

TARNISHED HOPE

by JJ Jorgensen

There was a brief moment that we shared eye contact. I know she felt the same thing I did. There was a glimmer of a smile, on both our faces. Then the train stopped, and she jolted as though just realizing it was her stop. She jumped up and threw on her backpack, pressing forward quickly through the closing doors, with just a second to glance at me, still smiling. Something was on the seat she vacated, a heart-shaped locket. It looked worn and handed down. I rushed over to grab it before anyone else might. When I touched it, my hand seemed to tingle. What a weird yet good feeling this moment was. Here I was bleak but now hopeful. I was sure I would see her on the train again.

The news was awful when it hit. It started days after that magical girl on the train. Months passed. Now things were really dismal. My father sent me a goodbye John letter and just like that my parents were gone. Thousands were dying in the street, bodies covered in plastic bags. Nobody went outside without goggles, gloves, and masks. Everything was closed. Everything seemed grey. Even sunshine had abandoned us. The job barely held on in a virtual capacity, then it too was gone. Food was scarce. I was losing weight from hunger. No subways were running, so there was no chance of finding her. The memory was fading; her slight smile, dark hair, and grey-green eyes. The image stayed with me, but I felt it slowly drifting away. I dreamed of the subway car and that moment.

A year and another flicked by. The streets were not safe. Police were disbanded, as the economy failed to fund them. Starved and dangerous gangs were roaming around looking for food or whatever. I had to go outside to try to find water and bread. My dog had died, and there was so little left of him. In my pocket I kept this thing, it was a bit tarnished, and sad, but touching it made me feel a little hopeful. I turned the wrong corner and was confronted by a gang of toughs. Most were female as they had survived the heart-related side effects of the unproven medicines used. Clearly, I was not much of a fighter.

They began threatening me, and I showed them I had nothing but this heart-shaped old locket. One of the women yelled and jumped at me. She grabbed the locket. She grabbed my face and stared at me with horror or maybe wonder. Through her goggles I saw something different, some warmth in the cold green-grey orbs that

protruded from her tight skin. She stared at the locket, then looked at me again in a less feral way. She removed her mask and smiled. Her voice was sore and straining as it competed with the noises of the dying that filled the air most often. She said one word, “subway”. Then she and the group turned from me and ran to find other prospects. I collapsed and fell to the ground.

My mind was racing. All I could do was struggle to breath. I was so very hungry, and the sudden pain in my chest was deafening. I felt gauged or hollowed. To lay there and fade away seemed like the best idea. The sidewalk was cold. My eyes closed, not sure for how long. Someone was shaking me. I didn’t care to be revived. The world was dark and hopeless now. The hand shook me harder. The word “water” was croaked into my ear. I opened my lips and a few drops of what felt like liquid heaven touched my tongue. I opened my eyes. She was holding my head in her lap. A few more drops she shared. She leaned forward, as though to kiss me and instead whispered “we have to have hope”.