

Five Days a Week the Commute Was

Nick Mamas

Five days a week the commute was utterly unbearable for

Emily Anne Holland, genius. That's how she thought of herself, *Emily Anne, genius*, and she wasn't wrong. Nor was she wrong about the BART—the retrofuturistic people mover, now stained and klugey, that brought her from her hovel in Berkeley to her table in the start-up right on the Embarcadero way too early each day and brought her back far too late every evening. Unlike the dot.com cud-chewers—or C.H.U.D. queuers, after both the famed horror film featuring those titular cannibalistic humanoid underground dwellers and the long lines at Downtown Berkeley's BART station, as Emily Anne thought of everyone around her—she couldn't telecommute even one day a week. Her work was rather too hands-on. She had a lab of her own, a lab full of pulsing, growing, fecund things, you know? And the state in all its fierce stupidity wouldn't let her live in the lab, barred her from curling up under her desk for fifteen-minute catnaps, the catnaps of genius. And on the train there could be no sleep; often Emily Anne didn't even get a seat at all. Unbearable, as the BART was and to this day is for most of us, no?

And so the commute. And novels, *recherché* and twee, were no relief, not when smythe-sewn and made for the hand with a clever ribbon bookmark and annotations even on the credits page, purchased at an independent bookstore where the employees still believed that a vote for Nader was a vote for Nader. Not when on her iPad either, though she downloaded them by the torrential gross in seconds. Seconds, I tell you! She would buy and skim, delete and buy—*Space, like time, engenders forgetfulness* one moment click! *an unclean traffic with the forces of reaction* scroll scroll skim skim then onto something new and properly copyright infringed and cracked wide open. Stuff she saw the other girls reading in her peripheral vision. *She wants to end properly, like a good sentence.* Gawd! click click! For a few weeks there was relief when Emily Anne taught herself enough of the old Greek to give *Chaereas and*

Callirhoe a whack in the original. Lots of shipwrecks and titillation without consummation, and then there was nothing else better. So Emily Anne let the language fall out of her head to make room for more data on lichen, mosses, and other epiphytes. Emily, in her Hellenic moment, thought that epiphytes—*upon the plant*—sounded somehow portentous, and it was.

But first there was her tumblr, dipsticksoftheBART. Activism after a fashion. Emily Anne surreptitiously took photos of vegan Burners blocking the doors with a kudzu jumble of smelly-seeming bicycles, children flung across the floor like last night's panties, *surlly Negroids*—as she callously tagged them, as a joke, a *joke* she kept explaining—fuming in aisle seats while elderly Asian women stood nearby in the otherwise packed train car. The emails were relentless—she was racist and privileged besides, Emily Anne was told. Didn't she know that black men take the outer seats only because nobody would sit next to them anyway, because of racism? Emily Anne had not known that, but even when she finally did she didn't feel bad. Then someone new wrote to her: *Mind your own business you fucking dyke bitch ill rape your ass to pieces in an alley. Oh no, not an alley!* Emily Anne thought to herself, for a moment a fool declaring herself safe because she wasn't aware of any alleys near either her workplace or her home, but then she shut down the tumblr anyway.

Fuming in an aisle seat of her own, Emily Anne turned to eavesdropping and reading over the shoulders of others. Go-getters with laptops working on their spreadsheets and very occasionally a snippet of somewhat interesting code. Morons highlighting printed-out emails. Oh yes, very important that stuff about interest rates and the yuan and holistic nursing and Emily Anne's career as a commuter extremely interested in the lives of her fellows didn't last to West Oakland, much less to the night trip back, when the great cranes on the piers of the Port of Oakland ceased their bowing and rose back up to their full heights, tips burning with steady red light.

Then a party, of the sort thrown by non-Google employees for the

sake of Google employees so that the former could get jobs working alongside the latter for ever so much money and bonuses and benefits besides. And a bus to bring them to work in Mountain View, in Google-town USA her own self, each day. Away from the BART. Emily Anne was tapped to attend not because she was interested in a career change, but because she was a genius and cute to boot—long hair with no split ends, a nymph’s body she was too comfortable in to be described as coltish anymore, and seven-hundred-dollar glasses on shiny gray eyes too dim to legally drive. Damn the state, damn the law! Accessible good looks are this year’s out of your league, explained several prominent Craigslist posters, so the millionaire boys kept a respectful, lustful distance. Just barely not close enough.

In an erstwhile warehouse space that in generations past would have been owned by a novelist obscure in his homeland but beloved in France and filled with jugs of Italian wine, instead of all sorts of chocolate-coated whatnot and robot-made sushi from Trader Joe’s, Emily Anne found in the corner an old record player, and balanced on top of the turntable was a large a tin cylinder with a pattern of slivered scales cut into it, and inside the hollow cylinder an old lamp with a bright bulb and no shade, its cord snaking out of the top of the cylinder to reach an outlet. So, the cylinder was supposed to be the lampshade, except that if you turned on the record player the turntable would spin and decorate the room with streaks of light, like an inside-out disco ball? Men lined up to explain it—the dream machine, they said—to Emily Anne, to bid her kneel down right close to it and close her eyes, because the idea is to get the flickering on the inside of the eyelids—we’ll do it with you, it’s cool ... nobody here is prone to *photosensitive epilepsy*, right?—and then one of the fellows started it up.

Not bad, the colors and the patterns, that’s what Emily Anne thought. Then a few moments later she stopped thinking.

The floaters in her childhood eyes after a minute of eager rubbing with her little fists, the first experiment of a junior scientist in Pikachu pajamas.

Heels over head in the back seat of the great sedan, an only child of only children, the moon following her home, fingerboned branches cutting it to ribbons. Then streetlights and a slower pace as the car rounded the curve of the world. A flash filled the interior, then blinked back into darkness, then light again.

That night, most all nights: a cross gliding against the ceiling of her room as the headlamps from oncoming traffic filled the window, then drove past.

Community college at age fourteen—PowerPoint slides and the sweet moment of nothing in between them. She didn't have to take notes, nor raise her hand to ask a question. She could be in the glow of the screen, and then not be in its dark.

Grad school, when all her possessions fit into one room, when all her clothes fit into one little two-wheeled wagon. A mistimed step and she fell. Hands flung wide, too wide for the wagon, waiting in the middle of her room. Emily Anne hit its aluminum handle with the bridge of her nose. She didn't see stars then, but a nova, just one huge blast of nerves, then a pain that filled her head like water swirling into a basin.

A third date to the disused mental hospital. Plaster crunched under their feet, then she swung her Maglite across the room to find that boy and his spooky skulking and for a moment the beam glinted off a spidery mirror.

The ophthalmologist's office. "Number one," the ophthalmologist asked her once a year, "or number two?" That pause between them, that's what she wanted.

The arthouse cinema where the Academy countdown film was shown before the feature. The moment after the numeral 2 when there were no frames reading 1.

Water in her eye in the shower during a rolling brownout at dusk, the towel for some reason not in reach.

That sick dream she had about her now dead cat Stymie reaching up with one swipe of his paw and blotting out the sun.

The second everything she was was stung by a wasp.

Emily Anne could hardly feel the thighs of the men on either side of her, toned and strong from hiking in the Berkeley hills, against her own thighs, and her flesh tingled. She couldn't even smell the party anymore. Finally, Emily Anne realized that there was something larger than herself in the universe, and as evolution, or luck, or the dharma would have it, the door to this Great Big Thing was located just a few millimeters behind her eyelids. As she'd always half-suspected. When the dream machine was turned off and the gathering's alpha male demonstrated his great speaker system by piping through it carefully mixed roars and thuds designed to feed the local constabulary's ShotSpotter Gunshot Location System a false positive, Emily Anne found herself not thinking at all, but instead with her heart and viscera and everything below her neck wishing that the flashing lights of the black and whites winding through the Oakland streets would always be with her. The furious party energy swirling around her, waves of libertarian guffawing at the cops running keystones 'round the hood crashing onto the shores of liberal outrage and worry, was a rough and tinny echo so so far off.

Far away.

There's an app for that. So she downloaded it, and tried to have a dream machine experience during her commute. Oblivious to the gapers around her on Monday Emily held her iPad up to her nose, closed her eyes, and played the dream machine video on the little screen. But the California sun flooded into the car from the great Plexiglas windows, and the dipstickoftheBART next to Emily Anne was playing her MP3 player ever so loudly. *Tchun tchun tchun tchun* went the beat, then the song explained that there is a love and it comes from above.

But genius will out. Where would the BART train not be too bright? While in the Transbay Tube under the Bay, of course. If a screen is too small, where might a larger screen be located? Well, those train windows were pretty big, weren't they? Turning a few

hundred meters of the Transbay Tube into a giant dream machine would certainly alleviate some of the monotony of Emily Anne's commute, and the monotony of her leisure time as well. The rest was simplicity itself for someone with the resources of a San Francisco biotechnology start-up. It took only about a week to biohack a bioluminescent lichen hardy enough to grow in the dank and the heat of the tunnel. The real trick was dispersal. Should it be—

“Mechanical or sexual?” Emily Anne said to herself in the lab the next morning. Her supervisor made a special note of it, as Emily Anne rarely spoke, then lost the note. In the end, it was both in combination. The lichen, mostly a few luciferase genes from bioluminescent foxfire, would flair to life for only a day then recede into torpor given the lack of sun, and the mercurial moisture, in the long train tunnel. But the stuff would spread, saturate a band of the tunnel, and when it saturated the area the columnar isidia would break off and find a new place to cultivate, whipped along the interior surfaces of the Transbay Tube in the wind-wake of the nine-car rush hour trains.

Emily Anne stayed late at work and instead of taking the train all the way back to Berkeley got out at MacArthur Station, a hub for three BART lines. There were a number of platforms, a bunch of levels, and enough confusion that an owly-spectacled white girl with zebra boots and green furry jacket could stumble around looking confused for more than an hour without attracting the attention of station agents, BART police, or other phalanges of the hated, *hated* state. And Emily Anne prepped the exterior surfaces of the cars. A touch here, a squirt of an atomizer of her own design there, and as she shuttled about, the long and awkward contact of her specially treated jacket against the skins of the cars. Emily Anne was happy to be pushed aside by loudmouths and overpopulated families and witless tourists trying to find an airport.

She did it daily for two weeks. Sometimes at the Embarcadero, other times at Powell Street, and occasionally at Ashby, her home stop. Once even daring to get off and loiter at the West Oakland

stop, and once at Fruitvale, where even her far-flung internet friends knew not to tarry, for the rapists were always waiting in the nearby alleys of the imagination. For Emily Anne, the commute became almost bearable; a fortnight of something that she could almost stand to live through without the rat in her brain trying to eat its way out through her lovely elfin ears.

Then Emily Anne received a text from one of the boys she had met at the party—a solid beta-plus—and fell in love. They took City Car Share cars everywhere and fucked on his saggy futon in his roachy Mission District apartment and ate so many burritos Emily Anne dreamed of turning into one, and they drank a lot of vodka at corporate parties and were gifted with many T-shirts with corporate logos on them and then he was hired away by Google and decided to relocate to the South Bay, and Emily's start-up failed to get another injection of venture capital, through no fault of her own—this she knew because one of the VCs had contacted her privately and extralegally about coming to work for another firm, this one in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she could grow things in the distended udders of black goats and make ever so much money and go cross-country skiing in Vermont every weekend if she wanted to, with him, of course, only if she wanted to—and so Emily Anne drifted back into both consulting and a Facebook status of Single rather than It's Complicated and she was so good that all her business cards needed were her name and the word genius underneath it because if you couldn't logically derive her email address or at least find it with a quick search you weren't worthy to work with her anyway, and if she wanted to date you, guess what, you would already be dating her. Anyway, she rarely took the BART anymore because there were a lot of biotech incubators in the East Bay where appropriate lab space could be had a bit more cheaply than in The City.

So it was a surprise and a coincidence—well, a *conscious* coincidence anyway, as a genius such as Emily Anne could do all sorts of complicated math in her sleep and often did—and not even rush hour when it happened that Emily Anne Holland had a train car to

herself one late and damp Sunday evening. The lichen bloomed in streaks and strips in the Transbay Tube as the train sped through it, and Emily Anne in her window seat clamped her eyes shut, and the colors pulsed before her eyes, and she saw every capillary blaze to life reaching forth chaotically in all directions, and the throbbing of purples and reds and blacks and colors that could not be completely accurately described in either English or the ancient Greek of Chariton of Aphrodisias came not from the universe outside her eyelids, but emerged from the universe on the other side of her eyelids, obeying new anarchies of optics, and something on her face started twitching and her body melted away to nothing, and then the train burst through to the surface again and she opened her eyes and saw the white skeletons of the cranes bowing low on the lip of the Port of Oakland, as it was nearly Christmas and longshoremen were getting overtime pay to get goods to market, the blessed *agora*, sixty tons every ten minutes. And Emily Anne Holland, genius, realized that the world was just a plaything to her in a way that most of the rest of her species could only ever dream about, but that also she was only a tiny columnar isidium of the great green planet on which she lived that had broken free and traveled some few feet to establish another lichen in a new location. Then she realized that the *apokálypsis* she had experienced was as trite and stupid as anything a stupid kid might come up with during a dorm room bull session, but somehow she knew it was still true, and for Emily Anne that was enough, so she decided to keep it all to herself if only to make sure she would never meet another tiny isidium of lichen *like* herself at some party. At Ashby station Emily Anne avoided eye contact with the passengers detraining from the other cars more assiduously than she ever had before—difficult, because they were all now very chatty and touchy with one another—and she looked at her feet the entire half-mile journey back to her apartment.

