

The Young Conductors

Miriam Robern

“Who’d win in a fight: Beyoncé or Colonel Sanders?”

My heart skipped a beat. Those words. I had been waiting, listening, for those words for three days. My conductor was here. My head snapped up from the record bin to take in my savior, and I gasped. Something must have been wrong.

The person who’d given the pass phrase stood one aisle over, perusing the jazz section. She was small, slight, and pale. Dressed in a baby blue sweater with a giant cat’s head stitched across the front. Comfy jeans. Older than me, but only just. Perhaps sixteen?

“I’m... I’m sorry, what?” I stammered, slowly lowering the album in my hand.

The girl flashed me a knowing smile. “Let’s go get coffee, shall we?”

“Are you... sure?” I asked uncertainly.

She lifted an eyebrow. “This is your one chance, Dylan. You wanna blow this joint or not?” Her entire affect was unselfconsciously flirty, as if she’d forgotten that she’d dressed like her grandma this morning. But she’d opened with the pass phrase of a conductor, or at least I thought she had. Had I imagined it?

I had a sudden attack of common sense. If coffee with a strange girl was the price of finding out, I was all in. “Yeah, let’s go.”

We left the second-hand music shop and headed across the street to the mall. “You can call me T,” she told me in the crosswalk. “Like the letter.”

“Your name is T?”

“No, my name is something that starts with T,” she told me with a look edged with exasperation. “But I go by T.”

“Oh, that’s... kind of cool,” I said, knowing I sounded stupid. I tried to figure out how to ask what I wanted to know. I couldn’t say what we were doing, I had to couch it in this cloak-and-dagger always-deniable language. “How long have you been... doing this?”

She gave me an amused look. “Going for coffee? Ever since I got my first allowance, feels like.” She held the door open and we stepped inside.

The coffee place was attached to the mall but faced outside, trying to span both worlds. Conversation, squealing coffee machines, and baristas calling out orders filled the space, along with customers. The place was packed. T and I got into line.

“Good afternoon, officers,” T smiled to the men behind us. Out of the corner of my eye I could see blue uniform shirts and tooled black leather utility belts. Police.

My blood turned into ice water. Had we been caught already? I tried to stop myself from trembling.

“Afternoon,” a familiar voice answered. “Oh hey, Dylan.”

I turned. “Oh. Good afternoon, Frank.” One of the officers was Frank Merchant, a friend of my parents’. “How are you?”

“Better as soon as I get my coffee,” he answered with a smile. “Who’s your friend?”

“Um. This is T,” I said, as casually as I could manage. “Like the letter. T, this is Frank.” Frank’s partner seemed to be intent on the menu, and I didn’t know him anyway. “Friend of the family.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Frank,” T said, offering her hand. “Here to fuel up for patrol?”

Frank laughed. “Yeah. You guys go to school together?”

“Nope,” T answered with what appeared to be a genuinely carefree smile. “Oh, our turn, Dylan.” And then she stepped up to the register to order.

After our order was placed, T spotted an empty table on the far side of the store and we hustled over to claim it. She maneuvered herself into the seat facing the registers, which put my back to them. As she settled, she told me sternly, “Do not turn around.” Then she pasted on that smile of hers. “I’ll watch for our orders coming up.”

She then proceeded to describe for me the last season of some television show I’d never heard of, animatedly talking about characters and surprise reveals. As the story got increasingly convoluted and ridiculous, I suspected she was making it up as she went along. She capped it off with, “Oh, there’s our drinks,” and jumped up to go fetch them.

“I hope you’re not too attached to this latte,” she told me as she plopped it in front of me and sat down. “You’re not going to drink most of it.”

I leaned forward slightly. “Why... why’s that?”

“Take three leisurely sips,” she instructed me, her whole face lit up as if she was still telling me about her television show. “And then head to the bathroom. In the third stall there’s a bag with a change of clothes. Leave your stuff in the bag. All of it. And this is the hard part, Dylan. Your phone goes in the bag, too, okay?”

She stopped there to watch my face, and I realized she was waiting for a response. “Um. Okay.”

“You’ve no idea how many kids try to keep their phones,” she confided with a roll of her eyes. “Anyway. The bathroom has two exits. Once you’re changed, go out the mall side. Understand?”

“You’ll meet me there?”

“No,” she said with a smile. “I’ll stay here and guard your latte.”

I took my third sip, stood up, and headed for the bathrooms. As I turned to open the door, I glanced back. Frank and his partner were still in the store, coffees in hand, standing around. Weren’t they supposed to be on patrol?

“My kid sister’s in there,” said somebody in the bathroom. “Sorry, she takes forever. I think that stall’s open?”

I stepped inside the bathroom to find the owner of the voice looking apologetic as another bathroom patron stepped into the first stall. The speaker stood opposite the third stall, as if guarding it.

“I’m sorry, your... sister’s in there?” I asked, hands clammy, as I walked toward the stall.

Instead of answering, the stall guardian gave me a mock salute, spun on a heel, and walked out the mall-side exit.

There was no kid sister inside the third stall, just a backpack and pair of boots hanging on the garment hook. Inside I found a black jacket, a white tank top, a pair of black skinny jeans, even some underwear. I changed clothes as quickly as I could manage in the cramped stall.

The boots hanging behind the backpack were heavy-duty things. Combat boots, I thought to myself, even though I wasn’t sure what qualified boots for combat duty. Tucked inside the left boot was a black beanie, with a note pinned to it: “Tuck all hair under beanie.”

I finished changing, laced the boots, and stood up. The boots made me at least two inches taller, and I started at the sudden new height. I then stuffed my old clothes into the backpack. My phone slipped out of the pocket and clattered to the floor.

I had to chuckle as I picked it up. T said this was the hardest thing to give up, and suddenly I could see why. This thing had been my portal to the outside world. This was how I reached out for help in the first place. This was how I kept in touch with everything and everyone.

Insisting that I wanted one last look, I opened up an app. What were my friends doing this weekend? I might not ever see them again, surely I should at least look them up. I couldn’t say goodbye. Maybe I could say something that no one would notice until I was gone, and then it would be clear that I was saying goodbye. Maybe I could tell my friends and my family that I loved them. That was

something people posted all the time, right? Hashtag blessed.

I typed out the message, but my finger hovered over the post button. No, this was stupid. I never posted about how I loved everyone, hashtag blessed. It would stick out like a sore thumb.

Maybe I could leave the message here, in the buffer, so when somebody finally found this bag, and my phone, they’d give it to my parents, and they’d see the message?

No. If T wanted me to leave my phone behind, it was to avoid exactly this. I wiped the draft message and stuffed the phone into the bag.

Outside, the mall was thrumming with its usual wash of weekend shoppers. I stepped out into the flows of people, awkward in the huge, heavy boots.

“Oi,” said a too-close voice, and I turned around. Standing beside me was a lean, lanky kid, with a sallow face and a head shaved bald. A skinhead, dressed in black, with skinny jeans tucked into combat boots. Dressed just like me. My stomach fell out of me. Had he mistaken me for one of his tribe? Did he think I was a skinhead, too?

He grinned. “So. Beyoncé or Colonel Sanders: who’d win in a fight?”

I cursed without thinking. “You’re... you’re a conductor?” I stammered.

He slapped me on the shoulder, hard enough to get me moving down the length of the mall. “Choo choo, motherfucker,” he said by way of answer. “I’m Mick. You’re Avery.”

I tried to correct him and tell him my name was Dylan, but he shook his head and pressed something into my hand. It was a school ID card. It wasn’t my picture. The name was Avery Cordova. “You’re Avery,” he insisted.

He herded me towards the mall exit. Great floor-to-ceiling windows separated the mall traffic from the coffee shop.

“Keep walking,” Mick told me. “Do not run.” I looked to him, wondering why he’d say as much, and behind him saw why. Inside the coffee shop, the two police officers were standing at our table, looming over T. She smiled at them and produced her wallet and ID. My latte sat on the table.

“They’re after me?” I squeaked, disbelieving.

Mick actually chuckled, but didn’t answer. He pushed open the glass doors to the chill outside air and nodded down the sidewalk. “There’s our bus.”

We clambered on board. Mick flashed his school ID card to the driver, and I did likewise, earning us free passage. Once we sat down and the bus was under way, Mick took my ID card back, stacked it with his own, and slipped the both of them through the window onto the street.

“Is T going to be alright?” I asked, worriedly watching the mall as the bus trundled past.

“Who’s T?” Mick answered with far more insistence than curiosity.

“The girl,” I blathered. “She met me in the music store, we went for coffee—”

Mick placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. It wasn’t a kind gesture; it made me shut up. “Having coffee with someone isn’t against the law,” he told me quietly. “I don’t see how she could get in trouble for that. And she’s a minor, right? They have to contact her parents, and there’s a whole rigamarole.”

I nodded, desperate for any assurances. “Where are we going now?” I whispered, even though the bus was nearly empty.

Mick grinned. “Concert.”

It did not take long for the bus to leave the clean and polished “nice” part of town. Four blocks over was a street lined with empty storefronts and piles of bedding tucked into the most sheltered corners. When I was younger, there was a toy store with a sandwich shop next door that my parents would take me to. We got out a few blocks up the dilapidated street.

Mick led the way down an alley between an abandoned baby clothes store and a still-struggling oil change place. I could hear the thump-thump-thump bass of blaring music ahead. The alley was well-populated with hard-faced people dressed in a surprisingly consistent uniform of baggy jackets, jeans, and heavy boots. We fit right in.

People clustered around the door into a warehouse, forming a very rough line as they waited for admission. A huge woman stood just outside the door, waving a thick black wand over every entrant.

“Why aren’t the steel toe boots and... all the metal in that guy’s face setting it off?” I muttered as we lined up. “Security theater, like the airport?”

“That’s not a metal detector,” Mick grinned back at me. “That’s a wireless signal detector. So if you’ve been a plant this whole time, wearing a wire?” He chuckled with a little too much anticipation. “These guys aren’t going to respond very positively to you waltzing into their committee meeting.”

“I’m— I’m not,” I protested weakly, but Mick had already stepped forward and raised his arms to be scanned.

I followed suit, watching the squeaking thing rove around me as if it were a snake rearing back to bite. But then the lady at the door had

to tell me, twice, that I was clean and I needed to shove off and get inside.

The interior of the warehouse was poorly lit, mostly by grimy skylights, and only about half of the place was being used. A stage sat at one end of the gaping space, presently empty. The speakers on either side of it were still blaring harsh, half-punk, half-metal sort of music with shouted lyrics that I didn't really want to make out. A few dozen people milled about, clearly waiting for the event to start. On the other side of the small crowd sat a handful of tables backed by banners and racks of clothing. Vendors.

Mick was already heading towards the booths, so I followed. He grinned at me when I came up alongside him. He gestured around and upwards, mostly to the pounding music. "Ah man, sometimes I miss this, you know? The sound and the fury and the pulse and the energy. Pity about all the hate that comes with it."

I shook my head. "What, you... you used to be..."

"Skinhead, yeah." He gestured up and down his body. "This isn't a disguise, this is just old clothes from the carefree days of my youth."

"What happened?" I asked incredulously.

He shrugged, and seemed to pull his whole body closed. "Beat the shit out of one too many people. It got to me. So I... well." He shifted gears. "Now I know you're not bugged, we can talk a little more freely. Well. As freely as you'd like to talk in the middle of a neonazi rally."

"Okay, well let's start with that, why the fuck are we here?" I demanded. "This place can't be safe."

Mick gave me a sly smile. "You've gotta love skinheads. Well, I mean, you don't gotta love

'em, you gotta... stand against them and oppose them at every step. But as cover, nothing beats skinheads. They all dress alike, so it's easy to blend in." He hooked a thumb back at the door. "And you can rely on the older generation to still be paranoid about their security."

"But they're— they've beat the shit out a number of my friends," I protested. "Just last month..."

Mick put his hand on my shoulder again. I quieted before he had to squeeze. "You're wearing the uniform; therefore you're safe. Well. You're wearing most of the uniform. Which brings us to your next step."

We had reached the table of one of the vendors. Behind the table and wedged between racks of jackets and teeshirts and suspenders sat a barber's chair. In it sat a girl nearly vibrating with excitement as an older gentleman ran a buzzing electric razor over her scalp. Long locks of hair fell to join the pile on the floor.

He held up a mirror and the girl cheered at her reflection, then bounced out of the chair to join her similarly cheering friends.

"You want me to—" I started.

"The less you look like yourself, the easier it is to get you out," Mick told me, pulling me towards the end of the table. "Oi, mate. My friend here wants to take the plunge."

The portly vendor blew stray hairs off the end of his razor. "A shave is ten bucks. Free if you buy something."

Mick put some cash on the table. "I'm gonna go browse his wares," he told me, "while you get shorn." He slapped my back again, pushing me forward.

I opened my mouth to protest, couldn't think of something that was safe to say where we were, and then sighed. I'd come this far. And if it

would get me any closer to safety, why should I balk? Hair grows back. I climbed up into the chair and pulled off my beanie.

The man made surprisingly quick work of it, and before I knew it he was holding up a mirror. “I look like an alien,” I said without thinking.

“You look like a soldier,” the vendor corrected me. “You’re gonna do us proud. The time is coming soon when we purge this country.” He rattled off a litany of slurs and epithets, targets he intended for my righteous anger, and I did my best to stoneface my way through it. My heart pounded in my ears.

When he started winding down, I nodded. “Thanks.” Then I pushed myself out of the chair as fast I could without looking like I was fleeing.

“Check out this jacket!” Said jacket was thrust into my face by Mick. It was army green, with a huge celtic cross on the back. The lapel had the number 14 stitched into it in bright yellow thread. “You should totally get it,” he went on excitedly, and grabbed the shoulder of what I was already wearing. “This one sucks, it’s boring.”

“I’ll give you ten bucks for the black jacket,” the vendor offered.

“Sold!” Mick shouted, and nearly tore the black jacket off of my shoulders.

As we walked away from the stall, me in my new green jacket covered in hate symbols, I looked over at Mick. “This isn’t some kind of... elaborate prank or something to get me in a... compromising situation where... somebody thinks I’m a...”

“Soldier for the cause of white racial purity?” Mick finished for me, eyebrows raised.

“Mick, I’m not even, like, 100% white—”

He snorted as he took off his jacket. “Neither are most of these guys. Which is a continual source of shame and anxiety for them.” He then reversed the jacket, turning out the deep red interior as the new exterior, and shrugged it back on. “Good thing there’s nobody with nefarious intentions ready to turn that shame and anxiety into destructive ends.” Then he stopped and looked around us as if noticing where we were for the first time. “Oh shit.”

“If they knew what we are—”

“What you are,” Mick corrected me with a shake of his head. “And besides, we’ve got what we came for. We’re outta here.” He leaned backwards against a steel exit door and suddenly we were outside again, the gathering night’s chill washing over my naked scalp.

“Wait, what I am?” I repeated, following after him down the now-empty alleyway. “I just... I thought—”

“You know what they say about when you assume,” Mick teased with a wan smile.

“You’re not gay?” I gasped.

“That I am not,” he answered blithely. “I’m ace, actually. Which qualifies me for queer, but not in the kind of way that gets you in trouble with your parents, yeah?”

“Asexual?” I said wonderingly. “I just assumed conductors would be other queers. But I mean, you’re still queer, just not—”

“Not sent away to a conversion camp,” he finished for me, and for once his voice had lost its flippancy. Instead his whole demeanor was suffused with sympathy. It was slightly unnerving. “Listen, I’m sorry your parents were sending you to one of those places. That’s terrible.”

I nodded, a little numb. “When I found the pamphlets, I didn’t know what to do.”

He put his hand on my shoulder, and this time it wasn't to quiet me. "You did the right thing. We'll get you out of the country. We've got friends across the border who'll take care of you. They'll even sign you up for school, you can finish your diploma. More importantly, you'll be safe."

We reached the ratty street and turned right. "Is there... is there any way to get a message to my parents?" I asked. "I don't want to just disappear on them. They'll worry."

"Once you're safe, you can give us a letter. We'll mail it somewhere else, and they'll forward it to your parents." He sighed. "We'll have to read it, of course. Even accidentally, you might give away important information. My advice, keep it to the essentials. You're safe. You can see them again when you're eighteen."

"Do... do kids go back?" I asked. "When they're legal adults?"

He shrugged. "We haven't been doing this long enough to find out. My guess is that everybody's different. And we've moved a lot of very angry kids, who never want to see their parents again. But even then, I'm sure some of them might soften eventually. When they're eighteen, when they're thirty. Who knows, you know?"

I nodded, walking along in silence, until Mick interrupted my reverie. "Well shit."

A block away and across the street stood the train station. Two police cruisers sat near the ticketing window.

"Are they looking for me?" I asked, heart in my throat.

"No, they're looking for us. Conductors," Mick answered, slowing his steps without stopping, or even appearing to hesitate. I tried

to follow suit. "The way you reached out to us wasn't exactly secure. You posted on like seven different message boards. Public ones, no encryption. Oh look, feds, too."

I looked over to where he was looking. A man and a woman in suits had stepped up to the police cruiser and talked with the officers inside. They had the weary casualness of people who were not going anywhere anytime soon.

"I'm... sorry, I didn't know."

He shook his head. "You did what you had to, and what you knew how to do. Just means we took a few extra steps to keep the railroad safe."

"But now the police are after you," I protested. "I mean. Feds, that's FBI, right? That seems crazy. The FBI is after you for helping queer kids get to safety."

"Technically speaking," he said with cocky relish, "we're a kidnapping ring."

I looked out at the blockade. My heart sank. "Does this mean... can we not get out of town?"

"No, just means it's gonna be harder," he grumbled. "That's your train pulling into the station now. You don't have to go past the ticketing window to get to the boarding area if you already have a ticket." He dug into his jacket pocket to produce a folded-up piece of paper and pressed it into my hands. I unfolded it to find it was a print-at-home train ticket, destination WEST GLACIER. A few twenties were tucked into the last fold.

Mick guided us across the street and into the parking lot that stretched between the 10th Avenue and the train tracks. We ducked behind trucks and SUVs, but up ahead was an open concrete space hosting an art installation of metal bars and brightly-painted panels. The boarding platform lay on the other side. The

police cars sat on the street side of the plaza, commanding an easy view of the whole area.

“They’ll still see me cross,” I objected.

“That’s the idea,” Mick grinned, and pointed through the windows of the family van we lurked behind.

On the other side of the street, a bus pulled up and deposited a few passengers. One more figure slipped out of a nearby alley and joined them. I couldn’t make out any of their features except for one.

“Those are my clothes! From this morning. How’d they get my clothes?”

“What do you think, we just leave a bag full of your clothes and your phone in the coffee shop bathroom?” Mick snorted. “Ah, look, there we go. They took the bait.”

Four police officers stepped out of their cruisers. The FBI agents that Mick had pointed out quietly faded into the oncoming crowd of bus passengers, flanking the kid in my clothes. “Go go go,” Mick shoved me towards the platform. “Good luck, Dylan. See you on the other side.”

I ducked behind the last truck in the row and then walked, as quickly as I could without looking hurried, across the plaza. Suddenly there was shouting in the street; when I looked, I could see the police advancing on whoever it was wearing my clothes. They shoved their way back through the crowd, creating even more of a commotion. I slipped across the platform and into the open door of the train.

I climbed the steps up into the second level of the car so I could look out the windows. The kid in my clothes was surrounded by police and agents, doing a great job of looking scared and confused. But then one of the officers waved them off, and they went their way, scurrying

out of sight. A moment later the train lurched into motion.

I did it. Well, the conductors did it. But I was on a train, heading out of the country. No conversion camp for me. No torture, no electroshock, no whatever terrible stuff they might think up to make me tell them I was their version of normal. No fifty percent chance I killed myself afterwards, whether or not they broke me to their satisfaction. I was free.

And then the train stopped.

Nothing happened for a long time. The minutes stretched out. I sat in my seat and squeezed my hands together in my lap, trying to will myself not to panic. The other passengers on the train looked bored or annoyed or just kept playing on their phones. Why should they care, after all, they weren’t fleeing for their lives.

The heavy clomp of boots started approaching up the central aisle behind me. I pressed myself into the plush seat, tried to hide my face inside my jacket. Maybe if I looked like I was asleep, like I’d been on the train for hours, if...

“Dylan.”

I put every ounce of effort I had into my sleeping charade.

“Dylan.”

I slit my eyes open. A police officer was looming over my seat. I uncoiled, body gone limp, defeated. “Hi, Frank.”

The man looked me over with weary eyes. Finally he sighed. “I always had such hopes for you, Dylan,” he said wistfully. “Look at you, look what you’ve done to yourself, just to...” He shook his head.

I started to cry.

“I can’t tell you how disappointed I am,” he went on, rooting in his pocket for something. Handcuffs. Taser. But he wouldn’t need it. I knew when I was caught. “Your parents... they failed you, Dylan. They were so worried about... I don’t even know what. Appearances, I guess. I tried to tell them, their first job was just loving you, no matter what.”

“What?” I gasped, uncomprehending.

He held out his hand. In it was a business card. “Here’s my contact information. You call if you need anything. No matter where you are. Alright?”

I took the card with trembling fingers. “Alright,” I managed to croak. “You’re not going to—”

He was already backing away. “I’ve got to go. You stay safe, Dylan. And if you can’t, you call me before you do something that’s not safe. Right?”

I nodded my head mutely, not trusting myself to say anything without sobbing. I rubbed my cheeks dry on my nazi jacket.

Frank plodded down the length of the car, then descended the steps to the lower level. “Yeah, this one’s clear,” I could hear him tell his partner. A few moments later and the two of them stepped out onto the platform. I ducked down so they couldn’t see my face through the window.

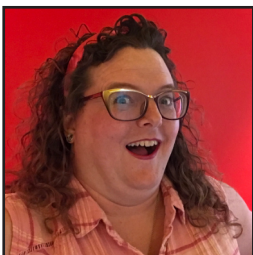
I watched my hometown slide along, twinkling in the night, silent and peaceful. Eventually it slipped away and out of view. I closed my eyes and was asleep in moments.

“So who’d win in a fight,” said the woman on the platform, a day and a half later. “Beyoncé or Colonel Sanders?” She was an adult, for a change, dressed in outdoor gear like an REI commercial. Behind her rose tall trees and green mountains.

“Beyoncé, of course,” I told her with a shaky smile. “What’s the next step?”

“Well I hope you like backpacking,” she told me, and hooked a thumb at the two packs leaning up against the railing behind him. “It’s 31 miles to Canada.”

I grabbed the nearest pack. “Choo choo, motherfucker.”



Hi, my name is Miriam Robern. I’m a white, queer, transgender creator of books and games and things. This short story was released through [my Patreon](http://patreon.com/miriamrobern) at <http://patreon.com/miriamrobern>.

I make a bunch of stuff there: short stories like these, browser video games, even the odd tabletop game. All of it tends towards *queer* in every sense of the word. If you enjoyed this story and would like to see more, please consider becoming a patron so I can keep making stuff like this.

Also I’ve got loads of other stuff at <http://miriamrobern.com>. Come take a look!