a basket, although she's probably too old now for a basket.

No one tells you how to handle it; they try to be sympathetic and say things like, "I can't imagine how it feels," or "I don't know what I'd do if I lost my child." It hurts because they are safe, and somehow you aren't, and their children are safe, and your children aren't, and it marks you. You are marked forever.

A group of us, relatives and friends, went out to the tracks, the day after Gabriel was killed, parking in several cars across from them, and going over to lay a shrine where he died. There was blood on the tracks. I remember my sister complaining to someone—maybe someone connected to trains—I don't know—that they hadn't cleaned the tracks properly. But how do you erase blood on the tracks?