

Please enjoy this excerpt of a work-in-progress I am writing in novel form, “Shrink”. It follows the conflicted internal journey of a middle-aged new widow who decides to sell her late husband’s home in Akron, Ohio, leave her small counseling practice, and try her hand at a brand new life in the South/Midwest in the middle of the Depression.

-M.L. Crider

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[Note: The following will be chopped up and blended to bits... but at this time, I let the pen ramble on in hope of getting some organic pieces from which to be able to use:]

"SHRINK" – by M.L. Crider ® WGA March 2012 [an excerpt]

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(A southbound train cafe car - late summer, 1936)

[Mid-scene continuous:]

His chuckling pink cheeks protruded from his gentle face like twin glossed sugarplums. When he smiled, they spun for the spotlight like stuck pinwheels that his happy lunch’s highball had hung on a poker party’s hallway hat rack.

It was just shy of noon. Bill Ruxby slid the south side of the cafe car's heavy glass door open and shut it behind him, sealing the twice-breathed air zipped back up in its own unbothered vacuum. The tiny veins of rosacea that surged from his broad stable face would have to keep his secret for now. There was something fetching about his smile--it bubbled up from the inside and calmed her. The graceful gent had just rescued her tiny-wired eyeglasses from the cafe car’s plush crimson carpet, clearing them of the fatal foot traffic into the safe palm of her hand. His polite accidental touch, the warmth of his unassuming smile, the twinkle that oozed out of those deep-set milk chocolate eyes -- it all enraptured her. His presence buzzed all over and around her skin as if the air were full of fairies beamed down by the sun.

The kind stranger was now gone.

The café car walls were lined with taut gathered curtains. They were placed too strategically, like some obligatory gift tied up too perfectly in strident yellow ribbon that tried to feign a happiness that had slightly exceeded its sender's intentions. Simone missed her living room on Cherry Street with George in Akron where they would light kerosene lamps to read and cook by. When the bank account was bleak during some winters that followed the war, they had even found smitten diversion in what became a pleasurable pastime of putting on the very thickest socks they could find and partaking of a humble picnic right on that living room floor rug where they would share sliced hard salami and Jarlsberg cheese with china demitasse coffee cups brimming with sips of brandy that his Aunt Sue had bequeathed to them at their wedding.

The train owner's busy wife must have seen to it that the latest hippety-do interior designer would be employed who would attempt to achieve the feeling of a persnickety aunt's formal living room...

*The kind of aunt who smiled lightly while she would coerce little Simone's finger and thumb to extract exactly one treat from her crystal candy dish by way of her half-sincere shooing hand, while looming over in boring church pumps on her white vacuum-streaked carpet with her black poodle hiccupping away in colicky spasms of salutatory chirps. Matching framed photos of unimportant frozen birds annoyed the weighed wall behind her proud posture making Simone want to offer the poodle or her well-meaning aunt some kind of serious sedative from her highest hidden cupboard... with an I.V. She knew full well that Aunt Claudine must have stocked some kind of relaxation serum, but she was just twelve, so she unwrapped and sucked the single stupid candy instead.*

Mere candy did not deserve a crystal bowl, church pumps, or a poodle. The twitchy dining car didn't deserve to occupy Simone's tender yearning for her dead husband now either. This trial lunch simply didn't deserve the debonair curtains, the bowtie, and the automatic napkins—all folded, placed, installed, or inserted by machines, not humans. The ambiance deserved a serious sedative from her aunt's hidden cupboard as well. Now that she wasn't twelve anymore, but into the ripe autumn years of her life, she deemed the fantasy of somehow sedating the curtains with a straight scotch through an I.V. to be fitting her fancy at this point in her reality.

Simone folded her glasses in her hands. She breathed in and held it... then blew it out

short and hard, frustrated. She felt insecure. A scotch sounded right up her alley. She ruminated,

*Why had her cheeks blushed during such simple exchange?  
...Oh, snap! the echo of disdain rolled over again.*

She would never have betrayed her dear George when he was alive--not even with such happenstance in the way of a simple exchange of pleasantries with another man. The mere *thought* of opening that door in one's mind was surely for other women, not for Simone. Did George's mere physical death suddenly grant an approving innocence in the way of permission for such? What about that? Under the blotted porcelain powder that hid her schoolgirl timber, the heat of her excitement was trapped; it had flooded up like a red fire hydrant that burst when the kink was released from its hose while in the momentary presence of Mr. Bill Ruxby. They did not blush gently like a fountain of vintage roses as she had most *wished* that he could have witnessed in her face instead. She renounced her coquettish unveiling to herself.

*Why such a fit of to-do over such modest exchange?  
What had just happened?*

Simone's senses faded and landed her on the dining car barstool again, the still eye of lunch's bustling hurricane.

She had nibbled the first bite of obsession. She couldn't shake it.

She attempted reconciliation with herself, clearing her throat as her nose twitched. Dealings with men after George's passing were not something she had previously entertained, nor had she dared *think* to account for. The seed was planted and it kept nudging her in unfair concentric circles....

That man's warmth melted her qualms in an accidental instant; his unselfish gesture of going to the trouble of retrieving her eyeglasses from for her safekeeping was enough to make breathe again. Deeply. He glowed somehow.

*Ah-hem, hem.*

She cleared her throat trying to resume a sense of poise. She glanced at the young bar hand, and his nonchalant perkiness and his smile that held only a few years.

Simone's chin returned to her plate. Crumbs of table water crackers and a half-dried smear of stone ground mustard slept back at her. Her plate was her date. It looked as defeated as she felt, projecting her weariness like a looking glass. It certainly didn't deserve the fancy leather black book that would encase the haughty bill that she would soon receive from the sweet chap with the virginal bowtie and the parted hair, in exchange for her brave new attempt at placing herself smack-dab in the middle of all of this strangeness... the bustle, this rhythm of *The Living* again.

The dank air had become a thick blanket as far as tolerable café car weather went. It confessed of cheap floor-cleaning vinegar and old baked fruit, like the newly hired caboose-of-the-night-staff had forgotten to secure the tired contents of the entire pie twirler back into the icebox from the shift or two before. It didn't much matter which shift. How does one hide the scent of vinegar? The squirrels jumped on the wheel again...

*Why did my daft cheeks have to reveal the simple tiny fluster that rose up through my face while in Bill Ruxby's presence after almost touching his hand? My lands, what must he think? Why should it matter to me? In his mind it was probably inconsequential and forgotten by now. Why did the kind Bill Ruxby have to retire so early from the café car? After all, he couldn't exit to Kansas City before anyone else.*

The train café car was eternally caffeinated, a frenzy of a twenty-four hour bonding place for commonality of arbitrary strangers that never affords ample time to be cleaned just enough to be able to catch up with ridding of the most recent scent of what the last shift's chef had prepared. It reminded her of her financial record logging habits when she had worked as a typist for the *Akron Beacon Journal* and tried to be a good wife at the same time while George was commuting eighty miles a day back and forth to Cleveland twice a week as a *Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company* acquisitions representative for the newly acquired *Kelly-Springfield Tire* office there. The deposits Simone and George had contributed to their busy checking till always seemed to ring in just shy of the monthly debits, but they always made it, somehow.

Hearty green shrubs and scores of distant anonymous pine trees fanned out fast through the windows beyond the boring curtains like cards shuffling in a savvy dealer's hand that didn't stop their cooling. The monotony hypnotized her

discomfort.

*Some things don't get a reprieve,* she thought.

The coffee came with a small spoon and cream. The cute bowtie set the black checkbook next to it. Suddenly, she needed to adjust her undergarments beneath her skirt where the heat and her pantyhose had met for too long, so she crossed her legs the other way instead. She swished them up and down back on themselves and placed her chin on her hand held up by her elbow to displace any southern attention back up to the safer north where her face rested.

*The Broadway Limited* all-sleeper train with the plush carpets, duplex roomettes, and drawing rooms would be braking hard and fast on its tracks for all of them at the very same time, no matter who they were, how they felt, or where it was that they were each gallivanting off to when the train station would have them disperse like a flutter of jolted birds from their morning branch. Tomorrow.

Simone swiveled her red bar counter stool from the step it was planted in above just enough to peer down and across at the whole room. The tops of worn brown corduroy hats swayed as necks shifted, freckling the stuffed air, hiding the faces that donned them as they speared into their meat chunks, like suckling worms that don't look up when sliding their smarmy blind sweat all over and around each other, spiraling over their fresh prey with no brain or eyes in tact to understand exactly how dumb they look, or to what degree their existence looks so embarrassingly small.

Ordinary businessmen surrounded her, bursting the café car's seams just like their pants, brushing gruff elbows creating friction when slicing into their thick slabs of meat in the stuffed sardine tin that was the train's café car. The cafe car was packed with their dusty lunchtime suits with the missing buttons--so vividly due to having shoved unwanted ripples into the trusty fabric that proffered no hiding places, then cinching it all up with a belt—for years.

They seemed pregnant with starched pithy secrets.

Simone's breath became shortened. The toxic dump of people noise began to overwhelm her senses. A spinning of her focus made her lungs try to gulp the oxygen-less air in, down past her skirt waist. It was useless. She pressed her eyelids

down to shut them hard in order to still the matter . . .

*The normal living noises, the thoughtless clanking and violent pushing of busy silverware that seasawed in and out of hurried elbows—the rubbing, whittling, and ravaging of dead meat; the irreverent shameless mouths’ that were pulling forks out too hard and fast without thought, filing down certain front teeth with each scrape sculpting their future elderly smiles down to little boy stubs, the switching of utensils through unsettled hands over a few sporadic fake laughs that camouflaged the grunts that followed, the clearing of neglected mucous that had built up in much more than their throats over time—all of this crass... sad... disturbance made Simone massage her tongue protectively, sucking around her front teeth to somehow reconcile the high-pitched sounds, the utter irreverence that shocked her nerves and burdened her shaken sensibilities. It was as if she had not slept in days, years, but in reality, it was because she had been experiencing this life in a finer realm, a more keenly perceptive place, having enjoyed the deep delight of living with and loving her dearest George... so implicitly.*

Hibernations do come to an end. The sunlight is supposed to come out.

The cacophony of this everyday-normal-people-screech haloed around her in a lucid bubble and broke her heart some more. She peered back into her used plate. Then, a strange thing happened. The funneling calmed to a stop, a cessation that was as stark as if the moon's gravity had instantly withdrawn from pulling at its waves that took it kindly for granted day in and day out. A realization landed all of her thoughts into one. It sucked all of her back onto her bar stool swivel chair where her body was still managing to own the verve to be able to remain sitting while enduring all of this heckle. Her heart merged into the rest of her again. Her butt felt heavier on the seat somehow. She sat like a stone for what felt like a long spell, but was unaware of the time. Epiphanies are gifting like that. Still in the eye of this swirling donut, Simone was utterly invisible to herself and to them: She was alone.

\*\*\*[INCORPORATE B-EDIT FROM HERE FORWARD - COPY FB RED 39]\*\*\*  
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Simone had trusted that a noisy café car at high noon might be a safe way to go about mixing back in to feeling a part of this life and its come-rain-or-shine insensitive time again. It did not do this. The businessmen's clocks were ticking much faster than her

dulled heart was ready to chime with in some kind of old regular harmony that she used to not even notice. Even the wall clock's elongated second-hand stretched out in vain like a miscellaneous open-mouthed winking toothpaste model with a glint of whiteness teasing in a clean spun circle on her front tooth like Simone had seen in the magazines. The long black hand's slender pointedness extended its sleek fishnet-ted toe like some Rockette's sultry leg pretending to kick this strange day forward in far too punctilious a precision, boasting, punching past every next ding-bat dumb dot.

Was this the life she was embarking upon with such fragility? Would she have to adapt her tastes for sight and sound so drastically, so devoid of all of her attuned senses, in order to be able to swim in this crowded deep lake like everyone else was doing with seeming nonchalance and loud silverware? The sad savage nature of these so-called normal people's relentless disenchanting habits had built up and splattered all too forcibly in some kind of unnecessary array of disorganized mock-cackle in her brain. Her mind absorbed every sound so poignantly; she couldn't keep up with disguising her rawness with a blank face for a mere moment more.

Her lungs were breathing in an insidious unhealthy soup. It encroached upon her slowly—a thick pervading liquid, suffocating her needed oxygen and absolutely any prior magic that her dreams had tried so hard to conjure up each new morning with her coffee mug and the backyard birds' company after her George's passing. The clatter of The Living had completely robbed last night's peace from her force-fed mind, etching dissonance where humble quiet had lived just an hour or so ago.

Simone had to stand up. Her body implored it. She stood to reach for a gulp of cool air out up and over the murky lake of hats. She knew all too well from the years of nurturing her good practice in Akron that certain mental institutions and their glassy grassy-green yards were chock full of absolutely dear and sensitive people that she had known personally and had visited when they were sipping grapefruit juice in roomy wooden lawn chairs in their morning cotton robes in order to allay this very kind of dissonance. She would listen with her kind non-judgmental face while marking their progress back then. Right now, her hands were shaking so badly, the thought of witnessing anything more was excruciating and simply too far away to be of aid to her. Should she check herself into one? Just for a few days, maybe? She simply would not, could not... take... a single... other disturbance more. The stones were about to fall down to rubble off the hill of her mind after the earthquake that was volcanically

bubbling up from her gut.

Last night's reverie of her sweet George had been so cheaply traded. The fullness of the empty petty noises had morphed it into some small slice of an unwarranted remnant of its original size. A mere modicum of her bashful young confidence that her dream had strove to muster in order for her to be able to even sit in the loud café car had been quashed out now by the militant marching boots of the bearish seething lunch parade and their hot elbows and lying empty buttonholes—with the cinched belts.

That would be quite well enough now, she decided. Simone signed her check, clutched her zipped purse, and made it to the exit where Bill Ruxby had left with such seeming ease. The Café Car Corduroy Hat Boys and their bursting suits had unwittingly pounced out her need for any fledgling cigarette that may now offer no more promise of perfuming her mind back down to sorts. Any residue of romance that had lingered from her dream of George was now robbed, erased so entirely that she feared that the cigarette she had wanted to light up in order to achieve some sense of reprieve would not even have a chance to communicate its usual wafts of exchanged kindness with her under this dirty...thoughtless... clamoring weight. She had gotten a fair taste of *The Living* again. She wasn't ready.

The breezeway with the forgotten swinging chains was a scary place—probably due to mere size warp, and her newly adopted shallow lung capacity. The tracks whooshed louder than all of the train café car voices put together, but in a more tolerable way. White noise does comfort, no matter the volume. It seemed that lighting a cigarette in the midst of this racket of ghosts that possessed the chains may prove to only exacerbate the noise from the café car by suddenly being too loud themselves—a different kind of voiceless quiet. The wind pushed her skirt up. She stepped over the metal plate that connected the café car to the roomette sleeping car and opened the glass door, grateful to close it tightly behind her.

Death can freeze a person midday.

Surely high noon was a safe hour to hobnob and try her hand at this again. Surely she could get a grip and the volume knobs in her head could be turned after moderately desensitized if she could only endure the next boisterous public place, and then



maybe...another.

The café car kept streaking down its slick solid tracks, at its acceptable normal speed. It was indifferent to her pangs of justified angst, just as the businessmen with the lying buttonholes were. She was the smoke and its smolder hadn't had a chance to be yet. This cage was no place for such vulnerability that seemed to have been sharpened like too many unneeded test pencils.

She would have to wait. Simone opened her roomette door and gathered her sprawled out books and night things from her bottom bunk, trying to quell her anxiety by focusing on breathing in each breath and then letting it go until doing it all over again. The Broadway Limited would slow down to arrive at the busy station at dawn. The fields of Kansas City air weren't far from her now.

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An excerpt of the train café car scene from novel/screenplay "SHRINK"

-by Melissa Crider ® WGA March 2012