

Momentum and Curves

By Don Pickett

©2008 Don Pickett

dp@dpickett.com

As usual, the downtown 2/3 is packed to the gills. I scoot in as quickly as I can and grab the last available seat, squeezing in between the rail at the end of the bench and a woman engrossed in her novel. Something about her catches my eye so, after settling back into the seat, I take another look. She's startlingly beautiful, at least to me: red hair, fair skin, green eyes, a few freckles, and a woman's face. Not a girl's face, but one that's been in a few battles and has the character to show for it, fine lines around the eyes and small creases at the corners of the mouth. I take a few glances, but she's too busy reading, so I give up. Desperation's never gotten me a date yet.

The train hits the next stop and even more people pile in. If you're standing it's cheek to jowl, shoulders pushed into backs and not enough handholds for everyone. Some big guy in a suit wedges in and pushes people into whatever little space I had. I ignore him and try to read my book.

As the train moves downtown he moves down the car until he's almost standing over me, his leg pressing into my thigh. I look up and give him a fuck-you look, but he's not paying any attention to me. I follow his eyes as they go down to the woman next to me and spill into her cleavage. She's wearing a v-neck blouse and hunched over into her reading; from his vantage point it's probably a straight shot down. I check the guy again. His eyes are huge, like he's heard about breasts all his life but never seen a pair. A minute later and he moves in for

a better view, pushing into me even more. My thigh is throbbing now, and I try to move it, shake him off, but he's too big and I've got no leverage. He's standing right over the woman now, and can probably tell who made her bra.

The train lurches. The standing crowd moves as one, packed too tight to resist. The big dork standing over me stumbles and almost falls. The woman next to me looks up at him, down at her blouse, and back up at him. I look quickly back at my book and steel myself for a true New York scene ("No, officer, I didn't see a thing. . .") but nothing happens. I sneak another look and she's looking up at him, grinning. I look at him and now I'm sure it's the first time he's seen tits. His eyes are threatening to jump out of his head. He smiles.

The woman next to me sits up straight and arches her back a little, thrusting her breasts out. She's looking him in the eyes and smiling, just a little, and for some reason that's better than if she were smiling a lot. She wiggles her shoulders a little and raises her hand, curling a finger and beckoning him lower. Now I think I'm in for a completely different New York scene.

The big guy takes a look right and left. No one else notices what's going on. People are too busy reading the newspaper or skimming their PDAs or catching a few, last minutes with their eyes closed. He kneels down slowly, with much difficulty, forcing my whole body to the left. He leans in and looks at her.

"How'd you like to start your day off right?" she asks, and I am surprised by her voice: calm, clear, free of malice.

The guy smiles. "Sure," he says.

She beckons him closer. He scoots in, his face inches from hers. She arches her back again, her right hand tracing a line down the inside of his right thigh. "You ready?" she asks. He nods.

I see her elbow move, quickly, just a hint of motion, and the guy's eyes go wide. He catches his breath and goes stock still. I start to smile.

"I know they're nice," she says, "but they're mine, and I control who sees them and who doesn't." She pauses for a second. The guy nods, small, quick movements. "So if I want you to see them, I'll tell you," she says. "But until then, stick to internet porn, okay?" She says the whole thing in the same calm, even voice.

"What's your stop?" she asks.

"14th," he says, his breath a gasp. She nods slowly. "Good for you," she says. "That's next."

The train continues to fall downtown and they sit there, very still. The guy is frozen in place, small veins beginning to show in his temple. Every turn and jump of the train threatens to castrate him, and I begin to enjoy the minor gymnastics he's

doing to stay a man. The woman is back to reading her book, her hand still on the guy's nuts. There's one long curve, right before 14th, and I thought think the guy was gonna lose it and end his child-making days in front of me, but he held on. The doors open, she releases her grip, and the guy's up and out of the car faster than I would've given him credit for. I turn to look at her and say something, but I get two green eyes and two thousand years of angry, Celtic DNA. I put my eyes back on my book and leave them there.

Wall Street Station, and I get off in a hurry.

* * *

Work passes like a bad dream half-remembered.

Much later, Jimmy pushes me through the bar's crowd, his hand hot and solid between my shoulders. It is too late and the crowd is too buzzed, end of the week adrenaline pumping through their systems.

"Why can't you pay some fucking intern \$10 an hour to make sure you don't get cockblocked?" I yell over my head.

"Because I need a pro," he yells back, pushing. The crowd reluctantly parts for us, shoulders turning in to protect territory and drinks, eyes sliding across mine for a brief second. Jimmy is in a hurry, happy and horny at the chance to end his week fucking some woman who doesn't know any better.

We break out of the press into a small bubble of space, two women sitting at a table pushed up against the wall. Jimmy shoves me down next to the one he doesn't want to fuck - dark hair, dark skin, fine, classical features. I settle in, hoping Jimmy will close the deal soon and make this brief.

"This is my friend," Jimmy says, lifting his voice above the anxious hum of the background noise. He's leaning in, across my field of view, and I can't see his intended victim.

"What does he do?" asks his target, and I am suddenly more awake.

"I'm the one who goes in and does the wheeling and dealing," Jimmy says. "He's the one who stays in the office and makes sure all the parts of the deal actually work."

"So," she asks, "you're style and he's substance?"

I am in the subway that morning, mind climbing up out of sleep, and the same voice is asking, "How'd you like to start your day off right?" I lean across the woman next to me look around Jimmy and into green eyes and freckles. My eyes go wide. She looks at me for a second before looking back at Jimmy.

Jimmy laughs her comment off, playing magnanimous, but she's hit him a little. "I'm the public face, Kelly," he says. "He's the private end."

Kelly. Her name is Kelly.

I turn away from the approaching train wreck and focus on her friend, whose name turns out to be Gretchen, who turns out to be very sweet, very smart and very tired. I sit, listen to her tell me about being a lawyer specializing in environmental law, and watch her smile at my small jokes. I would love to wake up nestled against her back after a night of searching for her tan lines, but, as she drifts further into exhaustion, I know nothing like that will happen tonight. I keep one ear cocked for Jimmy's conversation, suppressing a smile at the thought of what he's getting himself into.

"So you're one of the good guys," I say to Gretchen. She smiles at me, head resting on her hand. I am leaning in to make sure she hears me over the noise and confusion around us, so close that tilting my head forward would bring us forehead to forehead. In that tight space her smile is more intimacy than I'd expected and I blush a little, the heat spreading around my face and down my neck. She notices, smiles a little more, and closes her eyes.

Jimmy's voice intrudes. "Dude, I gotta take a leak," he says. I nod without looking at him. His chair scrapes the floor and he's gone.

"How's she?" asks Kelly.

"About to fall asleep," I say, turning my head to look at her. She's not so scary now, eyes half-closed with fatigue, chewing on her lower lip. She takes a deep breath, turning in her chair

to follow Jimmy's progress to the bathroom.

"You're friend's an asshole," she says, turning back to me.

"He is who he is," I say. "I saw that shit you pulled in the subway this morning, so I don't think you should talk."

"I like to think of it as balancing the karmic scales," she says. "Your friend is completely transparent."

"Oh, no," I say. "I don't see any innocents in this bar."

She takes another deep breath, staring to me, then lets it go with a small shrug of her shoulders. "Help me get her into a cab," she says, standing. We lead Gretchen, slumped with exhaustion, through the bar and pour her into a cab. She shakes my hand and gives me another blush-inducing smile before she closes the door.

"There's no way I'm going back in there," Kelly says. "I'd rather be celibate."

"Okay," I say. "Whatever."

She steps up onto the sidewalk, silent. "I thought you'd give me shit about that," she says. "Stand up for your boy or something."

I laugh, snorting. "Jimmy don't need no help," I say. "If he doesn't nail you he'll nail someone else."

"How can you stand to be around him?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say. "We spend a lot of time together because of work. If you ignore his shit about women he's okay."

"How can you ignore that?" she asks, pulling me onto the sidewalk as a cab passes.

"He doesn't hit on me," I say. "And I figure anyone stupid enough to fall for his bullshit gets what they deserve."

"That's horrible," she says. As close as she is I realize she's almost as tall as I am. I can smell her day on her: smoke from the bar, recycled air from her office, coffee from lunch and the faintest hint of perfume from her morning.

I lean back against a car, rubbing my eyes with my hands. "As much as I'd love to sit here and debate the fractured state of modern feminism and various concomitant counter movements with you, it's way early in the morning and I'm really fucking tired," I say. "So, if you want, give me your number and we can get together for coffee and figure out who's right, who's wrong and who should pay."

"Concomitant?" she asks.

"I minored in Literary and Cultural Criticism," I say. "I have to use those big words once and a while."

She takes my hand, the immediate intimacy shocking me awake.

"Come on," she says. "I just washed my sheets."

I lean back, holding her in place. "What the fuck are you

doing?" I ask.

"You seem nice, you're smart, and you just used concomitant in a sentence," she says. "It will be a nice change. Besides, this way I get to fuck him by fucking you."

I push myself off from the car, gently colliding with her.

"Just don't squeeze anything," I say.

* * *

Monday comes, despite my best efforts, and it's a motherfucker. Jimmy loses and it and gets sarcastic on a client, but he's German and doesn't get it. He thinks Jimmy's just using some colloquialisms he doesn't know and I'm able to smooth things over. I go ten straight hours without a break, fueled by coffee, adrenaline and pizza.

Afterwards I wedge myself into my favorite Manhattan hidden spot, an old Italian coffee bar still hanging on in the shadows of Wall Street. It's twelve feet wide and sixty feet long, smelling of seventy years of espresso and cigars. I sit at the far end of the bar. The owner brings me a strong cup of coffee without being asked. He comes back with a plate full of slices of prosciutto, olives and mozzarella. "Eat it," he says. "It gets thrown out at the end of the day." He leaves without waiting for me to answer. I wrap some mozzarella in ham and chew it.

"Dude," says Jimmy, walking down the bar towards me, "what the fuck?" I stare at him, waiting for more. "What the fuck was that Friday night?"

"What, the chick?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says. "I was looking forward to boning her."

"She didn't dig you, man," I say. "Nothing personal."

"I don't care if she dug me," he says, sitting down next to me. "I wanted to fuck her from behind and watch her head bob up and down." The owner comes down the bar and stops in front of Jimmy. "Amaretto," he says. "So, you go home with the other one?" he asks, settling onto the stool next to me.

"Nope," I say, olives in my mouth.

"Dude, alone for the weekend," he says. "So sad."

"I wasn't alone," I say.

Jimmy drinks half his amaretto, nodding at me. "Nice. Where'd you catch her?"

Instead of answering I stuff the last of the olives and cheese into my mouth. Jimmy watches me chew. I turn my head to look him in the eyes. "She didn't dig you," I say. "She digs me."

Jimmy doesn't react, killing the rest of his amaretto and holding up the empty glass to attract the owner's attention. "Well, shit," he says. "I guess we do live in an age of miracles."

"Green isn't your color," I say.

"Look, dude," he says. "Every once and in a while you get one of my cast offs. Don't act like you won the fucking lottery." He throws a \$10 bill on the bar and leaves.

* * *

Morning creeps in, the soft glow of sunlight seeping into my head. I open my eyes, her back six inches from my nose, pale and freckled. I drag a hand from under the covers and very gently lay it on her skin, feeling its smoothness and warmth. She stirs, her breathing breaking its regular cycle, and rolls over to face me, eyes slitted against consciousness.

"None of that now," she says, her voice hoarse with sleep. "You're supposed to be nice to me before you nail me. It's been a couple weeks now." She's on her back, the sheet tangled around her stomach, making no attempt to cover up.

"I barely talked to you before I nailed you," I say. A big Golden Retriever pads into the room, walking slowly to settle down on her side of the bed. "This is becoming a full-blown relationship."

"What do you think about this one, Killer?" she asks the dog. "Should we keep him or throw him back?" Killer yawns. "Since when does a relationship consist of screwing on the weekends?" she asks, still looking at the dog.

"Hey," I say. "We have dinner and breakfast, too." I sit up and lean forward, stretching out my lower back. She does the same, sucking in air. "Fuck," she says. "Fucking chair at work kills my back." I grab her by the waist and start to pull her towards me.

She grabs my hand, pushing it away. "I already said none of that," she says. "You tried all your moves last night."

"Shut up," I say, knocking her hand away and pulling around her so her back faces me. The muscles of her lower back are pulled tight across her spine. I start to knead them, working my fingers into the muscles. She grunts, leaning forward a bit.

"Feels great," she says. "Why are you being nice to me?" she asks.

"It's a character fault," I say. "I'm trying to work on it."

"Seriously," she says, wriggling her hips and stretching her lower back.

"I don't know," I say, shrugging my shoulders. "Why not be nice to you?"

She scoots herself towards me a few inches. "Between my shoulder blades," she says, and I do. Her back slowly loosens up. After I'm done she turns around, studying my face.

"This began as a revenge fuck, but now it's complicated," she says. "And you're dangerous. I could get used to someone being

nice to me, and then where will I be when you turn out to be just another asshole?"

* * *

Jimmy sprints ahead of me, running downtown, the Hudson sliding by on our right. I tuck in behind his left shoulder and keep pace, breathing more heavily than I would like. He turns his head to get me in his peripheral vision and speeds up again. I keep pace, just. We get down to Chambers and make the right into Battery City Park. Halfway to the edge of the water I stop, my heart about to beat out of my chest. Jimmy runs a few steps further, then stops.

"Come on, pussy," he says. I shake my head, breathing too hard to speak. "Dude," he says.

"I ain't run intervals since high school," I gasp. "I'm not about to start again."

Breath caught, we start to run again, following the paved path as it runs along the outside edge of Manhattan, turning south to see the Statue of Liberty in the distance. Jimmy increases the pace again. I follow him for a while longer, but can't do it past the ferry landing. I stop suddenly and lean against the wall, breathing heavily. Jimmy doubles back to find me, grinning ferally.

"We're almost half done," he says.

"Fuck you," I gasp. "Run by yourself."

"But then who would I beat?" he asks.

"If I remember, you're quite the expert at beating yourself," I say between deep breaths. He frowns at me and turns away, looking idly at people passing by.

"You ready?" he asks, still looking up and down the park.

"Gimme a minute," I say.

"Hey," he says, turning to me, "what are you doing Saturday night? I got a date with this hot, hot woman who works in equities. If she brings a friend we could both get some."

I shake my head. "Kelly," I say.

"What?" he asks. "Still? What, is she like a nympho?"

"I just like her," I say. "We have fun together. Go to movies and dinner and shit."

"Does she hold your purse?," he asks. I ignore him and walk to the railing, leaning over to smell the fecundity of salt water.

"So what about Saturday?" he asks from behind me.

"No," I say. "I'm with Kelly."

"Doing what?" he asks.

"Whatever the fuck we feel like," I say, turning towards him

"What part of that is confusing you?" He walks up and stops next to me.

"Whipped so soon?" he asks, grinning again.

"One of these days I'm just not gonna come in to work and we'll see how the clients like your bedside manner," I say.

"Don't joke about that," he says.

"Be terrible," I say. "You, alone in that office, trying to calm down angry Germans."

"Fuck off," he says. He starts running. I fall in next to him, and we finish the run with no more sprints.

* * *

My cell phone rings at me from a long way away, and I listen idly. Kelly's hand smacks me on the back and I pay attention.

"Answer your fucking phone," she says, her voice blurred by sleep.

I lean over the edge of my bed and pull it out of the pocket of my pants. "What?" I ask.

"Dude, where are you?" asks Jimmy.

"What?" I say again.

"Why aren't you at work?" he asks.

"It's Saturday morning," I say. "Only fucking idiots are at work."

"I'm here," he says.

"The prosecution rests," I say, expecting a laugh. He says nothing. I take a deep breath. "Dude, were you serious with that work-on-Saturdays shit you said?"

"Absolutely," he says. I kill the connection and start to sit up, squinting my eyes against the light.

"Where are you going?" Kelly asks, rolling over to face me.

"Work, I guess," I say.

"Fuck that," she says, pulling me down and next to her. I fall back to sleep with my head leaning against the back of her neck.

Five hours later I sit down in front of Jimmy and put my feet on his desk. He and I are the only two people on the whole, empty floor. He doesn't say anything at first, looking at his monitor.

"Nice of you to show," he says.

"It's Saturday," I say. "Markets are closed."

"Doesn't mean there isn't work to do," he says.

"Does, too," I say. I carefully take the lid off my cup of cof-

fee and blow streams of steam from the top. "You want someone here, go and get some FNG. Besides, don't you see enough of this fucking place?" I ask.

"I love it here," he says, falling back into his chair and looking out the window. "Sometimes, at home, I'm just waiting to be back here."

"You should rent out your place and live here," I say. "Spend the extra money on a nice hammock." I take a sip of coffee. "You won't get me into my office on the weekends for all the money in the fucking world," I say. "I see too much of it as it is."

"Everything else I do is just waiting around for this," he says. "Everything else seems like empty time to be filled."

I shrug, watching a pigeon preen itself on the ledge outside Jimmy's window. The day is turning sunny and warm. I take a sip of coffee.

"Come on," he says, leaning forward, elbows on desk. "Don't tell me you're not amped coming in here."

I shrug, watching the pigeon look around the ledge. "I like working with you cause you're good at your job, and I like the toys I can buy with the money I make. But it's not like I wanted to do this shit when I was five."

"But I can still count on you, right?" he asks.

"Yeah, sure," I say. The pigeon leaps off the ledge and into the air. I look at Jimmy. "Long as you can keep your asshole-ness to this side of things and not make my job too difficult with the clients, you can count on me."

Jimmy leans back into his chair. "From now on I'm going to need to know that you can be on call for Saturdays."

I lean forward and put my coffee on the edge of his desk. "On call?" I ask. He nods. "As in, you can call me anytime you feel like it and tell me to come in?" He nods. "Why?" I ask.

"Because I think we need to be able to be more flexible," he says. "Times are getting tougher and we need to be able to react more quickly."

"To what?" I ask? "Absolutely fucking nothing happens on the weekends."

"You never know," he says.

I stand up, looking out the window. A few specks of cloud dot an azure sky. "No," I say, turning without looking at him. "No way in hell."

* * *

I play hooky Friday, laying in the grass in Battery City Park and watching Jersey across the Hudson. I feel like I've discovered a whole, new world: two in the afternoon and people are

lounging, sun bathing, reading or sleeping in the sun. People walk slowly past, their dogs trailing behind, panting in the sun. I know Wall Street rumbles along behind me, but I can't hear it. I meet Kelly at her office after work. She smiles coming out onto the sidewalk.

"Casual Fridays?" she asks, brushing a hand through my hair.

"Didn't go in today," I say.

She nods slightly, still smiling. "Your career, not mine," she says.

"Who needs a career?" I ask. "I need dinner."

We cab it to Chinatown, wandering around until we find a small place full of good smells. I attack tofu with vegetables and a killer sauce. She goes after beef with broccoli.

"You don't fit in my world," she says, making patterns in the sauce on her plate with the tip of her chopsticks. "I can't categorize you."

I raise my eyebrows. "Boo," I say.

"I'm serious," she says, through a smile. "You're weird."

"Yes," I say. "Yes, I am." I steal a piece of broccoli off her plate. "Resistance is futile," I say. "You will be assimilated." She smiles, putting her chopsticks down and taking my hand. "I'm not all that weird," I say. "I'd love to take pic-

tures of you naked and put them all over my desk, but it would probably get me fired."

"I know you're horny," she says. "That's not the issue. And I know you're perfectly capable of being a complete asshole and convincing me all the terrible things I think about men are true. What I don't know is why you haven't."

It's my turn to smile. I push a few strands of hair back behind her ear with a finger. "I know, eventually, I'm gonna do something stupid and piss you off," I say, "or you're gonna do something dumb and hurtful to me, and it might be so stupid that it's the end of the whole thing. If my past is any sign, then there's no way to stop it. My folks are divorced. Every relationship I've had has ended."

"Thanks for the warning," she says.

"Well, my point is I don't know if this thing between us will last," I say. "I don't even know if we're exclusive. But I don't see any reason to be a dick about things while it lasts."

She's silent for a few seconds, her gaze calculating. "Fair enough," she says.

"Then it's true love," I say, scooping up more food.

"Whatever," she says, "Let's keep it simple - I like you. A lot. And we are exclusive, for now. You're far more entertaining than anyone else I know right now."

I nod, smiling through a mouthful of food.

* * *

My favorite Sunday night restaurant is a little Mexican place on Kenmare Street, where Chinatown, Little Italy and SoHo bump into each other and make a mess of things. It's squeezed between a store selling \$400 purses and a restaurant supply place, the sidewalk out front filled with huge gas stoves being forklifted onto delivery trucks. At night it's the quiet eye of downtown's social storm. The restaurant is a long counter piled with taco and tortilla shells and a row of tables.

I sit in the middle and open my ears to the silence of Sunday night. The TV chatters on a Spanish station, the guy behind the counter shifts on his stool and a taxi slowly squeals to a stop outside. Beyond that there is nothing: no millions of people shoulder to shoulder, no liminal hum of business, no chattering subway trains or overloud earphones. The cook brings me my burrito and I dig in, starving.

"I knew I'd find you here," says Jimmy. I look up into his feral, drunken smile. There's a woman trailing behind him, an uncertain look on her face. I take another bite.

"Couldn't take the heat?" he asks, falling into the chair opposite me. His latest target stands a few feet behind him, wearing an impossibly short skirt.

"Not on my burritos," I say. "Too hot spoils the taste."

He smiles, snorting. "We had an amazing day," he says. "Made money, money, money. Some of the guys made some fat commissions."

"I'll be there Monday," I say. "There will still be some money in the world."

"I don't know," he says. "The way some of these younger guys work, they may take your job."

"Those kids would shit their pants the first time they have to take a call from an angry client," I say.

Jimmy leans forward, his smile gone. "Easy to say when you're home fucking your girlfriend," he says.

I push my food aside and lean towards him. From a few inches away I can smell scotch on his breath. "One personal day in the last six months."

"Why?" he asks, suddenly neutral. "Why'd you blow off work Friday?"

I am surprised for a second, and have no answer. "I was burnt," I say finally. "Just burnt. I wanted to lay in bed and take a day off." Jimmy says nothing, looking at me with bloodshot eyes. "Don't you ever get tired of it all?" I ask. "Don't you ever just want a break?"

He shakes his head, small movements right and left. "I told you I love it there," he says. "It's the only place I feel alive."

"What about her?" I ask, flicking my head at his latest.

He shakes his head again, more small motions. "She'll be gone in a week," he says. "None of them stay."

"After you fuck them," I say, finishing the thought.

"After, before," he says. "What's the difference?" He leans back, pale under the fluorescent light. "Look, every relationship ends, right? So, it's like a stock. If you keep getting burnt by the same stock, don't invest in it for the long term."

"Don't you get lonely?" I ask.

He shrugs, staring over my shoulder. "I guess," he says.

"People say that word and I don't really know what it means."

"Like you want to be around someone you like," I say.

He shrugs again, still looking into the distance. "I guess," he says. "I don't know if I'm never lonely or lonely all the time."

Kelly comes in to the restaurant and stops by the door, watching us. I catch her eye but can't read her expression.

"Well," I say, "I got lonely. I like being around Kelly."

"It'll end," he says.

"Probably," I say.

Kelly is standing next to Jimmy's date. They are talking.

"It'll end," he says. "And then you'll be back to where you started. Alone."

"Yeah, well, that's no reason not to do it," I say.

Kelly comes over and puts her hand on Jimmy's shoulder. He looks up, surprised.

"She's bored," says Kelly. "You'd better take her somewhere." He stands up and takes a step backwards, running a hand through his hair.

"Monday?" asks Jimmy. He waits for me to answer, completely still.

"Monday," I say. He leaves without answering, gathering his date on the way out. Kelly sits down opposite me.

"How was that?" she asks, forking a bite of my food.

I shrug. "Okay," I say. "Just making sure I'm coming back to work."

She nods, chewing. "You say yes?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say. "Unless you want to support me so I can retire early."

She shakes her head, swallowing. "Not on your fucking life,"

she says. I reach across the table, take her hand, and squeeze it. She smiles back. We finish eating and leave the restaurant, walking west through a silent and mostly empty SoHo.

"Promise me you won't turn into a Jimmy," Kelly says, stopping and looking at a darkened shop window. "Men like that make me hate all men."

"I think that's what he wants," I say, watching our reflections in the dark glass.

"Why the fuck would anyone want that?" she asks.

"I think he thinks it's freedom," I say.

"Well, don't do it," she says, turning to me. "I don't want to hate you. I'm tired of hating."

I run a hand through her hair, my shadow self moving in the window to my right. "Don't ask me about the future," I say. "I'm terrible at it."

"What are you good at?" she asks. Her reflection takes a step towards me.

"I'm good at trying," I say. "I try and I try and I try and, if it doesn't work, I may rearrange things and try another way. But I keep trying."

"Why?" she asks.

"What's the alternative?," I ask.

She thinks for a second, eyes unfocused. She looks at me and nods, collecting me in her arms and pulling me along.