

## **Mona Lisa and Demons at Penn Station New York**

Little girl  
Standing on the main Concourse at Penn Station  
I failed you.  
Waiting with the other waiters  
For the train to Philadelphia  
I watched your mother  
Grip your two wrists hard  
Shake you hard  
Look at you hard  
The relevance (if any)  
Of your offence (if any)  
No longer relevant.

*Answer me* she said.  
(I think she said).  
I had to lip-read  
Because the metallic-voiced announcer  
Announced my metallic departure  
From Stairway Number Six for Philadelphia.

Six times (I counted)  
That woman shook you  
Like an object she objected to.  
White-knuckled solitaire  
Sparkling hard  
As her hard anger-sparkling eyes.  
And you  
Grave-faced  
Pigtailed  
Frightened  
Grieved out your ten-years-old grief  
In silent unsparkling isolation.

I should have said (to her)  
In my Special Child Protector's Voice  
"Stop Madam  
You won't break a little girl's spirit  
Or even her wrists  
That way Madam  
But Madam  
You'll break her love  
Which Madam  
I assure you Madam  
You need Madam  
More than you'll ever realise Madam."

Or maybe (to you)  
In my Special Grown-Ups Defender's Voice  
"Don't be sad little girl.  
Your mother's not herself.  
She's het up  
Flustered  
Tired from packing  
For her Florida vacation.  
(It's deadly little girl  
Trying to decide what to pack  
And what not to pack.)  
Grown-ups little girl  
Have so many things on their minds  
That they almost go out of their minds.  
Actually little girl  
Your mother loves you actually.  
- Though I guess she's got a strange way of showing it."

But I stayed silent.  
Looked at your mother  
With as good an imitation as I could manage  
Of your hurt  
Your helplessness.  
She saw me.

Smiled  
A demon *Mona Lisa* smile.  
Linked her arm in a man's (your father's?)  
Who looked as if you didn't exist  
And said something funny (presumably funny)  
That made your mother smile again  
Her demon *Mona Lisa* smile.

Then the man  
Re-counted the suitcases  
Paced the Concourse  
Navy-blazered  
Clean-shaven  
Dutiful  
Perspiring  
Blinking his eyes  
Under his rimless spectacles  
Like the perspiring  
Navy-suited  
Dutiful attendant  
In the Louvre in Paris  
Pacing out lifelong protection  
To a billion dollar canvas smile.

Little girl I failed you.  
I said nothing.  
I shuffled off perspiring  
With two over-heavy suitcases  
To Stairway Number Six  
For Philadelphia.  
Looking back  
Before I escalated to a lower level  
Where the black locomotive  
Hissed its steaming welcome  
To all who'd escalated to a lower level  
You were looking at me  
Letting me know you knew I'd failed you

Like all the other forward-faring strangers on the Concourse  
Who had somewhere better to go  
Something better to do  
Than comfort a little girl  
Lost in a world  
Of grown-up black locomotive hardness.

Little girl we're damned.  
Mothers  
Fathers  
Attendants-in-waiting  
Strangers in flight from love  
In black locomotive plush compartments  
To Philadelphia or sunny Florida.

Damned little girl. Damned.

All of us all of us damned.