

### Yellow Line

Gerald stood and watched the rain at the Fort Totten station. It was coming down heavy, and the sound of it crashing against the concrete in curtains filled the empty space left by all the people who'd decided to stay in for Saturday rather than brave the storm. Gerald didn't miss them, or really notice they were gone. Not because the rain was so interesting; he just didn't care anymore.

It was only three, but it looked like twilight, the heavy clouds suffocating the sunlight and leaving only an eerie green twilight. Representative Dowsing had called him two hours earlier for an emergency lunch at some sushi place on the Maryland side, and now Gerald needed to get back to Arlington for his appointment. He needed to get to the appointment, because Dowsing's chief-of-staff had told him he was fired if he didn't stop moping. Not that getting fired would matter much, but work cleared his mind and that was something.

Gerald lifted his eyes from the tiny explosions of raindrops and scanned the D.C.'s squat skyline. The city was strange, over five million people and only two buildings taller than two-hundred feet, at least till you left the district proper. The nation's capital sat low and uniform and he didn't mind that the sheets of rain seemed to wash the city away past a quarter mile. Most people hated when the early hurricanes rode their way up the Atlantic coast to dump on the city. Gerald was glad; like the remnants of the storm named Arlene, he could feel himself falling apart.

The train came blasting through the rain, its lights bright and its breaks protesting loudly as it rumbled to a stop. Gerald waited for the bell announcing the doors were open then started towards the car. He crossed the rainy gap between the train and the awning in five long steps, but that was more than enough time for the rain to soak through his hair and stain his overcoat with long wet trails.

He sat down heavily in one of the seats his friends in New York called clean. They didn't feel clean to Gerald. He grimaced as he thought about the long parade of ever more self-absorbed asses that had sat there before him, though he smirked at his own pun. He shook his sleeve and checked his watch, an anachronism he held dear because it was exactly that. The train was three minutes late, and while Gerald would normally have been annoyed, this time he sighed with relief. He wasn't looking forward to

his appointment with Dr. Hannah Felder. At best, it would be a brief talk and a prescription for some antidepressant he had no intention of taking.

He ran his hands through his damp brown hair and down over his face. He felt stubble there, something he hadn't allowed until two months ago. He could feel the bags under his green eyes, and let out a sigh. His face was warm in spite of his frown, and that helped the pain in his fingers.

With a frown Gerald flexed his hands. They ached when fronts and storms moved through. The ugly scars that marked where a dog had bitten him years before stood out against his pale skin and shifted as he tried to loosen them up. He'd be trying to get his favorite toy away from the neighbor's prized Rottweiler. His hands had broken in six places in the left and eight in the right, and the joints had never recovered. He still struggled with typing and was almost incapable of writing. Since he'd been fourteen, he'd had only partial use of his hands. Gerald sneered and let out a soft bitter laugh to himself. That was what happened when you fought for things that weren't worth it.

"Crazy people laugh to themselves," someone said, the male voice brittle.

Gerald's head snapped up and his eyes darted over the car. A stout Guatemalan woman who must have been forty was sitting a few seats ahead of him. She was the perfect analogue for the horde of Latin immigrants that kept D.C. clean. She looked up with surprise herself. That left the bum with a guitar sitting in the back. He was a skinny guy, kid really, with pitiful tuft of a beard clinging to his face. An unseasonable, enormous coat, stained with an incredible amount of filth, seemed to consume the kid.

"Excuse me," Gerald said, forcing a smile.

"You're not excused," the boy said. After a minute he glanced up, flashing a brilliant white smile, before looking back down to the ground.

Gerald watched him briefly before shaking his head and looking forward again. His eyes fell to his hands again. He massaged each in turn, using the stiff fingers of one to rub their equally crippled partners on the other. It brought a little release, and he closed his eyes as then painful tension faded.

His reverie was broken by the sound of an acoustic guitar being tuned. Gerald had heard the progression enough walking past the steps of the dorms in college, every guy who could play three chords

would sit out there during freshman year, hoping to earn the attention of a girl. Gerald felt himself sneering at the memory.

The kid was evidently better than those serenaders back in college. Soon the car was full of music, a song Gerald knew he knew but could not identify. His brow bunched as he tried to anticipate the rhythm, and his mouth pursed as it became more and more frustrating.

“Free Bird,” the Guatemalan woman said with a helpful smile.

Gerald flashed her a wan smile of thanks and nodded. Free Bird. This kid was playing Free Bird by Lynard Skynard. Jesus. Gerald was 28, the song had been old by the time he was born, why the hell was this kid playing it? And how the hell did a Guatemalan woman know it? Did they play Lynard Skynard in Guatemala? Andrea would know, she'd studied abroad there.

Andrea.

He shook his head and looked out the window at the walls of the tunnel. His right forefinger brushed the empty spot around his left ring finger where a white gold band once had been. Where it should have been. Instead it was in an envelope in his desk, beside the matching ring she had handed him two months earlier.

*Handed him.* She hadn't thrown it at him in a rage. She hadn't screamed that he could take it and sell it for all she cared. She hadn't left it in his mailbox, too distraught to face him. She had handed it to him, calmly, with eyes that were sad but already looking ahead. And like that, it was over.

“Doors opening,” the automated voice alerted. Gerald turned from his reflection in the window with a start, shaken from his thoughts. Almost immediately the music descended into a few discordant notes as the kid started cackling.

“You were pretty zoned out dude,” he said.

Gerald didn't have anything to say. He just glared at the kid, who smirked and looked somewhere a few inches from Gerald's feet.

“What's up man? What's in the window you're so pissed off at?”

Gerald flushed and his eyes narrowed. Then he forced a smile. “Sorry, it's been a rough day.”

“Oh man I bet. Shoes that expensive, it's gotta kill you to get em wet.”

Gerald flushed hotter. His throat was tight and his hands clenched painfully on the rail. “Must be nice to not have to worry about that.” He nodded towards the worn and broken boots on the kid's feet.

The kid let out a hoot. “Oh man! You got me! It's true, I don't give a good goddamn about my shoes! Shit. Sick burn bro.” He made brief eye contact during the last line, sneering with his white white teeth. Then he turned back to his guitar.

Gerald shook his head in disgust. “Get a job.”

“Ooo, then I could be like you,” the kid said with a sneer, starting “Free Bird” up again, drowning out the conversation.

Gerald glowered and turned back forward in his seat. His face was burning and he struggled to keep his composure. He felt like he was in middle-school again, getting embarrassed by the kids in sports. It made him nauseas to feel that way again, and he was furious with himself for letting the little shit win.

The jerk of the car at the Mount Vernon Square stop shook him from his rage. He let out a final sigh and looked out at the group waiting to board the train. There were more people than at the previous stops here, a small crowd. As the doors chimed, Gerald's breath caught in his throat and he grabbed the seat in front of him.

Andrea was there, getting ready to get on the train.

Gerald's mind went blank as his chest tightened painfully. She was right there, he was looking at her. They hadn't spoken since she'd given him the ring, what would he say? How could he convince her in the brief moment they had on the train, to call him again? This was how it happened, people bumped into each other after a long time and remembered why it had been so wonderful before.

And it had been wonderful before, hadn't it? Yes, meeting her when she'd interviewed him back before she changed majors had been wonderful. Taking her to his parent's place in the Piedmont had been wonderful. Her gasping out yes when he'd proposed at the top of the Washington Monument, looking out over their city had been wonderful. It had all be perfect and flawless and there she was again.

Except it wasn't Andrea.

After staring far too intensely at the woman for ten seconds, Gerald realized it wasn't Andrea. Her hair was the wrong shade, she didn't have the freckles dusting her cheeks, her eyes weren't the right chocolate brown. It was just some girl; she was slender and graceful and not Andrea. Gerald let out a shuddering breath and slumped back in his chair as she walked into the car ahead of his.

The doors chimed and slid shut; the train rolled forward.

Gerald licked his lips and swallowed hard. For a second, the girl had looked like Andrea the night they'd listened to the National Orchestra at the JFK, her cheeks blushing and her hands shaking with excitement. But Andrea had been excited by the violins, not his flowers, and whoever that girl was she didn't care about either. The momentary butterflies turned to bile that crept up his throat and into his mouth.

The train slid along its course through the center of the city, a short fat snake that wound its way down towards Virginia. Gerald liked that thought, that he was in the stomach of some enormous serpent. He felt like he was being digested. No, he felt like he was digested. He felt like shit.

Andrea was gone. She'd never been there, as it turned out, but even thinking she had been brought the real leaving into sharper relief. Four – five years? He was livid with himself for caring. She was the one who had lost something, had lost everything really. She was a school teacher for Christ's sake. What the hell was she going to do with that Georgetown apartment without his pay check? He smiled to himself grimly; Andrea couldn't even afford the fee for breaking the lease. Things not worth fighting for.

He watched not-Andrea get off at L'Enfant, and thought how real Andrea was really no different from everyone else. So full of her own ignorant certainty that she'd left, and like them, she would regret it. He opened doors, brought flowers, sang soft songs he'd written just for her. Where would a woman get that these days? A romance novel? No, he was keeping chivalry alive and the stupid bitch had left. Like the guys from the frat. Oh they talked a good game about brotherhood, but as soon as they'd graduated they hadn't had time. And they'd wanted to do such stupid, childish shit. Idiots. Everyone was so damn stupid it was sickening.

The train exploded out of the tunnel and barreled toward the bridge over the Potomac. The sky, Gerald instantly noticed, was even darker. Thick bands of lightning stitched the clouds together in black mounds. The rain hit the windows with a sound like gunfire, and the kid finally stopped playing the guitar; the rain was drowning it out. The world was a blurred wall of falling water, the dark shapes of nearby buildings looming just outside the veil of rain.

The regularly rocking of the subway gave over to erratic swaying as the wind buffeted the city. Gerald looked outside and let himself forget everyone for a minute. He'd never seen a storm this bad, not back home in Illinois or here in D.C. The lightning was like the inside of the clubs the guys always drug him out to back in school. He was glad he wasn't epileptic.

The train hit the bridge and Gerald looked down to watch the water heave. Waves ran west on the river, and he watched the barges struggle to stay afloat. There were no cars driving along the shore, no people walking. Gerald's skin prickled. The storm had shut the city down completely, except for the Metro. Nothing stopped the Metro.

The world went white and then exploded in the loudest sound Gerald had ever heard.

The train was shaking, first with the sound of an ear-shattering explosion, and then with the struggle of the breaks which screamed and sent visible sparks flying along the sides of the car. Then with a painful jolt, the train stopped.

Gerald rubbed his eyes and blinked. The dark cabin of the car swam into view, the lights all off, only the frequent flashes of the lightning revealed where the windows were. Slowly everything else came into focus.

"Rayo," the Guatemalan woman breathed, and Gerald didn't need Andrea to translate "lightning" for him.

"Damn," the kid grunted.

"Yeah," Gerald muttered.

The three people in the car were fine, and everyone else in the adjacent cars seemed fine too. At first the shifting of the train as it was hit by the wind roaring down the river startled them, but after a few

minutes they got used to it. The rain still slammed into the sides of the car, but it wasn't nearly so loud when the train wasn't going forty miles an hour. The rattling when the thunder rolled over them gave Gerald goose bumps, but as the minutes wore on, it became less frightening. After ten minutes, worry started giving way to frustration.

"What the hell," Gerald growled. He pulled out his phone and dialed 9-1-1. After a brief conversation with the operator, in which he assured her everyone he could see was safe, she told him help would be on the way. Then he called Doctor Felder's office to cancel. No one answered, and he assumed they'd gone home because of the storm.

After that, they waited. For what he didn't know and didn't really care. It was almost predictable that something like this would happen. This is what the world did to him; things never went the way they were supposed to. He let out a loud sigh and stared out over the water to watch the monuments get silhouetted by the lightning branching towards the ground.

Then the kid started plucking at the guitar. Gerald turned, incredulous, to stare at him. He was playing "Free Bird." Again.

"Is that the only song you know?" Gerald demanded.

"It was my dad's favorite," the kid said, intent on his playing.

Gerald winced and softened his tone. "Maybe try another one please?"

"He'd play it to me all the time growing up. It wasn't the first song I learned, not by a long shot. But it was the first one I played for him."

The Guatemalan woman nodded with a knowing smile. "Is good."

"Thanks," the kid looked up at her and smiled. This time more naturally, and with less of those white teeth showing it didn't look so much like a snarl. Then he turned down the guitar, his eyes wet. Something soft slipped from his mouth, but got lost in the sound of the rain.

Gerald cocked an eyebrow. "What was that?"

The Guatemalan woman lifted a hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry."

"Excuse me?" Gerald was confused.

“Don’t worry about it man,” the kid said, his voice thick. After a minute, he stopped playing and put the guitar in its case. When that was done he closed his eyes and leaned his head back in the chair.

Gerald turned back to the storm outside. He was irritated with the Guatemalan woman and the kid for leaving him out. Not that he wasn’t used to that feeling. He was always finding out about parties at the frat only when he’d ask what everyone was setting up for. Andrea was always texting someone else, and telling him it was nothing when he asked. He’d checked her phone to see when she was in the shower once, and had been ashamed to discover that’s really all it was. Just nothing; a nothing he wasn’t a part of. He took a deep breath and watched the rain as it fell into the river a hundred feet below.

A familiar desire entered his mind then. He could undo the latches of the window. He could force it out from the frame. He could climb up on his seat out the hole left by the glass, and just fall into the river. He wouldn’t pencil dive like everyone said could save you. He’d spread his arms and legs and scream like hell and then he’d die. He would not have to listen to the kid’s music. Or think about the kid not giving a shit. Or the frat guys not giving a shit. Or Andrea not giving a shit.

He’d just be dead.

“He said he miss his father,” the Guatemalan woman said softly.

Gerald blinked and turned to her.

“I think he’s father is dead,” she said sadly, looking at the kid, who seemed asleep.

Gerald hadn’t expected that. A deadbeat father sure but not a deceased one. Something fluttered in his mind, like he was trying to remember a fading dream. His own father was distant but there when Gerald needed a loan or advice on which scotches to drink. Gerald didn’t know how he would react if his father died, but flushed when he realized he certainly wouldn’t be as upset as the kid clearly was.

Gerald looked back out the window again and sighed. He imagined his father would honestly feel about the same way if he, Gerald, were to die. Sad in a distant, things-left-unsaid kind of way, but no genuine sense of loss. Just a little disappointment, an extra glass or two of scotch each night for a month, and then?

Then back to work.



“Tempting, right?” The kid’s voice was flat. Gerald whipped around to see the kid looking at him with deadened eyes.

“Yeah,” Gerald replied softly.

“You could do it,” the kid said.

Gerald flushed, “Well so could you.”

“I’m just saying,” the kid offered with a shrug. “You’ve always got that man.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you have that power.” The kid turned to look down at the river. “I mean whatever else you lose, whatever else you’ve already lost. You can always end it.”

The hope in the kid’s voice was uncomfortable. Gerald wasn’t in any place to talk someone else down.

“Why don’t you?” Gerald blurted.

He regretted it, who the hell asks that question? The Guatemalan woman gasped and glared at him in outrage. The kid just chuckled softly, and let out a long breath.

“My dad didn’t spend all his money on orthodontia just so I could grin on my way down,” he said, his voice slightly amused.

“What happened?” Gerald asked.

“I got a call, that he’d gotten real sick,” the kid kept watching the water as the wind fanned it out in waves. “I was in my first semester of school. I tried to take a greyhound back, but it got a flat in Cleveland. I hitchhiked here, but by then dad was in a coma. He’d always had a cough...”

The kid faded out for a minute, just staring out the window. Gerald guessed it had been cancer that got the kid’s father. If you didn’t get check-ups, didn’t catch it early, it could happen like that. Andrea’s mom had been an oncologist, he’d heard the stories.

“I’m sorry,” Gerald said.

“Yeah,” the kid said. “Yeah.”

Gerald mulled the conversation over for several minutes. He had no idea what to say to the kid.

The Guatemalan woman just watched the kid sadly. Gerald felt small and stupid. He put his head against the cool glass of the window and let out a soft sigh.

He woke up when the train moved forward slightly. The car smelled like an ashtray, and Gerald was only slightly surprised to see a cigarette in the kid's mouth. Gerald rubbed his aching neck, and absently checked his watch. He'd only been asleep for fifteen minutes. The kid looked better, there was some color back in his face and the wry sneer was creeping back up.

Gerald pressed his face against the glass and looked towards the last car of the train. Another train had pulled up and had just gently pressed its bumper against the back of theirs. The train started moving forward, rolling along the tracks at a careful crawl. Twenty minutes later they pulled into the Pentagon station. Two ambulance loads of EMTs stood among a small army of police as the train came to a stop. The doors were pried open, and the passengers all filed out in a numb silence.

An old black woman who worked for the Metro took Gerald's name and contact information.

"In case of litigation," she said helpfully. Gerald just nodded.

He walked outside, where a half-dozen metro buses and cabs waited to ferry passenger's home. People were filing past a streetlight and onto the buses. Gerald thought he saw the Guatemalan woman amongst them. Behind them, an awkward figure with a guitar case slipped through the halo of the streetlight, walking down the sidewalk through the rain.

Gerald jumped in the nearest cab and pointed at the kid. "We're picking him up."

The cabby raised an eyebrow and looked from the shabby figure retreating down the sidewalk to the expensively dressed Gerald.

"Just do it," Gerald sighed.

As they pulled up, Gerald rolled down the window.

"Get in," he said. The kid blinked and his mouth fell open slightly. He looked around, narrowed his eyes at Gerald, and then opened the door. He wedged the guitar between them and sat heavily in the car.

"Where to?" the cabby turned in his seat to appraise Gerald.

“Where do you live?”

“This is stupid,” the kid said, reaching for the handle.

“Don’t be an idiot, it’s pouring,” Gerald said. “Where do you live?”

The kid’s hand fell back from the handle, but he just blushed and glared at his own feet. After a second Gerald nodded and gave the cabby his address.

They rode in silence for several minutes, the cab rolling through the mostly empty streets of the district. It was the lightest traffic Gerald could remember.

“I’m not staying at your place,” the kid growled, his voice almost shaking.

“You can just wait out the storm then,” Gerald offered.

“K,” the kid muttered.

“My name is Gerald,” Gerald said, thrusting a scarred and slightly shaking hand at the kid. His face was flushed and his throat felt tight.

For a long moment the kid just looked at the hand. He was frowning, and Gerald felt like an idiot. It was a mistake, the cab, his offer, everything. This kid didn’t give a shit, and why should he? Gerald could feel himself getting nauseous.

“Matt,” the kid said finally, taking Gerald’s hand and giving a single strong shake.

“Nice to meet you,” Gerald said, smiling at the awkwardness.

“Yeah,” Matt said, returning the smile. “You too.”