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Through the Window

I spent my final year as a Ph.D. candidate in England, sitting in a pub in west London called The Level Crossing. It was one of those classic English pubs that had been around so long that the building itself was a historical monument. The beer was hand-pumped out of ancient oak casks by a crotchety, mostly-blind man stuck in the Blitz. The food was served on thick wood blocks with massive potato wedges or in deep clay bowls tempered by countless portions of rich, steaming stew. On Saturdays, the pub filled with people watching West Ham play while telling bad jokes and draining ale by the pint. Most days, I sat in my seat by the window, drinking tea and working on my dissertation. Emma, the waitress, kept my cup filled and always had a smile and some gentle humor for me. Her father was far less friendly, or maybe just protective. Either way, I got no smiles or painless mockery from him, just unintelligible growls and repeated reminders to keep my feet away from the window. The old man doesn't so much as glance in my direction; I think he only responds to "ale" and its synonyms.

I don't think I would've spent as much time in the Level Crossing if it weren't for that window. Fifteen feet across, it consisted of sixty panes of glass, all frosted with age. The window bows out, allowing an unobstructed view of the train station below. Thanks to the relative quiet of modern, high speed trains, the pub was spared most of the rumble of diesel engines and squeal of brakes, leaving me to watch the churning masses of people coming and going in peace.

When I didn't have work to do, or when I just needed a break, I picked people out of the crowd and invented lives for them. For instance, there was the blond woman who always wore massive black sunglasses like they do in Hollywood. She was so determined to make it as an

actress that she had already started behaving like a diva, dressing only in expensive designer fashions and throwing tantrums whenever her poor father forgot to evenly dust her French toast with organic nutmeg. She was so convinced that her big break was just days away that she refused to address her ailing finances and her massive credit card debt, no matter how often the bill collectors called her.

Then there was the Pakistani with the blue turban who changed trains here, commuting into London from some village out past Reading. At home he suffered nervous looks from neighbors whose xenophobia is softened only by fond memories of *Aladdin*. His first train pulled in two platforms away from his waiting connection, and he was always ten steps too slow to make it. It happened every day, but he never once so much as jogged in an attempt to save himself fifteen minutes. He was a man of tremendous character, a man who holds his dignity in the highest esteem. I think that he secretly enjoyed the accidental discrimination of the timetable, a warm-up snub before a long day of subtle ostracism.

When business was slow and she finished her chores, Emma often joined me at my table. Normally, I was working on my dissertation—"Theoretical and Empirical Studies on High Speed Transit and Service Sector Output"—so she sipped a glass of lemonade and did the crossword while I played with data sets. Other times, I let my computer crunch numbers and we talked. Usually she ranted about being ignored by whoever she happened to be dating at the time. She was not a gifted storyteller; her outrage was too shrill, her frustration too tragic, and it often seemed like my reaction was more important to her than her ire. I never met any of these people, not Aaron with the perfect smile, nor Ian with the deep blue eyes, nor Paul the French exchange student. When she ran out of horror stories, I shared some of my thoughts on the people down below. Like the bloated, grinning mechanic who stood on the third platform, ignoring the crumbs

cascading down his coveralls from whatever strange sandwich he was always eating. When his train pulled in, he tossed whatever was left of his meal in the direction of the bin and saunters aboard. He always missed, and the sandwich went bouncing down the platform, lunch meat sailing off in all directions. Sometimes I wanted to march down there, pull him off the train, and make him throw his food away. Emma laughed when I told her about his habits.

“You’re ridiculous,” she said.

“It’s not that funny.”

“It is a bit. You get all riled up about a fat man on a train station.”

“Maybe a little.”

“Well, anyway, why don’t you go down there and talk with him?”

“It goes against the rules.”

“You have rules?”

“Sure. Well, one rule.”

“Which is?”

“Don’t interfere.”

Emma got up, smoothing out her black apron, and collected the empty bowl and beer glass from my table. She flicked a straight brown bang out of her face with her free hand.

“Of course not. They’re just stories.”

“Right.” The murmured agreement floated around in my head.

They’re just stories.

It was the sundress that first caught my eye. A white, satin number devoid of frills, it was the dress of the dream girl, the woman that had grown up unaware of the hero’s silent

infatuation. She picked her way through the mass of people on Platform Two, her slow careful movements out of place amongst the mad rush of commuters. I sipped my tea and watched as she sat on the bench at the end of the platform, crossing her legs and folding her hands in her lap. Then my laptop beeped, demanding my attention. I brought up my buggy program and returned to work, pushing the woman out of my mind.

It took me an hour or so to figure out what the problem was with my code, and another four to sort it out. The lunch rush had come and gone; so rather than bother the cook for food I went out and bought a curry, which I ate at a bench across the street from the police station. Exotic odors mixed with the crisp smell of fallen leaves, and I couldn't help but smile, both at the weather and at the drunken man a pair of constables half-led, half-dragged into the station. He hiccupped a few times, face flushed with alcohol, and then stumbled through the doors. If his grin was any indication this wasn't the first time he had been picked up, and it wasn't going to be the last. Still, I couldn't help but admire his cheerfulness as I walked back to the Level Crossing.

I returned to my spot to find Emma in my seat, playing Minesweeper on my computer, her feet on the sill. I sat across from her, taking a sip from the beer that she had left me.

"I've never understood what people see in this game," she said, not looking up from the screen.

"So why are you playing it?"

"I'm bored."

"Exactly. That's why people play it."

She looked up at me.

"So how come you don't?"

"I don't get bored."

“Right. You have the lives of others to keep you entertained.”

I took another sip of beer. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“I’ve never had any luck with other people,” she said. “I get impatient, I want in. Instead, they just go about their lives, oblivious to my presence.”

“I think you might be missing the point.”

“I know you are.”

I didn’t respond. I could feel her eyes scrutinizing my face and I did my best to keep it blank. Finally, she gave up and slid out of the bench, wiping her hands on her apron.

“I’ll let you get back to work”

Emma disappeared into the kitchen, leaving me to ponder her words in silence. I got up and slid back into my usual spot. Pulling my glass across the table, I glanced out the window and then froze at the sight of the woman in white.

She hadn’t moved from the bench in over six hours. It’s as though the Tin Man, on holiday from Oz, had strolled down the platform, decided that the bench looked comfortable, and rusted in place. Every conceivable train to every conceivable location had come and gone dozens of times. She didn’t work there; even at this distance I could tell that her pale, smooth face was one that belonged in the top floors of an office building, not amongst the grime and muck of the train station. A constable loitered nearby, keeping an eye on the woman. He wasn’t suspicious, just curious. He’d never seen anything like it. The woman shots him a small smile, appreciative of his concern and the constable nodded in acknowledgement before strolling off to deal with a man who had begun proselytizing to a very uncomfortable group of old ladies waiting for the train to Gatwick.

We sat for another hour, she on her bench and me at the window. She wrapped herself in a shawl, and I finished my beer, but otherwise we were still. My laptop beeped a few times, trying to get my attention, and then died with a pathetic squeak. I stuffed it into my bag in annoyance, crumpling a few of my papers in the process. Men just getting off work started streaming in, and the familiar buzz of melded voices began to grow. The ambient noise only intensified my focus and it was not until Emma tapped me on the shoulder that I realized that some of the regulars were watching me with unease.

“What’s wrong? You’re putting everyone on edge.”

I took a breath. “Nothing is wrong.”

“Right. Of course it isn’t.”

“It’s not.”

Emma said nothing.

“Fine.” I sighed. “That woman is still there.”

“So what? Can’t come up with a plausible explanation?”

“No, I—wait. Yes, actually.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know. What would you wait on a bench for hours on end for?”

She gave me an odd look, wiping her hands off on her apron.

“You want my advice.” It wasn’t really a question.

“Sure.”

“Break your rule.”

The sun was minutes away from setting by the time I reached the platform, and the day had softened in anticipation. The woman's pale face, framed by jet black hair, glowed faintly in the orange light. She watched me as I approach, and said nothing when I sat next to her. A thousand questions raced through my mind, but I kept quiet. We sat, watching the crowds rush up and down, tired and cranky, just trying to get home to disinterested spouses and ungrateful children.

One train departed, and another arrived. We didn't say anything.

It was a lot noisier down here, in the middle of everything. The diesel-electric trains thumped as they pulled out of the station, and howled as the expresses raced through. Brakes squealed and doors dinged, all set against a background of hundreds of footsteps. It was smellier here too, thanks to overflowing bins and scattered garbage, but for the moment the only aroma I was registering was a curious mix of oil, autumn, and lavender.

The woman gave a quiet, lilting sigh. Her shoulders slumped slightly as the last vestiges of stubborn hope gave way.

"He's not coming."

Her voice was rich and melodic, with a small waver that sounded more like a vibrato than a note of resignation. I said nothing, preferring to drink it all in.

"It was a long shot at best. It's been five years."

She reached down and picked up her purse.

"You know what the worst part is?"

"No." My voice was no more than a throaty whisper.

"I could sit here for days and wait. In fact, I might come back tomorrow and do just that."

"I don't doubt it."

She rubbed her eye with the back of her hand. “When they say she won’t wait forever, that doesn’t mean she doesn’t want to.”

“It only means she won’t.”

The woman nodded, and stood up. She glanced past me and then gave me a small smile.

“It only means she won’t.”

I watched her walk away, dress flapping in the breeze, no sign of stiffness in her gait. She thanked the constable and then got on the escalator and rode up to the bridge before disappearing into the mob. I could feel a pair of eyes on my back, eyes in the pub that wonder what revelations I am having, but I didn’t turn around. For that moment, it was enough to sit in the cool autumn breeze on a dirty platform west of London, while someone else told a story about me.