

Cardiac Arrest

Advertising billboards sweep by outside the train, but you have tunnel vision for the other passengers. It's late. You've chosen a seat equidistant from the young woman with the ripped fishnets and the shaggy man with the bruised eyes and twitching hands. You hug the bulky box to your chest. You've invested so much.

Yours is the next stop. The train slows with extra screech and whine, because of the wet. Jolts to a halt. The doors don't open. You glance around, holding the box like it's a scared child. It's heavy. The shaggy man is gone. You don't remember him getting off.

The doors hiss apart and you hurry onto the concourse. The station's lights glimmer off puddles. You catch your reflection in the glass of the network map. In a moment of mayhem and panic you see blood, but it is just the stain of the rain, dark on your jacket.

The back roads are slick and empty. A few midnight cars ghost by in the distance, watchtower headlights that disappear with a turn. You come to your own street. Ahead, dark hulks are parked under the hooded streetlights. Behind—a noise. A shape darts, low and fast. Skitters up a nearby tree. You put your head down and press forward.

There's a man. In the alley, cigarette in hand, his face cleaved by shadow. He's watching you.

You cross the road. Your feet quicken, find yourself running. A ruptured section of path catches a foot and the box jumps in your grasp. Your heart is a pulsating grenade as you try to hold on to the twisting, falling cube, your fevered claws snatching at the damp cardboard.

In vain. The box hits the ground with a moist thump. You cringe, dismay in every sparking nerve. Laughter echoes down the empty street from behind you. You curse the Premier, or the mayor, or whoever is responsible for maintenance. That could have cost you everything.

You pick up your box, hurry the last few steps to your house. The click of the deadbolt tongue is a wave of relief. You breathe. The hunger that had been suppressed by anxiety and adrenalin now rears like a wave. You place the box on your kitchen bench, pull back the soggy flaps. Remove the four round, plastic bag-wrapped weights from inside.

You are ravenous. And impatient. There's no time to cook. You extract a steak knife and fork from the drawer and a jar of mayonnaise from the cupboard. Select the smallest package—the size of a fennel—peel away the sticky plastic bags.

The smell of meat and iron erupts like a perfumed cloud. Plump red flesh. Ventricles like rigatoni oozing merlot.

You wish it was still beating. Maybe next time.