

# Short Story Contest

October 2020

 LIBRARIES

PROMPT: You're sure that someone keeps tapping you on the shoulder. But when you turn around, there's just empty space.

[Untitled]

by **Andrea Subtirelu**

I am zoning out. I can't be zoned out right now. It's time to shine. I can't shine, though. Why did I have to stay up that late? It was so unnecessary; I could have definitely done everything that I needed to do at a time that wasn't two in the morning.

I feel a tap on my shoulder, my right shoulder, fortunately interrupt my regretful inner monologue.

"Thanks, Jenni—" I see that she's not there as I turn around. That's – odd. Hm. It's okay. I have been pretty hypersensitive to everything lately. I guess stress heightens the senses? I saw that online, anyway.

I finally shake myself out of my slumber of daydreams and pull out a hefty pile of paperwork from the drawer that my right knee is crammed into. I wish this compartment wasn't so small. I wish Jennifer was behind me, tapping her fingers on her computer so that I could ask her for help on a point that I was confused about. She's good with numbers. I, undeniably, am not. I am sure that I could obtain an infinite number of attestations to that fact from every math teacher that I have ever had, from kindergarten to my senior year of college. Ah, college. I didn't think, while I was in college, that I'd be stuck here at the same old sort of desk job that my mom complained about for the entirety of her career, that's for sure. And there I go again. Another day, another endless tangent that flows through my mind instead of the actual work that I am being paid to do. I hear the click-clack of Jennifer's heels, characteristic of her classiness, coming from the break room.

"Hey, I picked up two waters. Want one?"

"You truly are my savior," I exclaim, making some large, odd gesture with my flimsy arms. Jackson, the newest intern, side-eyes me from across the room. He won't get anywhere with that attitude. Well, actually, yes he will. How else would my boss be making six figures?

I grab the cold water from Jennifer and give her a smile before turning back around in my seat. I decide that, because she was an angel and brought me water, ice-cold and just to my liking, I won't bother her with a math question that I could procrastinate about for another – wait how long until my shift is over?

The rest of my day – well, my workday – went by relatively smoothly. By smoothly, I mean that, when I looked up at the clock periodically, ten minutes had passed instead of five.

I say goodbye to Jennifer, stand up from the rolling chair, almost hanging my computer by its charging cord in the process, and I finally leave for the day. It's Friday, and I'm supposed to be going out tonight wi-

“Yeah?” I say as I turn around to yet another tapping sensation. Nobody's there. Come to think of it, I did feel the tapping earlier in the day when I was bending down to grab something from the fridge. I assumed that it was Andrew. He does the old tapping-on-the-shoulder-thing-that-nobody-finds-funny gag every time I check out what's in the fridge, without fail. I didn't think much of it, I guess. This is weird though. There's nobody behind me. Nobody is even in my vicinity. Ok. It's just the wind, probably - said everyone in every horror movie ever before some creep jump-scares their way into the frame.

I walk out of the office, this time with a little jump in my step. I feel a familiar flight reaction swallowing my body as I speed walk from the office doors to the elevator. I remember this feeling from when I was a child rushing from the bathroom to my bed, making sure to jump into the covers without getting my feet bit off by the Bogeyman. I get to the elevator and let out a huge sigh. It's been a long day.

I take the elevator down to the ground floor, say an eye-contactless goodbye to the receptionist, and exit the building onto the sidewalk. I feel so relieved to be surrounded by people.

It's fall now. I love the fall. The wind rushes past my face, softly kissing it as it passes. I smile.

Someone taps me. My smile fades. I have a feeling that nobody is behind me, but I look anyway. I was right. What's going on? This isn't leaves falling on me or some hypersensitivity of mine to the passing wind. Someone is tapping me. With their fingers. But nobody is there. I walk a bit faster, fast enough to catch up with the next group in front of me. I keep up with them, that is until I have to turn left onto the crosswalk. I begin walking, and there it is again. There's the damn thing again.

“What?” I yell at the empty space behind me. I make eye contact with the man in the Honda to my left as I jerk my head back around. After staring at me for about two seconds, he gives me an awkward smile and looks away. I wish I could tell him that I’m not crazy, but what’s the point?

I keep walking, but the taps just keep making my journey longer. They’re almost incessant now.

I don’t know what’s going on, but I try to keep calm as I rush around the people walking in front of me. I need to get home. I need to get home now. But why? So that whatever this thing is can corner me in my own apartment? I can’t really go anywhere else. I keep going. My walk home has gone from what it is supposed to be, a simple walk, to a tiring trek. I am mentally exhausted from the confusion rattling inside of my brain. My heart is beating at a rate that it never has before.

I can see the railroad at a distance. It’s the only thing left separating me and my home. The tapping has turned into a full-fist knocking. No more weak fingers clanking against my shoulder.

Someone or something is physically hitting me. Who or what it is? – I don’t know.

I can hear a distant train. Then again, I am so distracted by the overwhelming sensation in my arm and the anxiety pounding through my brain that I cannot currently be sure of the accuracy of any of my other senses. I start running. No, I start sprinting. I can’t get away from this thing fast enough, but it also can’t get away from me. The knocking. The beating. It follows me like a parasite. I stop right in front of the railroad. I start laughing. Loudly. Nobody can hear me, anyway. Oh, that’s right. Nobody can hear me *except* for the pest that’s been banging on my shoulder for God knows how long. I turn around. I face off with the air. It is the most desperate confrontation of my life. Me against this invisible *thing*.

“What? What do you want? What? What?” I can’t stop laughing and screaming, and my head won’t stop pounding, and the thing- the thing won’t stop pummeling me. It feels desperate – this beating. It feels almost as desperate as I am right now. I turn back around to catch up with this creature that has found its way back around to my shoulder. I take a step.

I slip.

The rail joint catches my thigh with a welcoming gash. Tears are streaming from my eyes. The thing is pushing me now. Even without something to recognize it as, I can feel its anguish, it’s despair. I turn to my right, where the sensation has led me to look, and I see the steel beast rushing towards me.

I feel my body jerk itself up from the tracks, like something has yanked me by a rope. I stay there, suspended mid-air, thankful for my life.

I look down, and my jaw drops. That's me. I see me. But I am me. So who is that? I'm bleeding. But I feel fine. I'm bleeding so much. So much. I start thrusting my body back towards the ground, like a desperate breaststroke through the cold air. I bring my hands up. I can't see my arms. I look down. I can't see my feet. But I can feel everything. I look at her. The girl on the ground. I know that she's me.

But how could she be me if she's right there? I feel nothing, but she looks like she should be in excruciating pain. I can't find her arm anywhere. What's left is a blood-soaked stump. Her appendage has been ripped off like a turkey leg during Thanksgiving dinner. All that remains is a bare bone and the string-like ligaments that sprawl from her right shoulder. I try desperately to shove the running blood back into her body. What happened to me? I can hear the distant roar of the train as it continues on its unsuspecting journey, leaving a mangled mess of a girl behind.

I look into her eyes. They are blank. There is nothing in their reflection. Nothing.

I close my eyes, my nonexistent eyes, and I'm back. I'm back in the office. I'm back at my desk. But I'm also behind my desk. I want her to notice me. What an existential question that is – how do I get myself to notice me? I tap her on the shoulder. Her right shoulder.