

Preparing in Pockets

By Kate R Canter

Janet believed in preparation. If you put a glass of water by your bed, you are more likely to take your medication in the morning. If you put a sensible sandwich and an apple in your bag before work, you are less likely to waste five dollars at lunch. If you keep limber and sprint home every Friday, you are more likely to evade pursuers when they decide to pursue.

When Janet stepped on the subway, she thought she was prepared. She had ten dollars remaining on her card; enough to take her anywhere in the city, though she only wanted to go home. Her phone was fully charged, with her Unwind Playlist queued up. Her bag contained a half empty water bottle and a full can of pepper spray. Janet had never used the pepper spray, but she had made emotional peace with harming another person to preserve her own safety.

The car was mostly empty. Janet stayed next to the doors, leaning on the safety rail. Another woman stood in the center of the car, leaning on nothing. Two elderly women sat in the handicapped seats, gossiping loudly. A teen with spikey hair and indeterminate gender sat at the far end of the car, deeply engrossed in their phone. A man with greasy black hair, a tattered coat, and a thick layer of grim over his skin, paced the opposite end, muttering. Janet watched his reflection in the glass window. The train lurched forward.

Janet held on to the safety rail. She thought about the fried rice waiting in her kitchen. Then the woman spoke.

"I could kill everyone here with the contents of my pockets." Her voice was normal, even conversational. No one else heard her.

Janet adjusted her gaze to watch the woman in the glass. She wore a ratty black hoodie covered with spots that could have been paint but probably weren't. Matted blond hair hung passed her shoulders, with a few strands floating in the static electricity. Glassy grey eyes met Janet's in the window. The woman smiled, revealing jagged teeth.

"What has it got in its pocketess?" She hissed, "Nasty little Baggins."

Janet froze. She knew Janet was watching her. She knew she'd been heard. The Pepper Spray called from her bag, but she didn't know how to reach it without drawing more attention to herself.

The woman pulled out a black pen and examined it, clicking the top with a smile. "I could stab the kid." She glanced at the teen, "right in the jugular. Turn his blood black like his soul."

If You See Something, Say Something extolled the poster over the doors. Janet had her phone in her pocket, but they were underground. Would she even have reception? If she did, would the cops or paramedics be able to get there before this woman made good on her threats. No one else in the car seemed to have heard her.

She replaced the pen in her hoodie pocket and pulled out an ID card attached to a lanyard. Janet couldn't see the name on the ID, but she doubted this woman had a job of any kind.

"Strangulation," she muttered. "Obvious but I like the simplicity. I could shove the card down their throats, but what's to stop them spitting it out?"

She regarded the old woman, still oblivious, for a long moment. "I suppose I could strangle them while it's down their throats."

Still, she made no move toward the other passengers. Instead, she replaced the lanyard and ID in her pocket and pulled out a candy bar. Janet felt some of the tension leave her shoulders. There was no way you could kill with something as innocuous as a candy bar.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you, Janet?"

Janet cursed herself as soon as she turned. The woman flashed that crooked smile again.

"Google 'Ivory Coast chocolate slavery' when you get home. Candy kills." She unwrapped the bar, careful not to rip the shiny paper. "We are going for sudden death though." She offered the chocolate on an outstretched palm. Janet stared at the streaks of dirt and paint on her skin. The woman shrugged and shoved the candy in her own mouth.

"Rude," she said, chocolate dripping off her teeth, "Of course, I do like the idea of the ultimate paper cut." She folded the wrapper into a harsh triangle. "Right across the wrists; Or is it down?" She shrugged, "I'll just go diagonal."

Janet watched her chew the chocolate, licking it from her teeth. The old ladies kept talking, but she couldn't understand them. A muffled voice announced the upcoming station, two stops from Janet's destination. How far would she have to walk?

"Old bastards," the man muttered behind them. "Old bastards sneakin' up from the dirt."

Janet followed the killer's gaze to his scared, dirt stained face. He stared with clouded blue eyes. He stepped back.

The killer turned back to Janet with a grin. "We'll let time take care of him. I'm Diane, by the way. You go ahead and relax, Janet. I'm not here to kill you."

Janet said nothing.

"You don't have to believe me," Diane said, "Just don't do anything stupid like taking that little toy out of your bag. I don't want to change my plans for the day."

Janet let go of her bag. "How do you know my name?"

Diane chuckled without sound. "You people. You're so simple, yet you've got to complicate everything. I love you."

Enough to kill us, Janet thought.

Diane shook her head. "I haven't killed anyone in weeks."

"Weeks?" Janet couldn't stop herself. No one even looked up.

Diane rolled her eyes. "Like three weeks. You people are so touchy about death. It's always: 'Cure this, save that, please-no- I have a family!' Like they're going to live forever."

She stepped closer. Janet tried to back away, only to smack against the closed doors. Diane's mouth opened, wider than a grin. She had chocolate on her teeth.

"Sanctity of Life, that's my favorite," she said. "As if you people didn't kill more than we could ever hope to. When you hit that door, you demolished thousands upon thousands of dust mite civilizations. A billion lives smooshed by your butt, Janet!" She laughed.

One of the old women looked at them, then turned to mutter something to her friend.

Diane didn't seem to care. "You could stand naked in the woods, never moving for the rest of your life. You'd still kill something. Think about all the baby spiders you kill in your sleep." She shook her head. "We should study you in school."

"Who's we?" Janet asked. There was no ignoring this. No calling for help. She might as well know what was happening.

Diane giggled. "I think you can figure that out on your own. Catholic school wasn't that long ago, was it?"

Janet had a sudden image of a woman in black, threatening her with fire and brimstone if she didn't keep her hands off the girl in front of her. "What, you're a demon or something?"

The absurdity caught her off guard. She had to suppress the urge to laugh in Diane's deranged face. Janet didn't believe in God, let alone demons.

Diane's smile disappeared. "Or something," she agreed. "You're right to watch yourself, Janet. I don't need the contents of my pockets to kill everyone in this car. I could wipe out the city without even using my hands. It's not technically my job but—" she glanced down, "what the boss doesn't know..."

Janet swallowed. "What is your job then?"

The fear seemed to please her. "Reconnaissance mostly. Crusades, crucifixion, when you dropped that thing on Hiro-whatever. Any time the world changed, drastic and violently, I've been around. Well, someone like me. We had to take on some new recruits lately. You've been so busy."

The train stopped, forcing Janet to grab the safety rail. Diane didn't move. "Can you hear them screaming, Janet? All the little dust mites? You get used to it."

A chime dinged above them. The unintelligible voice spoke as the doors open. "Welp!" Diane clapped briskly. "That's my stop. Go home and fix yourself a drink, Janet. You're gonna miss work in the morning."

She turned and stepped onto the platform, hands in her pocket. The crowd swallowed her whole.

The car filled with normal, human people. No one spoke to Janet. No one even looked at her. She pushed herself up off the safety rail, wondering if she'd ever feel safe again. She only made her stop because the doors opened behind her, and the crowd pushed her out.

Today wasn't Friday, but Janet sprinted home anyway. She barely touched the ground. She tried not to think about what lived under her feet, or what waited to crush her from above. When she heard the explosions come from downtown, she shoved her hands in her pockets.

Janet spent the next day in bed, but she didn't sleep. She saw jagged teeth behind her eyelids, covered in chocolate, in a mouth stretching too wide to be human.

Bastards sneaking up from the dirt.

A demon.

Or something.

She called out sick the next day. Her boss's voice shook on the phone. She told Janet to take as much time as she needed.

Janet spent the day online. She avoided the news. She didn't want to hear every side blame the other, or watch bodies dragged from the wreckage. She didn't Google Chocolate Slavery. Instead, she scoured the darkest, abandoned parts of the internet, trying to find more information. She requested as many books as the library would allow. She didn't know what she would find, or what she would believe, but she would prepare.

The End.