

Short Story Contest

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PROMPT: You find a Polaroid camera that seems to predict the future: its pictures show what will happen exactly 5 minutes from the moment you take them.

[Untitled]

by **Kaitlyn Daniels**

“Nnnrrroooooowwwmmskrrrrtttt!” the slender train came to a rapid halt. This one was headed to St. Adams Street which was in the opposite direction I needed to go. Considering I was well ahead of schedule, I decided to partake in my favorite pastime, people-watching, before I had to head to my underpaying, overworking job in the heart of the city. I paused to breathe in the musty air of the metro station while I pinpointed the nearest bench to sit and pass the time. Families and friends, strangers, and acquaintances alike all passed by without a single glance. Everyone was always so focused on the destination and never the journey. I’ll be the first to admit that I get swept up in the day to day hustles of life; however, I always tried to squeeze in some personal time to reconnect myself to the world around me. It was times like this when I found I could best empathize with the ongoings of the city people swarming around like ants towards the metro doors. Instead of patiently waiting for those in need to exit, they rush inside without a care who they may step on, bruise, or cause to miss the exit platform altogether. I was once like these people. Matter of fact, most days I shoved past the entrance and ensured myself a seat before I ever considered the others and the places they needed to go.

My mind began to wonder about all the possible, yet convoluted reasonings for being so self-absorbed. Perhaps the slender man in the trench coat who just forcibly claimed his throne on the train is on his way to the hospital where his wife of three years is in labor. Maybe he needs that seat or else he would pass out from the excitement, or perhaps he is just a rude citizen who cares little if anything for the elderly woman squished between the plethora of others awaiting the end of the ride. Either way, his blatant disregard towards those around him shown when he blocked the path of a woman along with her wheelchair-bound child. They weren’t able to escape the closing doors of the metro in time. On they went riding, obviously flustered but

prepared to make it out at the next stop before history repeated itself.

My watch beeped twice meaning it was 6:30, indicating that I still had another half hour until my train departed. I reached into my work bag and pulled out the glossy onyx camera I purchased about a fortnight ago from one of the vintage treasure shops near my apartment. Sure the camera was not in the best of shape, but I had received a great deal and I had been looking for a project to take my mind off of work. In reality, all that it needed was a little tender loving care and a new film cartridge inserted for it to get back into shipshape. I took a test photo of a nearby child awaiting a pretzel from the nearby vendor. “Shhhhhnnirrrk,” echoed the camera and out popped the polaroid. My apparent success in repairing the camera made me smile, as I waited for the photo to fully develop. That was my least favorite thing to do when it came to photography. Waiting to see if the shot was good or not could lead to the altering of the scene; therefore, one snap of the camera is all you get sometimes. After a minute or so, the greyish tint faded and was replaced with the surrounding scenery.

My attention shifted from the polaroid and back to the little girl I had decided to be my photo's subject. She was still at the back of the line rocking back and forth on her toes to keep her busy. I held up the photo to compare the quality and likeness to the real world when I noticed something off about what was captured. In the picture, the girl was in tears but in real life, she stood with a grin from ear to ear back in the line. The image depicted a scene that I hadn't noticed before. The child had dropped her pretzel after being jolted aside by a fast-paced passerby. “She must have decided to get another one since she dropped her last,” I thought to myself. Upon further inspection, I began to see the lies enhanced by the minute details. She didn't have a mustard stain on her flowery shirt and her hair remained in tight curls unlike in the polaroid where her shirt was ruined and her hair had lost a single rosy bow that had held up one of the curls. “Huh? That's peculiar,” I muttered to myself as I glanced back up just in time to see the girl get her pretzel and take off back towards her parents. Just then, she got knocked from behind and down went the pretzel and a single red bow. Mustard splattered all over her once clean shirt and big crocodile tears erupted from her face just like the photo showed. I held up the polaroid in time to see an exact match of reality and print.

Pacing back and forth, I considered what this could mean, “Wow! How awesome is that? I could totally sell this for major bucks!” I decided to test my theory of how this camera could see the future. I quickly snapped a shot of the lady wearing a bright red brimmed hat standing by the metro entryway. I anxiously waited and shook the polaroid with anticipation. As it began to form the details, I quickly noticed the differences this time. The train had arrived in the photo unlike in real-time where it was just an empty moat housing train tracks and the occasional

rat. Instead of her casually draped against the column reading a newspaper, she was on her knees covering her mouth from letting out a spine chilling scream. That horribly distorted face made my hair stand on end and my throat tighten. I had never seen anything so terrifying and depict agony like this before. It was quite obvious what had happened based on how many were rushing forward to the train, while others held their loved ones with a tight grip, and some plainly ran away from it all. Someone fell into the tracks!

I knew immediately I had to stop this from happening. I got up and surveyed the area. No one was too close to the ledge and all kids seemed to be accounted for by their parents. "Oh! This is silly. I am just paranoid for nothing," I murmured to myself, but upon the second inspection of the photograph, the same startling scene appeared. I casually inched toward the train platform until I was parallel to the woman from the photo. She seemed to be so engrossed in whatever article she was reading in the newspaper that she didn't hear the train sound squeak from the dark tunnel. It was still a good distance away, but that meant someone would be going over the edge soon and I needed to be ready to act. I sat my bag down, shoved the photo into my pocket, and placed the camera on top of my bag. I needed to be able to move freely and have both hands to save them when the time came. I waited. An echo erupted from the tunnel that could not be ignored this time and the rails began to tremor from the oncoming train. I looked around the station once more, only to see a greasy smug thief snatching up my nearby belongings. I shouted, "Hey! Leave my stuff alone!" as I reached out to take it from him. I then noticed my mistake, as he threw the polaroid camera and it hit me square in the jaw. I reeled backward and tipped right into the tracks splitting my skull into the musty ground below.

The glare from the oncoming lights pierced my brain and the screeching metro kept advancing. All the while, down fluttered the polaroid for what seemed like an eternity as it softly floated down to meet my eyes with a kiss of death that sealed my fate.