



R U N A W A Y

Story by Steven Mendel

“Come on, Todd; it’ll be fun.”

“I don’t know...running away?”

“I got it all figured out.” Holly looked around the schoolyard to make sure no one was close enough to hear and in a low voice said, “Tomorrow is the perfect day, Friday before a three-day weekend. By the time we get back to school on Tuesday, our teacher won’t even remember. Look—” She pulled out a subway map and opened it. “There it is, the aquarium.”

Todd looked, “Where’d you get the map?”

Holly ignored Todd’s question. “Besides, the rides open tomorrow.”

Photography by Margaret Mendel

“Tomorrow?” Todd asked. “The Cyclone too?”

“Yep, the Cyclone too. Memorial Day weekend all the rides at Coney Island open.”

“You ever ride the subway by yourself?” Todd asked.

“It’s easy, we catch the D train at Columbus Circle and just take it to the last stop.”

Todd quietly let this all sink in.

Holly and Todd have known each other their whole lives. They were in nursery school together, and now they’re in the same fourth-grade class. When they were younger, their mothers became

friends. They would spend almost every afternoon together and ate dinner together many nights. “Why go home?” The mothers would say, “It’s not like there’s anyone waiting for us.” Todd’s father often worked late, and Holly’s dad was just out, according to her mother. They were more than close friends, more than sister and brother. They could not remember a time when they weren’t best friends. They made an odd pair. Todd with his body starting to stretch, getting ready to sprout in that adolescent way and Holly with her furrowed brow, light hair, offset by her dark eyes.

“Tomorrow morning we’ll meet at the schoolyard,” Holly went on. “We wait for everyone to go in and then go to the train station. Make sure you act like it’s a regular day.”

Todd shook his head. “We’re going to get caught.”

“Who’s going to catch us?”

“The cops?”

Holly laughed. “We’re not robbing anyone. We’re just going on the subway. It’s the day before Memorial Day weekend. We’ll be back that night. No one will notice.”

“I don’t know Holly.”

“Think about it, a whole day at the aquarium; then we can walk on the boardwalk. And don’t forget the Cyclone.”

“It’s going to cost a lot of money.”

“Bring all you can, and I will too. We’ll put it together.”

Holly had been thinking about this trip for a long time. She was going to run away, like her father. She remembered when she first heard that her father was a runaway.

“Your father called. He’s moving to another city.” Holly’s mother was crying. “It’s what he does best, runs away.”

Holly waited for her mother to tell her why he left them.

When she didn’t, Holly asked her, and every time she did her mother ignored her or changed the subject. She hated it when her mother hid things from her like she was a baby. She will show the both of them. She’s old enough and doesn’t need them.

Friday morning, a teacher blew the whistle for the kids to line up. Todd and Holly stood in a far corner of the yard where they couldn’t be seen. When the schoolyard was empty, they slowly walked away. They were waiting for someone to say, “Where do you kids think you’re going.” But no one said a thing. As soon as they were out of sight of any teachers, they took off running as fast as they could, their backpacks bouncing on their shoulders. They ran two blocks and stopped. They were bent over, trying to catch their breath. Holly started to laugh, and Todd joined her. Once they started, they couldn’t stop. It was so easy. Holly looked at Todd. His face was red from running and laughing. She felt like screaming out loud. She felt grown up and free. She sat on the curb. Todd sat next to her.

“How much money you got?” Holly asked.

Todd pulled out a few wrinkled dollar bills from one pocket and a small handful of change from his other pocket. “Four dollars and seventy-two cents and I have two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, so we don’t have to buy lunch.” He smiled proudly. “How about you?”

“Seven dollars,” Holly said. She didn’t tell Todd that this money came from her mother’s purse. She knew he would be angry with her. He’s such a baby sometimes, she thought. He wouldn’t understand her taking money from her mother. He was a good boy and always did what he was told. Holly hated him for it sometimes, and other times she wished she could be more like him. Maybe if she were a better person, her family wouldn’t be so messed up.

Holly stood, shook her head, and brushed the back of her pants. "Okay, let's get going."

Todd stood too, and they walked to the subway. They turned the corner and found the sidewalk packed with people. Even at eight a.m., the city streets were full of dog walkers, mothers pushing strollers and men in suits carrying briefcases, all going about their business. Every adult they passed, seemed to know that they were not where they belonged. The two kids kept their eyes on the ground, not making eye contact and willing themselves invisible. They waited for some adult to catch them. When they finally reached the train station, they let out a deep breath.

As they began to go down the subway stairs, a crowd of people was coming up. They had to squeeze to one side as people rushed past. They finally made it to the turnstile and froze. Somehow, they didn't think about having to pay to get on the subway.

"Now what?" Todd asked.

Holly looked in the token booth. The clerk was on the phone. Could she be calling their school? No, that would be impossible. How could she know? But, if they bought a token from her, she might ask, why aren't you kids in school? The whole plan was over before it even began. Holly felt like she was going to cry.

"I know what we could do," Todd said.

"What?" Holly asked in a whisper.

"We wait for another train to come and when all the people get off we sneak under the turnstile," Todd said, smiling. "Get ready. I hear a train." He grabbed her hand and just like he said a crowd of people came pouring out of the train. They

pushed into the crowd and ducked under the turnstile. No one even looked in their direction. Another train came right away, and they quickly got on.

"Wow, that was great," Holly said.

Todd didn't say anything, but he had a big smile. He felt good that he figured it out.

The train was half full, and they found two empty seats next to each other. Holly's shirt stuck to her back from sweat. She looked at Todd. "What made you think about ducking under the turnstiles?"

He shrugged his shoulders. Sometimes Holly felt like she was the leader only because Todd let her.

Holly looked around and wondered if the people on the train knew they're playing hooky, but if they did, no one seemed to care. The other passengers were either looking at their cell phones or staring into space.

"I'm getting hungry," Todd said and pulled out a sandwich.

"Eat if you're hungry," Holly said angrily. She realized she sounded like her Dad, and this made her even angrier. She was not sure why she was mad at Todd.

Holly gets like this Todd thought. One minute she's happy and his best friend in the world and then the next minute she makes him feel like he's done something wrong and she can't stand him. Todd put the sandwich back.

They sat quietly as the train stopped at a station every few minutes. All of a sudden, they came out of the dark tunnel, and the train was outside on the elevated track.

Todd felt like the trip was taking forever. "We must almost be there."

Holly opened her map. “We still have a long way to go.”

“I can’t wait anymore,” Todd said. He dug into his backpack again and pulled out the peanut butter and jelly sandwich and offered half to Holly. “You sure you don’t want some?”

“No, I told you I’m not hungry.” She said angrily.

Todd ate the whole sandwich in three quick bites. Holly’s bad mood rubbed off on him. He was sure they would get into trouble, and they didn’t even have enough food. There was only one sandwich left, and it belonged to Holly. It seemed like so much when he packed it. Now it was gone. He looked at Holly and could tell she was still upset. Why did he listen to her?

The train kept going and Holly wondered if this whole idea was a big mistake. Running away. What would that change? Would that bring her father back and make her family normal? She had to do something, she thought, and this was the best she could come up with. Maybe if her parents saw how bad she felt they would get back together.

The train stopped, and an announcement in a computer voice said; “This is the last stop, Coney Island, everyone, off the train please.”

“This is it,” Holly said and bolted out of her seat. Todd followed. They rushed out of the train and ran down the stairs. It was the biggest train station they had ever seen. There were stores everywhere, even in the station. There was a candy store but not your regular kind, one that sold cotton candy, fancy balloons and tee shirts. Another store sold nothing but water toys. Next to that one was a store selling Italian ices. They followed the crowd out onto the street into what felt like the middle of a carnival. There were places with video games, skee ball and shooting booths,

and on the other side of the street, there was one food place after another. They couldn’t see the ocean, but they heard it. They ran towards the sound of the waves, and the street turned from asphalt to sand, and before they knew it, they climbed up a few steps, and they were on the boardwalk. In front of them was the ocean. To the left, the boardwalk ended in a mist and looked like it went on forever. On the right, the boardwalk led to the rides.

They both twirled around in circles first seeing the water, then the boardwalk and the lights of the amusement park. The air tasted like a mixture of salt, hot dogs and cotton candy.

“Wow,” Todd said.

“Yeah,” Holly replied. All their doubts were gone. There was so much to see and do.

They heard the squeals from the Cyclone as the roller coaster barreled down the steep incline. Behind them was the train they rode and the city they left behind to enter this new world.

“Which way?” Todd yelled above the noise. He was jumping up and down. Holly could not make up her mind. Todd not able to contain his excitement took off and ran towards the Cyclone.

Holly found herself alone. Sometimes she felt like she was his mother. “Wait up,” Holly yelled and ran after him.

Todd was breathing heavily as he took his place at the end of the line for the Cyclone. The kid in front of him took a roll of red tickets out of his pocket. The kid was counting his tickets. Todd was dying to ask the kid if he can get on the ride with money, or did he need tickets. But, he didn’t want to sound like he didn’t know what he was doing. He knew when the ride ended, the line would move fast. Where was Holly? If she got here before the ride ended she could get tickets for the both of them, and he won’t

lose his place. The screams were getting closer, and that meant the ride was coming to the end. He looked around and saw Holly. He waved at her.

“Don’t run off that way. I couldn’t find you. We have to stay together.” She said between breaths.

“All right,” he replied. “Hurry, get the tickets before the ride ends.”

She looked at him blankly.

“Tickets,” he yelled. He watched the roller coaster coming to the final turn.

“Take my place in line. I’ll be right back.” Where was the ticket booth? He ran towards the ocean and saw the sign for the ticket booth. There was one old guy selling tickets, and there were at least ten people in line. It took forever for the line to move. It seemed everyone had to have a long discussion before buying the tickets. Finally, it was his turn.

“How many tickets to ride the Cyclone?” Todd asked.

“Eight,” the old man answered.

“How much for sixteen?”

“Eight dollars.”

“Eight dollars?” Todd repeated. What was he going to do?

“So, kid, how many tickets do you want?” The old man asked.

Todd pushed his four dollars under the grill. The old man counted the money and gave Todd eight tickets. Todd felt nailed to the spot.

The old man asked, “anything else?”

Todd heard the fat woman standing behind him sigh. He

grabbed the tickets and walked away. It was only when he walked away he realized only one of them could go on the ride. What could they do?

Holly saw Todd walk slowly towards her, his head down.

“Don’t worry, we’ll catch the next one,” Holly said.

“That’s not it. We don’t have enough. Its sixteen tickets for both of us to ride and I only have enough money for eight.”

“You go,” Holly said. The truth was she wasn’t that interested in going on the Cyclone. She only brought it up to get Todd to go with her. “Give me your backpack, and I’ll wait here.”

“Are you sure?”

Todd got in a car with another kid riding by himself. “First time,” the kid asked. “Just wait.”

Todd was thinking about what to say when the roller coaster started clanking and making that long slow trip up the first incline. He held on to the bar in front of him with a mixture of fear and excitement. The roller coaster was going higher and higher. He could see the ocean and the subway station. The people on the ground looked tiny. He thought he better not pee in his pants when the roller coaster stopped for a second at the highest point and then whoosh, the earth opened up, and he was hurtling down so fast that his face hurt from the force. He was screaming. Just when he thought he couldn’t take anymore, the roller coaster slowed down. However, a second later, it made a sharp turn and barreled downward again. Then it veered sharply right and then left, and he slammed into the other boy. By the third turn, Todd couldn’t wait to get off the ride, but at the same time, he was afraid it would soon be over. As the ride glided towards a stop, he was wonderfully dizzy, and he stumbled out on to the sidewalk.

“How was it?” Holly asked. “You okay?”

“It was great.”

“Let’s walk on the beach,” Holly said.

They took their shoes off and stepped on to the sand. The sand was the perfect temperature, warm but not too hot. Todd’s toes dug into the sand, and he felt like the happiest kid in the world. Here he was walking barefoot on the beach at Coney Island with his best friend after playing hooky and his first ride on the Cyclone. For the rest of his life whenever Todd walked barefoot on a beach, he would always remember how happy he was at that moment.

They sat down on the sand and stared at the ocean. The rhythm of the waves, the feel of the warm sand and the heat of the sun drained all their energy. Using their backpacks as pillows, they closed their eyes and inhabited their own private world.

Todd’s contentment spread throughout his body, and he was back on the rollercoaster. He could still feel the lurch of the ride and taste of the wind. The Cyclone was even better than he imagined.

Holly was dreaming about how relieved her parents will be when she comes home safe and how their love for her will bring her mother and father together. She would promise never to run away again and be the best girl.

“This was a great idea,” Todd said without opening his eyes.

Holly smiled and sighed.

“Hey, you. I’m talking to you.” Someone was yelling at them and kicked the bottoms of their feet. “Yeah, you. Wake up!”

Todd and Holly’s eyes snapped open as they jolted out of their dreamy state. The sun was in their eyes, and they had to squint to see who was talking to them. Three big boys were staring down at them.

“How come you kids aren’t in school? You wouldn’t be playing hooky, would you?” The biggest boy said. He had his legs spread with his hands on his hips, a leather jacket slung over his shoulder, and the look of a hungry dog on his face.

One of the other boys laughed and said, “We’re going to tell your mama. That is unless you pay us. How much money you two got?”

“Stand up,” The tallest boy said. “Empty your pockets.”

“All I got is change,” Todd said. He opened his hand and showed them the coins.”

“What about you, girlie? You can’t be broke, like your little boyfriend.” A red-headed boy said, and all three of them started laughing.

“Me too, all I have is change,” Holly said.

“Check their pockets, Louis,” the tallest boy said to the redhead.

What’s going to happen now, Todd wondered when Louis finds Holly’s money? He felt his legs start to tremble.

Louis started to walk over to Todd, and Holly then stopped suddenly. “We got trouble,” Louis said and nodded towards the boardwalk.

Todd and Holly turned and saw a cop walking quickly towards them. “Let’s go,” Holly said, grabbing her backpack and shoes and ran towards the boardwalk. Todd grabbed his stuff and followed Holly.

Holly and Todd ran until they were sure they were not being followed. They collapsed on a bench.

After catching his breath, Todd asked, “Hey, what were you going to do if that cop didn’t come along?”

“I don’t know,” Holly said. “But I wasn’t going to let those jerks take my money.” When she really thought about it, she realized she almost looked forward to those big boys trying to take her money. She was so angry at her parents that she was looking for a fight. That thought excited and scared her at the same time.

“Now what? It must be close to three o’clock,” Todd said.

“Let’s find out.” Holly stood up and walked over to a man and in her most grownup voice asked, “Excuse me, sir, do you have the time?”

“Why yes, young lady, it’s eleven forty-five.”

“Thanks, mister.”

“Not even noon,” she told Todd. “We would have just gone down to eat our lunch if we were in school.”

“What do you want to do now?” Todd asked.

Holly looked up, and there it was right in front of them, the aquarium. She poked Todd with her elbow and pointed. They walked up to the entrance and once again, a door slammed closed in their face. Admission: Adults \$17.50 Children \$9.75!

“Now what?” Todd asked. He was checking out the turnstile. It was too low to go under and besides, there was someone there checking tickets.

They saw a bunch of kids being led in by a teacher on a class trip. Holly looked at Todd, who shook his head.

“No way we can sneak in with a class,” Todd said. “The other kids would know right away we don’t belong.”

They walked to the back of the building and saw a door with a sign written in red lettering: NO ENTRANCE. DO NOT OPEN. ALARM WILL SOUND.

“Hey, you kids want to get in?” They heard someone say.

Where did it come from? What they thought was an old winter coat lying in a corner started to move. The head of a man appeared with a scraggly grey beard. “What would you pay me if I got you in for free?” He asked.

The man stood up, stretched and stumbled toward them as if he might fall. “Huh, what would you pay?” As he got closer, they smelled beer and urine.

“Let’s go,” Todd said. He didn’t like the look of this man. Besides, his mother told him not to make eye contact with smelly people who asked for money on the street.

“Two dollars,” Holly said.

“You got a deal.” The man said. He walked to the door with all the warnings in red and with one shove pushed it open. Todd and Holly tensed, ready to run when the alarm sounded. They waited, but there was nothing, not a peep.

The man held the door wide open and bending down swept his arm, “Welcome to the Brooklyn Aquarium.”

They walked towards the door slowly, expecting someone to stop them.

“Ahem,” the man said and held out his hand. Holly took out her seven dollars and gave the man two. “Thank you very much,” and faster than they thought possible, the man walked away.

Holly and Todd walked into the building and were immediately surrounded by total blackness. After being in the bright sunshine, the heavy darkness hurt their eyes. Todd’s eyes adjusted first. “Look! There are the sharks.”

For two hours, they wandered around the aquarium. They saw sea horses, a tank with beautiful colorful tropical fish and they even went to a show with seals doing tricks. Tired and hungry, they found a bench and both plopped down.

“Are you ready to go home?” Holly asked.

As soon as Todd heard the question, he realized he could barely take another step. “Yes.”

Walking slowly towards the subway, Holly noticed a sign in the window of a pizza place. Student special: 2 slices and soda 5 dollars. Holly looked at Todd.

“What do you think? I have exactly five dollars left.”

Todd couldn’t believe how hungry he was. “Yes,” he said enthusiastically.

This time they walked right through the emergency exit without having to pay along with everyone else getting on the train. The platform at the top of the stairs looked a mile high. They began to slowly climb the steps when a crowd came rushing at them. They heard the announcement, “Last stop, Coney Island.”

“Hurry up, Todd,” Holly yelled as she ran up the stairs.

With their last bit of strength, they scrambled up the stairs and stumbled into the train with Todd clutching the greasy bag with the pizza and the soda.

They took a corner seat, Todd flattened out the greasy white bag, and they gobbled down their slices and drank the soda. The pizza was gone before they noticed the train hadn’t moved. The car was filling up, and still, the train didn’t move. Finally, the computer voice, “Watch the closing doors, please. This train is making all local stops to Manhattan and then express stops in the Bronx.” The doors closed.

Lulled by the moving train Todd and Holly leaned against each other and fell asleep.

“Wake up,” Todd shook Holly. “Our stop is next.” They were just able to gather their backpacks and stumble on to the

platform before the doors closed. The clock in the station read 4:40.

“What are you going to tell your mother about coming home so late?” Holly asked.

“Just that I hung out with you after school. What about you?”

“I don’t know yet,” Holly replied. “I have to see what kind of mood she’s in.”

Todd took a deep breath as he walked into his apartment.

“Is that you, Todd?” His mother yelled from another room.

“Yes,” he said.

“Oh, good I was getting worried. I was about to call Holly’s house. We’re going to eat soon. Wash up.”

That was it. Todd didn’t need a story. His mother didn’t know anything about his adventure. His childhood ended with the realization that his mother was not all-knowing; he could have a secret life outside her watch.

“Where have you been?” Holly’s mother asked but didn’t wait for an answer.

“Your father is coming over tonight. He wants to talk with both of us. I made chicken with dumplings, his favorite. So, run along. Get out of those dirty clothes and take a shower.”

Holly couldn’t believe it. Her plan worked.

Her father did return that night and moved back in, but after a week the arguing began again, and a month later he ran away for good. He never came back.

It took many years for Holly to understand that there really was nothing she could have done to keep her parents together.

As two adults looking back on their youth, they never forgot the day they cut school and went with their best friend to Coney Island.

Todd came to realize that it was Holly's fearlessness that was so appealing to him, her fierce determination to be heard and not overlooked no matter the risks. He needed someone to lead him; otherwise, he would forever be the "good boy."

It took Holly a good part of her life to learn to have fun. Only later, did she come to realize that it was Todd who was her first teacher.