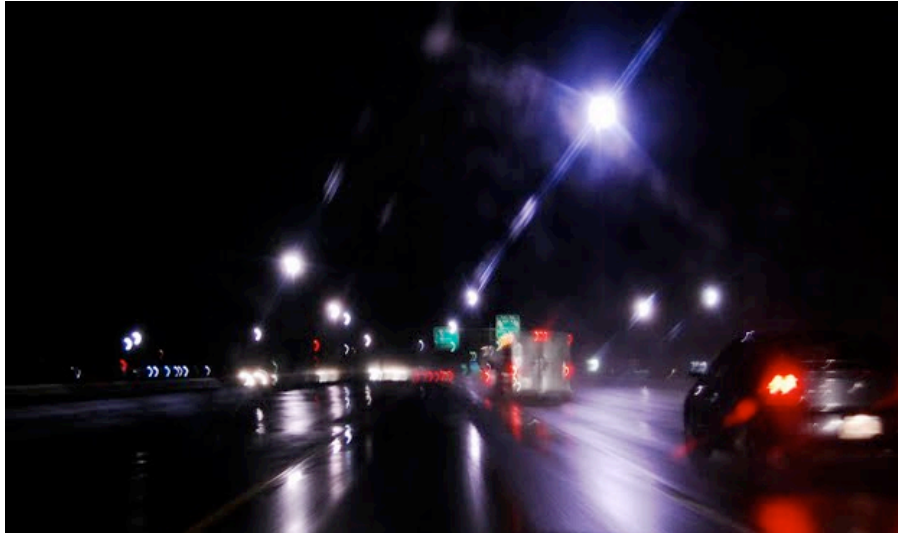


CONCUSSIONS

by JOEL SCHNEIER



Ten minutes to midnight on New Years Eve and I'm on my back staring up at the Union Station clock tower. It lurches over me at an obtuse angle, luminescent clock faces on all four sides and blue glowing letters pitch *GO BY TRAIN*. My head is a blunt throbbing pulp resting on my backpack in the bed of a pickup truck, and I watch my breath hang in the air.

An elusive murmur, a fleeting wisp here then gone, tells me I've done this all before. Bad dreams, blackouts, *déjà vu*—I'm in their hunting grounds; *but*, I *do remember* some girl is inside Union Station buying me a train ticket to somewhere else.

Begs the question, though: *How'd I get back here at this?*

The main entrance doors of the station swing open and the girl walks out: tall, shadowed, in a dark parka with fake lining, thick steal-toed boots. She missteps when her left foot pushes off the ground, almost loses balance but doesn't. Then she steps with the left again and the dance repeats across the empty parking lot to the truck.

"Got your ticket," she says. "You leave at six."

"Where am I going?" I ask.

She looks away and snickers. Throws back the hood to show her short, dark hair that rises up in rigid shining spikes. Her face could've been carved from a statue.

"Well?"

The dim lamplight in the parking lot gleams off a stud on her left nostril, her eyes flash green.

"Wouldn't it be more fun," she says, "if you didn't know until you got there?"

("Wouldn't it be more fun," Andy says, "if we didn't have to worry about all these nails?"

Blood beads down his forearm from a freckle-size puncture on the backside of his wrist. The particle mask can't hide his manic smile. He rubs his forearm against his t-shirt already blotted with a number of browned bloodstains, and picks up the sledgehammer again.

Curtis grabs Andy's wrist to look at the wound. "Is that number three or four today?" he asks.

Andy looks at me and rolls his eyes beneath the work goggles. He shakes Curtis off. "I got a tetanus shot last week, it doesn't matter."

"You're still an idiot." Curtis takes the sledgehammer out of Andy's hands and gives it to me. "Jonas can have a turn. Go clean that."

"You should clean that," she says, pointing at my head. "There's a bathroom inside you could use."

I sit up and feel a weight roll against my right temple.

"Looks that bad?" I ask. I put a hand above my right eyebrow to the gash, exposed flesh and caked blood, and it's wet and smarts to the touch.

"You got beat pretty hard," she says.

What else is new.

"Could look worse, though. You got a solid head." She sits on the edge of the tailgate and the truck barely sinks under her weight. "You remember what happened?"

I grab my lower jaw and pop it; the echo sends my head in a spin. Can't remember who this girl is and why she's here, let alone the ugly motions I got beat with.

"Yep," I say. "I always remember."

She laughs and looks at the clock tower, her sharp chin to me.

"This a routine of yours...? Wander into a party, start a fight, then ditch town...?"

I shrug and there's a crack in my left shoulder blade and I wince.

(The sledgehammer swings over my left shoulder and the head busts through the drywall. I pull it out, breathe deep, come around again and open another hole. I kick the crumbling wall with my steel-toe boots; dust and crackling plaster give way, which I then pull from the wooden frames. Curtis whoops behind me, I swing the sledgehammer sidearm style and one of the wooden planks spins out, tumbles to the floor a meter away.

Beautiful. A work of art.

I put the hammer down, Curtis brings the wheelbarrow, and we pile in debris. When it's full he walks it outside to the loading dock with the dumpster below and drops the mess in. I grab the bolt-cutters and go at the metal wiring.

Andy comes back from the bathroom and sees the sledgehammer free. He starts in a run while whooping, grabs the hammer, lifts it above his head, hurls into fresh drywall. He cackles and cracks against the wall again. Plaster spits everywhere.

Curtis returns with the wheelbarrow, yells, "Andy, stop being so fucking reckless!")

"Pretty fucking reckless," she says, pulls a pack of smokes from the front pocket of her parka.

"Yep, I've heard that before."

She shakes the pack and removes two cigarettes, offers one to me that I take and put behind my ear. She laughs and lights up.

"Saving it for later," I assure her.

She breathes in and the cherry burns hot-orange. "I don't judge."

I pick up my train ticket and hold it between my bloodied fingers, strain to focus on the writing, all washing blurs, scrawling up and down. Might as well be ancient hieroglyphs.

"Should I go to the hospital?"

She exhales from her cigarette. "I wouldn't," she says. "They probably called the fuzz, who'd have called the ERs."

I nod. "Good thinking," I tell her. "I don't want to spend another New Year's Eve in a hospital, anyways."

She laughs again. I notice a few splotches of dried blood on her jeans, but can't tell how fresh it is.

"Is that my blood?" I ask, pointing to the spots.

She looks down at her denims, brushes at the dots of blood with her hands, holds it to the light from the lamppost.

"I think so," she says.

"How'd my blood get there?"

“You fell on me,” she says, wryly, “after the big guy *smashed* a bat over your skull.”

(“We better stop smashing walls before I get a nail in my skull,” Andy says. “It’s late and New Year’s Eve anyways. It’s quittin’ time boys!”)

Curtis nods and wipes dust out of his hair. “Sounds good. I need a shower before we go out.”

I’m on the ladder, pulling down drop-ceiling panels. They hang in place by thin metal channels that make a grid just below the ventilation ducts. Lightweight rectangles that I punch upward, break them out of place from the channels. They fall to the ground in pieces, often hitting my head and back.

“Jonas!” Andy yells. “You coming out with us tonight?”

I nod.

“Hell yeah!” Curtis shouts. “Let’s get the devil outta here!”

I climb down the ladder and pick up the broken ceiling panels and toss them in the dumpster beneath the loading dock. Andy steps behind me, his goggles and particle mask removed.

“I dare you to jump in,” he challenges me. His eyes are wide, menacing. Keeps his lips pursed shut.

I look in the dumpster at the mangle of plaster, ceiling panels, two-by-fours with crooked nails sticking out, jagged steel rods, and other debris.

Curtis laughs as he closes the back door and locks it with a key. “We could tell Tom it was an accident. He’d probably pay you not to sue.”

I turn, motion to jump, but Andy grabs me by the shoulder and holds me back.

“Dude, no fucking way!”

“We ain’t taking you to the hospital tonight,” Curtis says. “Not gonna ruin New Year’s for us.”)

“Sorry to ruin New Year’s for you,” I say, an empty husk of words I’ve said millions of times before. Her green eyes are shadowed with thick eyeliner and freckles around the stud on her nostril.

“Didn’t ruin a thing,” she says. “That place was dead anyhow.” The cherry of her cigarette sears red.

I drop from the pickup onto the blacktop, walk a few steps, feel my body: left knee is tight, won’t bend all the way. Every breath hurts like being stuck in the sternum. Shoulder blade snaps with every arm-swing. My head feels swollen large, off-kilter, my eyes pang when I stare at the lights. I keep my neck crooked toward the ground.

“You know,” she says, “I used to work as an EMT. I’ve seen a lot of concussions and head trauma.”

Must be why she gave me a ride. I lean against the body of the pickup. Her pickup. It’s dark red, mid-nineties body with dents and scrapes against the passenger-side. A Silverado, maybe. The circle’s closed in on me again. Ironic, I guess.

“How do I rank in what you’ve seen?” I ask.

She takes a final lungful from her cigarette, down to the filter.

“Middle of the road,” she suggests. Exhales sharply, shoots two columns of smoke from her nostrils that unfurl and spread, curling into the dark air above.

“I bet you’ve seen some pretty sick stuff.”

“All kinds of shit.” She flicks away her cigarette, it spins through the dark and the cherry leaves a dizzying orange trail that scatters in sparks over the asphalt.

She steps in front of me and looks me in the eye. Her face is hard, sharp; but through the shadows I see she’s amused. She’s having fun.

“You don’t remember a thing, do you,” she says.

“You won’t remember a thing about tonight,” Andy says. He turns the ignition and his old Silverado growls to life. He pats the dashboard and coos, “Good girl.”

I’m in the passenger seat, Curtis in the middle. The radio clock reads 6:55pm. It’s dark but the sky is clear with a waning moon rising in the southeast. There are still some patches of blackened snow against the curbs and medians along the road. Andy slams his foot on the accelerator and peels out from the parking lot.

“If we start at noon tomorrow we’ll be able to finish the rest,” Curtis says. “Tom still needs the place completely gutted by the third.”

Andy turns on the radio and skips the dial around from music to static to louder static, finally rests on “Machine Head” by Bush. He speeds around car after car, swerves in and out of lanes with quick jerks.

“Make a left at the next light,” Curtis yells over the radio.

“I know where to go,” Andy snaps, slaps Curtis in the face cackling.

Red traffic lights shine a couple hundred yards ahead at the coming intersection. The left-turn lane leads to the highway on-ramp that shoots across town to Andy and Curtis’ apartment.

“Where are we going tonight?” I ask, like it matters.

“Some stupid party,” Andy says. “Should be lots of tail, though. Gonna get fucked up then fuck!” He pulls a cigarette from behind his ear

and lights it, keeping one hand on the steering wheel. I roll down the passenger-side window.

Andy slows for the light and enters the left-turn lane. Cars are stopped at the opposing light from the oncoming lane, and a big van is approaching. The headlights blind me to everything but the glowing contours and shadows of the cars.

The left-turn signal goes green, Andy lets off the brake and the truck rolls into the intersection to make the turn. I look down from the green arrow and see blinding headlights of that van already in the intersection, not stopping, horn blaring, Andy screaming “FUCK FUCK FUCK—

—SLAMS into us hard, quick, the sledgehammer into drywall and both vehicles dance, slide across a forever distance in zero time flat and come to rest bludgeoned on the median.

My breath is ripped from me.

I open my eyes.

Passenger-side door is crunched inward, glass pebbles spread over my lap, my hands, the dash, the floor. The windshield is a spider-web jagged and violent.

Smoke slithers from beneath the hood, the engine still clicking.

I look to my left.

Andy is out of the car, stumbling into the tranquil intersection clutching at his head with one hand, waving the other in fury. His blood is spread over the steering wheel.

My breath trickles back to me.

I unbuckle, I want out.

Curtis is dazed, moves slow to get his seatbelt off, has trouble with the release, his fingers cut and bleeding, dribblets of glass glued to his skin.

“Get out of the car,” I tell him.

He looks at me, back to the buckle, mumbles something that blends into the gurgling death rattle spit from the engine.

“The light was green!” someone shouts from outside.

“No no no, no fucking way!” Andy goes psychotic screaming. “We had the green arrow!”

“Curtis, get out!” I yell.

“Man, I had the light. You’re messed up, you don’t know what happened!”

“I FUCKING KNOW WHAT HAPPENED!”

Somehow I’m laughing and I tell her, “Yeah, I’ve no idea what happened.”

I move away from her but she keeps in step and bends to meet my eyes. She’s locked in and refuses surrender.

“What’s your name?” she demands.

I scoff, hesitate. “Jonas.”

“What day is today?”

Look up at the clock tower. “New Year’s.”

“Where are you?” She grabs my chin to keep me looking at her.

I writhe loose and slam backward into the body of the truck.

“What does it matter?”

“It matters.”

It *never* matters.

“Portland.”

(The EMT is dressed in dark blue with a fireman’s helmet and points a small flashlight into my eye. “Where are you?” he asks.

“Staunton.” I say.

“Can you walk of your own power?”

“Sure,” I say, feeling bits of glass in my boots.

Curtis is already tied down to a stretcher. Andy is pushing off EMTs. His eyes are blood-red and manic, bawling deranged and primeval. The truck is totaled: engine fluids bathe the median, the driver-side wheel spins freely off the ground, the passenger-side door I was sitting next to took the brunt of impact—completely taced inward.)

On the asphalt, holding myself up with an arm, chest sore. Every breath stings and the sight of this girl pacing sends my stomach into spins.

“I don’t know what the fight was about, but I can tell you what I saw,” she says, her boots clack against the blacktop.

I don’t care what happened. Never do.

“You showed up at the party a couple hours ago. No one knew who you were, but it’s a big house, News Years, lots of people, so who cared...”

Telling a story I’ve heard before, told before, played before. Means nothing; just an act that sells.

“Then the fight: I was in the backyard when the big guy shoved you out of the house. He took some swings to your back and stomach with a baseball bat. Then your head.”

My head, always my head. I don’t count anymore, it’s withstood so much, made of god-knows-what, that I cloud with whatever I can get a handful of.

“You went flat to the ground. I know a concussion when I see one, so I got the guy to stop. I checked you out, got you talking. You said you needed to leave town. And here we are.”

Here I am. Back here at this.

“Any of that sound familiar?”

“Yeah, that sounds familiar,” I say, lying.

Now she’s laughing. Paces back to stand over me again.

“What’s my name?” she asks.

Busted. The clock face is almost at midnight, tells me *GO BY TRAIN*, but I still got several hours more to wait.

“Umm... nope, sorry, I don’t remember...”

Laughs again. “I never told you my name.”

“Just another test, huh?”

She smiles, her green eyes radiate in the lamplight, and the stud in her nostril catches the glow from the clock tower.

“Just another test,” she confirms.

(“We need to do another test,” the doctor says. Her brown hair slips over her pail forehead. The cracks in her lips have been chewed on. Speckles of blood dot the breast pocket on her white coat.

The bed is stiff and the blankets over me are coarse. There’s a needle stuck sideways in the back of my right hand, planted into a vein, in case they need to shoot me up with some fluid or other.

“How’re you doing?” she asks.

I nod.

“You’re lucky your window was down, you know...” Her face is stoic, and she’s not even looking at me. “Could’ve been much worse.”

She lifts my hands and turns over my fingers; with alcohol and swathe she scrapes out the dried blood.

“Want anything for the pain?”

Stupid question.)

“You look like you’re in a lot of pain,” she says. “Maybe I *should* bring you to the hospital...”

I should let her. Another fall, another band-aid.

“Let them pump you full of anti-nausea meds and painkillers and baby you...”

Just the type of suckers I love, can’t get enough of.

“But,” she says with a malicious glee, “that’s what you *want*, isn’t it? I bet the ERs in town already know you, already got print-outs with your pretty-boy face in black and white.”

She looks at me with those eyes and smug grin like she has me pegged against the wall.

“So, what happened to you? What’s your sob story?”

I get to my knees.

“You’re too young, too cleaned-up for some cracked-out drifter, for that *not-all-who-wander-are-lost* bullshit.”

“Bring me to a hospital, or leave me alone,” I tell her. Every vein in my head is throbbing, resonating down the back of my neck.

“Or,” she says, “I can call the fuzz on your drunk ass.”

“You’re not a narc.”

“But *I am bored* with you.”

I stand to my feet, my head tilted downward, staring at her boots, unwilling and unable to look her in the eyes without a pounding headache that could pull me from my feet yet again.

“So tell me: where are you going?” she asks.

(“Where are you going?” Curtis asks, lying in the bed of his hospital room while I hover in the threshold. His eyes strain to look at me, his head crooked upward by a pillow. Skin pail, razed with cuts from glass, he breathes in coarse stutters.

“You should call Tom... tell him we might be in late tomorrow...”

I laugh, or maybe cough, feeling bold, deranged. “Don’t worry about it,” I tell Curtis. “There’s nothing to worry about.”)

“What’s the worry?” she asks. “Spend the night in the drunk tank. It’s New Years, you won’t be alone.”

Time to go. Don’t know who she is or what kind of shit she’s trying to pull but it’s my time to go, get away from her, from this town, leave this sorry trenchant footstep behind.

I grab hold of the truck and pull myself around to the bed. My backpack, my ticket. Run.

(The doctor yells at me from down the hall. She starts running with her sneakers making staccato squeaks on the tile floor, pushing her way between nurses and carts and beds blocking her path along the shining, sterile white hallway.

My shoulder leans into the Emergency Exit door, bottle of pills in my ripped and bloodied pockets.)

I’m running through the parking lot toward the train station, my head down, backpack swinging, feet scuffling, head hammering, that girl laughing—

—DONG DONG GONG-DONG—

—the clock tower strikes midnight, erupts in horrible chorus—
—DONG DONG DONG-GONG—
“Happy New Years!” she bellows. “Get well soooooon!”

(The Emergency Exit alarm goes off, a high-pitched RRRREEEEEEEE tremors in my head, rattles my eardrums. I’m pulled down the stairwell; hands catch the railing, down into the pit.)

“WHERE ARE YOU RUNNING TO?!” she yells.

Not running. Trying to live but just spinning in circles.

Through the doors, the train station is dim and empty. The ticket booth to the far end is lit and a toad of a man sits behind the counter, staring at nothing.

(The stairwell dumps into a back dock with dumpsters and an ambulance idling, the lights still flashing. Each whirl of the red pulses in my eyes.

“Son, you shouldn’t be out here,” says an EMT, cigarette in his mouth, silhouetted by the red spinning sirens.

I brush past, down the stairs of the dock and past the ambulance.

“WHERE ARE YOU RUNNING TO?!” he yells.)

Restroom to the right, I lean my shoulder into the door, the brightness stings my eyes, and there I am in the mirror...

Hands clamped against the porcelain sink, elbows locked, crusted blood on both sides of my head, eyes yellow caverns, hair wild, skin hard and cracked, breathing heavy and staggered; trepid.

There are times I’ve caught glimpses of what I’m really doing to myself—I don’t want this to be one of them. But it’s the only act that feels the least bit right. Not because it is, but because it’s what I know. Memory is speckled, haggard, dim—*fucking missing*, even.

But I know this:

Ticket reads 6am to Seattle. Six hours to wait, a few hours to ride, another 365 days for the clock to strike me by the head yet again.