

ONE
November 2015

I thought that the bomb might detonate on the subway this morning. A bomb would go off, at some point, and I thought that today would be the day. I moved home to New York after 23 years, the most recent 17 spent raising my two children in Texas. Yes, that Texas, with the boots and the steak and the God thing. The God thing is big in the Bible Belt. Anyway, I couldn't wait to return, and even to start a part-time teaching job requiring the subway, because its salary meant that Charlie The Terrier and I could live in a large one-bedroom apartment on East End Avenue, a new home that would feel roomy enough when my daughters came from college for holidays. But then, Paris was attacked and on the Monday that followed, I had to get onto the Number Four, or Five, Express train at eight in the morning. Terrorists bomb trains at eight in the morning. It is prime bombing time. Terrorists like to start their days early.

I looked up alternate routes, on the bus. I prefer riding on terra firma, not beneath it. When I lived in Manhattan the first time, 30 years ago, I took two buses to get to my job in midtown. My editor told me that as a new assistant at the groundbreaking Working Woman Magazine, I needed to arrive on time, early, in fact, before the senior people walked in, and that I should consider traveling by subway. I told her that I did not take the train and that I wrote on the bus, so I had really begun work sooner than she had thought. Even though I was an assistant who opened mail (mostly) and didn't write for publication (yet, anyway), I was, certainly, hard at work on my burgeoning career, one that would include writing (for a salary) at some future time, I was sure.

Today, when there was no explosion on the Number Four Express train to Borough Hall, Brooklyn, there was a man who did back flips down the center of the aisle, instead. His hands landed an inch from my toes. The train was moving in the opposite direction as he flipped and I, and my fellow passengers, were duly impressed. His movement made me think of those algebra word problems about boats and planes heading on certain trajectories at certain speeds, asking you to determine which would arrive sooner, or faster, or where one would take over the other or where the two would crash. The man then counted to three and hurled toward a friend and fellow flexible man positioned by the pole, attaching to his feet, magnetically, and becoming a two-human bowling ball. The floor was filthy. They were a snowball of bacteria, I thought.

My mother, who has always lived in New York, gave me a massive pump jar of anti-bacterial gel before my first day of teaching. Between the subway and the hands of many teenage children, I would need the sterilization, often. She also provided a small squeeze bottle, into which I could pour the gel for travel. It was the right size for both the train and my makeup bag. My mother is a grand re-purposer. The small bottle used to contain shampoo, a trial size. While the human bowling ball was careening down the middle of the train, I squeezed a bit of the gel into my palm, hoping that my mother had rinsed all of the shampoo out of the bottle. When I put anti-bacterial gel into my daughters' pencil cases, it was in its original container.

Welcome to New York.

That is what the people say.

The Monday after the Paris bombings, I put my hot pink fake leather notebook into my bag with the express purpose of writing on the train. The bus route that I charted on my computer the evening before would take more than two hours each way. If I wrote on the train, as I wrote on the bus three decades ago, the 23 minute brush with potential death would zip by more quickly. So, on Day One and now, I write in the hot pink fake leather notebook to speed up the trip. And speed up it does. I am a writer, after all. This new practice in my new town, and therefore the bombings, have jolted my craft, I suppose. Terror is good for certain things, or maybe one thing, creativity being one of them, or the only one.

Oh, here we are already. Borough Hall. That was fast, indeed.

“Stand clear of the opening doors.”

In Texas, I raised my children and myself, I like to say. I arrived in 1998 with two babies, one husband and two white dogs. I left six months ago with none of them. (Charlie The Terrier is the new guy, and he knows it.) Here is how I got there, from here, and back again, via a lot of stops in between. And I mean a lot of stops. Mainly, here is how my daughters, Daphne and Cooper, took off into the world with a single parent childhood tucked under their arms and in their psyches, bolstered by it, informed by it and shaped well by it, in large part, as I am and will be always. The status challenges you to be better than you normally would be, I think, in all that you do, in every choice that you make. That is because the status scares you. If you don't do it correctly, if you are not the best parent, if you loosen up for just a second, you may meet catastrophe. You fear that your kids will lose out, that they will be dented and scarred and torn up. You fear that the statistics will win, and mock you in the process. So you live in service to the mission--to protect what has been threatened--and this governs what you do with a force that

grips on and keeps hold. This becomes who you are. This becomes who you are when your kids are finger painting in their high chairs and even when they are making the Dean's List. Even when you are a million miles away, and when you are in a shoe store, when you are at the dentist, in the bath, on the train. You do not let up. The way you check and check again that the toaster is turned off, the way you study your notes walking into the test, you do not let up. Because you can't. And you know what? It is all okay, for everyone. No, it is better than that.