

## **“Three Steps” – Rhiannon Wapling**

**Word Count: 726**

On a normal day at a normal time, a small middle aged lady was sitting alone at a busy tram stop by the State Library with wooden crutches by her sides. Crowds of people raced past her while she sat still staring fixatedly at the tram approaching from the distance. Today, she decided, was the day she would get on the tram by herself.

The rickety green tram creaks towards the tram stop now packed with students, business people, tourists and bag laden shoppers. With each inch the tram surges forward towards the line, people silently jostle towards the doors eager to get a seat. No one speaks; they briefly invade each other’s personal space in the pursuit of that elusive spare seat away from school bags, loud iPods, repulsive body odour and talkative strangers.

From the dirty, cold aluminum seat beside the glass wall of the tram stop, this frail lady struggles to get to her feet. The lines on her face deepen and purse as she looks beyond the flurry of people and at the tram with fierce determination. With both hands grasped tightly on her crutches, she forces herself off the seat and towards the tram doors. Her thin, bluish skin is pulled tight over her bony hands and white knuckles, and the distress is evident on her prematurely lined face. This strain goes unnoticed by bystanders who, with an air of inconvenience,

step snappily over the legs of her crutches and her slipper covered feet.

Undeterred, she begins taking small, painful steps towards the tram door.

After an excruciating minute, she reaches the tram door. The patient tram driver leaves his cabin to help her up the three steep stairs, and warmly extends his chubby hands down to her weak arms. A balding businessman looking on from his seat by the door lets out an obvious tick and a sigh, followed by a dramatic glance at his oversized watch. Bizarrely clothed students bury themselves in their books and block out the world with loud alternative music, while shoppers spread their bags over the scummy linoleum floor. With wide, glassy eyes and anger burning inside her, the lady thrusts her crutches up to the driver and grabs the rails.

Just like she learnt in physiotherapy, she uses her thin arms to support her light body and pull herself up the first step, placing very little weight on her limp feet. She imagines herself to be a fit, young gymnast on the parallel bars, pulling her body weight up effortlessly. She closes her eyes and focuses on this image as she fights to ignore the pain ripping through her entire body.

Just like she could before the accident, she bends her weak knees and confidently lifts her left foot over and onto the edge of the second step. She stretches both arms in front of her again and claws onto the hand rails. She can see herself as she used to be, in a power suit and pointy heels striding around

the city and into trams with ease, and remembers the times when everything was so easy.

Just like she knows she can, she heaves herself up onto the final step as the tram driver holds his thick arm out behind her. She crashes onto the tattered bench chair by the door, puffing heavily as her arms shake uncontrollably from the pressure.

“I can’t believe I just did that,” she exclaims loudly to the silent passengers as the doors ding shut. No one reacts; they bury themselves in their newspapers, turn up their music and stare harder out the window because they decide she isn’t talking to them.

Exasperated, she yells again, “I can’t believe I just did that!” Again, there is no reaction from the passengers, but the tram driver waves his hand through the window and gives her the thumbs up.

“I can’t believe I just did that, did you see what I just did?” she says again, this time to the young girl nearby who caught her eye. The girl gives her a weak smile, and whispers, “Well done.”

She leans back and lets out a deep sigh as her heart flutters with exhaustion and excitement. Her wheezing dissipates into silent tears of joy, and a wide, foreign smile envelops her face.

Yes, she did just do that.