

one

The train was already moving when I sat down. I didn't know where it was going, and I didn't ask.

Across from me sat an old woman with two cheap plastic bags at her feet. One was torn at the edge. Through the hole, I caught a glimpse of something soft and blue. I think it was wool, or maybe a blanket folded one too many times.

She didn't look at me. Not once. Just stared ahead like the window wasn't there. Like she wasn't here, either.

Her hands were placed neatly on her knees. Not stiff, not loose. Just still, like they were waiting for instructions.

She reminded me of someone, though I couldn't say who.

I started building a story about her, as I tend to do. She seemed like the type who once lived by the sea. Not the kind you swim in, but the cold kind, with wind that never stops. Maybe she kept bees, not for honey, but for the hum. Maybe that sound meant something to her. Maybe it drowned something else out.

I imagined she used to sit in a small garden, hands in the soil, listening to them buzz around her like they were singing only to her.

In my version, she has a son, or maybe it's a neighbor's kid she took in for a while. He left, of course. They always leave. But she still waits for him. She doesn't admit it, even to herself. But she looks for him on trains.

I bet those bags she carries are full of things nobody else would call valuable. A photo that's been in the sun too long. A fake apple with one tooth mark. A little music box that plays a tune no one can quite recognize.

Maybe she plays it sometimes just to prove she can still feel something when it stops.

Then, right when I was starting to feel like I had her figured out, she turned and looked at me. Just one second.

It was nothing.

It was everything.

The train slowed. She stood, lifted her bags, and walked off without a sound.

And then, as if on cue, a man in a suit dropped into the seat across from me. Crisp cuffs. Sharp jaw. Polished shoes. The kind of guy who checks his watch like time owes him something.

I didn't say anything.

I just watched.

two

He sat like he'd been assigned the seat. Like the train was just another meeting, and punctuality was something sacred.

He didn't look around. Not once. Just checked his watch, adjusted his cuff, and gave the faintest sigh, like something already wasn't going to plan.

His shoes were immaculate. The kind of shine that says someone else does this for me. Black, but not boring. You could probably see yourself in them if you tried.

I didn't.

He looked like the kind of man who reads articles about productivity before bed. Who weighs his meals. Who sends perfectly worded follow-up emails and keeps them short.

I imagined his life was built out of systems. Beautiful ones. Calendar blocks, macros, optimized lighting, vitamins sorted by function.

In my version, his apartment was cold but orderly. One painting. One whiskey glass. No magnets on the fridge.

His phone buzzed once, and he didn't flinch.

Maybe he'd lost someone. Maybe the systems came after that. Not to cope. To prevent it from happening again.

I pictured a day, just one, where the structure cracked. Where he woke up late. Where the coffee machine broke and the silence felt heavier than usual. Where something reminded him of something he never processed.

And I imagined he sat on a train, very much like this one, across from someone like me.

I don't think he ever cried. But I think he came close once, in the kind of quiet that makes you realize how many parts of yourself you've outsourced.

The train slowed. He stood like he'd been expecting it, like he'd already left the moment before.

And then she sat down.

three

She sat down without looking at me. I kind of wish she had.

Long, tangled hair, dyed at least twice and grown out in defiance. Glasses that slid a little too far down her nose. Calm in that way some people have, like nothing urgent could ever reach them.

She crossed her legs and tucked her hands under her thighs. The train lurched, but she didn't move.

And just like that, I was nowhere near the present anymore.

I didn't know her. But I recognized the shape she carved into the air. The way her elbow leaned against the wall. The way her hair caught the light, unfair, like it had done this before.

I looked away.

It wasn't her. I knew that.

But my chest still did that thing it does when I remember too suddenly.

She glanced out the window like she was waiting for something to appear. A city maybe. Or a version of herself she used to believe in.

I imagined she played piano, not well but with feeling. I imagined she gave terrible advice to her friends but always listened when they cried. I imagined she used to love someone who didn't know what to do with that kind of love.

Someone who mistook it for a mirror.

I shifted in my seat. I wasn't watching her anymore. I was watching something else entirely.

I remembered silence. Not the peaceful kind. The kind that follows too many chances.

And I remembered the light in someone's hair. Different light. Maybe a different train.

She pulled out a book and started to read, mouthing the words a little. I didn't recognize the cover.

I wondered if she was the kind of person who ever looked across at a stranger and imagined him into a mistake.

I hoped not.

The train kept moving. I kept still.

Her hair caught the light again.

I blinked.

And when she stood at the next stop, I almost followed her. I could've said something, anything.

But the door slid shut, and the train pulled forward.

I stayed.

After all, I wasn't going anywhere. I was already on my way.

four

He sat down like he belonged there.

For a second, I thought I was seeing myself. Reflected, refracted, or remembered. Same frame. Same eyes, only duller. Same mouth, but tighter at the corners, like it had forgotten how to relax.

He wasn't me, but he was close. Close enough to make me straighten up without knowing why.

His shirt was wrinkled, like he'd slept in it. His hair was messy in a way that wasn't trying to be anything. He looked tired, but not the kind that goes away with sleep.

He tapped the glass with his knuckle twice, then stared out like he was watching for something he didn't expect to see.

He had that kind of stillness that makes everything around it feel too loud.

And I started thinking about the stops I never got off at. The ones that blurred past while I was too busy looking inward.

What if they weren't just scenery?

What if they were exits?

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. Not in thought, more like habit. His fingers twitched, like they used to hold onto something important but forgot what.

I wondered if he was the version of me who asked more questions. The version who stopped playing games with beautiful strangers on trains and stepped into something uncertain just to feel it.

I wondered if he ever moved on.

The train slowed.

He stood up without hesitation. Adjusted nothing. Checked nothing.

When the doors opened, he stepped off like it wasn't a choice.

I watched him go.

And for the first time, I wasn't sure if I was staying for the journey, or just because I didn't know how to leave.

five

The seat across from me was empty.

The first time in hours, maybe. Or minutes. Time had started to fold in on itself, wrapping around the rhythm of the wheels, stretching and snapping in between stops.

It felt wrong, the emptiness. Like the space should've been filled by someone. Anyone. I kept glancing up, half-expecting a figure to materialize.

No one came.

The train rocked gently. The window showed nothing but tunnel.

I tried to anchor myself. Thought about the old woman, the man in the suit, the girl whose hair still caught the light in my mind, the one who looked like me.

It all blurred.

They felt less like people now, more like chapters I couldn't reopen. Lives I passed through instead of with.

Maybe I hadn't been watching them at all. Maybe I was just collecting mirrors, trying to find one that showed me something I could name.

I looked at my hands. Still the same.

I looked at the seat across from me. Still empty.

Maybe I was waiting for someone to sit down.

Maybe I wasn't.

The train kept moving. I didn't. The next person sat down.

six

He sat down without hesitation.

Not with purpose. Not like the others. Just... sat.

I looked at him for a while, waiting for something to reveal itself. A twitch. A sigh. A detail to latch onto.

Nothing.

No anxious hands, no distant eyes. He wasn't nervous or angry or quietly grieving. He wasn't anything.

Brown coat. No brand. Pants a little worn but clean. Shoes that had walked a lot, but not recently.

He didn't check a watch. Didn't scan the window. Didn't fidget.

He just sat.

I tried to imagine something for him. A job. A loss. A love he never confessed. But it all felt false, even to me.

He gave me nothing to work with.

And somehow that made me uneasy.

Every person before him had asked something of me. Had mirrored a thought, echoed a fear, opened a wound. But this man, he offered no entry. No permission. No invitation. He didn't need to be understood.

Maybe that was the difference.

I watched him for too long. At some point I realized I wasn't looking at him anymore. I was searching inside myself for a way to make him mean something.

I failed.

The train kept moving.

He sat there the entire time, untouched by metaphor.

And when the train slowed, he stood.

No glance. No pause.

Just up, and gone.

For a second, I thought he might have been the most real of all.

But I didn't know how to prove it.

seven

I didn't see him sit down.

One moment the seat was empty. The next, he was there.

He wore a navy jacket with a bright red scarf tucked unevenly beneath the collar. It wasn't the kind of red you see in winter fashion. It was too loud, too cheap, maybe handmade. It didn't match anything.

I couldn't stop noticing it.

The rest of him looked normal enough. Jeans. A canvas bag. Hair that hadn't been recently cut, but looked like it didn't mind.

He didn't look around. He didn't shift. He just sat like someone who wasn't waiting for anything.

I didn't invent much for him.

But I did imagine that he'd made peace with not needing answers. That he knew what it meant to carry quiet things. That he'd gotten off the train before—not because he was lost, but because he was curious.

There was something gentle about the way he breathed. Something unbothered.

And for the first time, I didn't feel like I had to be understood. I just wanted to be near it.

He looked up.

Not long. Just enough.

The train began to slow.

He stood. The scarf shifted slightly. Still wrong. Still bright. Still completely his.

I stood too.

Not because I knew what came next.

Just because, for the first time, I wanted to see.

The door opened.

He stepped off.

So did I.