

He sat up straight when she arrived. His eyes followed her as she used her shoulder to slide the heavy door of the train car closed. Ripped tights, tangled black hair, and a forehead shiny with sweat. He didn't know what it was about her, but he got the sense she was a heroine stuck in the wrong book. She sat down one row ahead of him, across the aisle, not bothering to take in the fog on the windows or the few sullen passengers around her. She just stared at the rows of faded seats. The man caught a glimpse of her eyes, a bright, tough blue, and he swore the air got colder.

It wasn't like him to commute this late. He usually took the six-o'clock train home from the office and was cooking dinner by seven. He never strayed from this routine, and never wanted to. Tonight's unprecedented exception was a result of his research team's end-of-year report. His suit was wrinkled and his hair greasy from a long day of staring at inconclusive data. Usually, this train car was a sea of tired, suit-wearing men after work. Today, he felt like an imposter. Besides himself and the misplaced heroine, there were very few other passengers. A pair of hardened teenage boys sat several rows behind him, and a middle-aged woman in a stained uniform for the fast-food place downtown dozed off near the front of the train car.

The man leaned his head against the cool window, listened to the rhythmic scraping of the wheels against the tracks, and watched the girl. Her eyes were wolf-like as they stared out the window at the dark buildings racing by. He noticed that she always kept her chin tilted slightly upward, but her shoulders slumped with the air of someone with bigger things to worry about than an evening commute. Though she showed no interest in the train's dreary ambiance, the harsh lights seemed more intense with her there. The man crossed his skinny arms. She was the kind of person who made others stop and take notice. He couldn't picture her waiting in line at

the bank or buying groceries. Too trivial. This was someone who others stared at from afar, a person he would never work up the courage to approach. A glowing blue in a world of greys.

Several stops later, he imagined that she was the daughter of an escaped convict, then the leader of an underground drug-smuggling ring. While considering the possibility of a scrappy Ivy League dropout, he was interrupted by the sound of loud, slow footsteps. He looked up at the glassy-eyed source of the noise and raised his eyebrows. A new passenger, tall and bearded, stumbled by with a careless smirk. With each lumbering footstep, the newcomer looked around without taking in any of it. When the train lurched forward, the drunk noticed the blue-eyed girl. For the first time, his face changed. His mouth moved, just a little.

The drunk put an unsteady hand on the headrest of the seat to the girl's left. Her eyes stayed pointedly glued to the window, and the wheels of the train kept scraping. At the next turn, the large man collapsed onto the stiff cushion with a weary exhale. From across the aisle, the quiet spectator froze, his fingers tightly gripping the seam on the wrist of his grey suit jacket.

The buildings rushing past had gotten farther apart, and the red brake lights of late-night travelers had disappeared. Besides the occasional streetlamp, the train windows were a solid black. The disheveled onlooker, who was usually in bed by now, pursed his lips as the drunk man placed his big arm around the girl's shoulder. Her blue eyes snapped away from the window, and she gave a small but swift shake of her head.

"Honey, relax." At this, the woman in the blue fast-food uniform looked over her shoulder.

Noticing the drunk's awkward leaning, she quickly studied the girl's face. After a moment, she slowly turned to face forward. With a close-lipped, unhappy smile, the girl slowly pushed the arm

off of her. Angling her body towards the window, she turned her attention back to the dark landscape.

A row away, the man in the wrinkled suit glanced fearfully at her small frame. Then, all of a sudden, the drunk face was close to hers, saying things that made her jaw tighten. She stared intently at her muddy, black sneakers. The slurred words were just quiet enough that none of the other passengers could make them out. Making no effort to disguise his anxious stare, the man in the wrinkled suit thought about calling for help.

Moments later, the girl stood up, blue eyes on fire. She gave his ample gut a fast, strong shove with both arms, letting out a soft grunt of exertion. Pausing to take a shaky breath and a long look at him, she carefully stepped over his contorted body and walked down the aisle. The man in the wrinkled suit was overcome by a wave of nausea, and he just barely shook his head. The drunk let out a dull groan, causing the woman to glance back over her shoulder and the teenagers behind them to look up. Ignoring the older woman's intent eyebrow raise, the girl slid into a row near her. The seat closest to the door. Looking down at a spot of squished, pink gum on the floor, the suit-wearing man vowed he would call for help if that creep tried anything else. The girl's black hair stuck out from behind the seat and he thought about how scared she must have been. He'd never felt more useless.

*Isn't her dad worried about her?* He thought. His female friends talked about how dangerous it was to be out late in the city. He knew that girls had to learn to be overly cautious to avoid getting hurt. He shot a look of annoyance at the drunk man, who was mostly recovered by now and starting to fall asleep. *I won't let anything bad happen*, he swore. His newfound resolve made him feel slightly noble, and his shoulders relaxed until the girl started coughing. *That's not a common cold*, he

thought. *It's a smoker's cough, or maybe she's just sick. Nothing worse than being sick when the weather's this bad.* He peered into the aisle and took in her thin jacket. Worn denim, with some fraying near the bottom. It looked like the kind his sister used to wear. She would sit on the couch with her jacket and a craft knife, trying to get her homemade rips just right. He was sure this wild-eyed girl hadn't ripped her jacket on purpose. Not one for artfully distressed denim.

She coughed one more time, loud and scratchy. Then she went quiet, and the man, who'd just realized he had cough drops in his briefcase, frowned. *She's holding it together,* he thought, *but she's hurting. No one that young should be hurting by herself.* Then the train slowed down and he heard the female conductor's disinterested voice announce his stop. When she finished speaking, the conductor hummed for just a second, one note of a mindless melody. Then the intercom went silent. The doors opened, and the man wondered if the girl had any friends to help her out during hard times. He wished he could make sure she was okay, but he didn't know what to say. The doors closed and the train started moving again.

The teenage boys had since left, and the drunk wandered off the train a few stops later. The train was empty except for the night's three final passengers. Just two more stops until the end of the line. The man, whose shiny work shoes were pinching his toes by now, had never truly seen this part of the city before. The silent landscape was broken up by random shouts and cars honking. Previously, he'd passed through, but like most people he knew, never stayed too long. Resting his head against the back of the cold seat, he finally wondered what he was doing. He'd consciously passed his stop ages ago, and was getting farther away every second. He didn't have a plan and was still worrying about the girl in the seat by the door. She'd moved so he couldn't see her hair anymore. *I'll just watch to make sure she gets home alright,* he decided. Then he would get on an inbound train, or a cab if it was too late, and go to bed. He found solace in knowing the girl

would be safe, and let himself be soothed by the sound of the train's wheels scraping back and forth.

Minutes later, the train again creaked to a stop, and the black hair moved out from behind the seat. She glanced back at him, just for a second, and the man was briefly mesmerized by her eyes. When she got off, he shuffled towards the door at the other end of the train car. *Like a fairy godmother*, he thought. *No, a guardian angel- more masculine*. He smiled to himself as he walked down the metal steps onto the platform. Trying to make his broad shoulders and long limbs discrete, he started walking, slowly, in the direction the girl had gone. The air smelled like new rain and cigarettes. He took a deep breath, relieved to be out of the stuffy train car. He frowned a little. The girl seemed to have disappeared. Figuring she would soon reappear, he pulled out his phone to check the schedule for inbound trains.

---

Inside the train, the surly conductor hummed to herself to keep from dozing off. The same pointless tune over and over. The small screen in front of her showed the train's route in glowing yellow. One more stop and she could finally get some dinner. After flipping the rusty switch to get the train moving again towards its final destination, she realized something wasn't right. She'd heard a noise, muffled and abnormal. Something deep inside of her told her what it was. Pushing that thought away, she stared blankly at the screen for an instant before pushing the *Emergency Stop* button. Ignoring the urge to yell to invisible coworkers (at home, not working the night shift today), she remembered reading a news article about this moment. The experts stressed the importance of staying calm and not hyperventilating. Take a breath. Besides, it could have been anything. Her mouth had gone completely dry. After three swift tugs to the cabin door

(*hadn't they called a repairman to fix that?*) she stepped onto the tin stairs with a clang. She was sure the train had been empty, anyway. She barely got any passengers this late.

The conductor's arms tensed as she was struck by a gust of freezing wind. Her feet were moving slowly, and not a single thought entered her head as she walked past each car. There was no one around to ask what she was doing, or why she had that awful, desperate look in her eyes. She just kept walking until she came to the front of the last car, then stopped. She took one last step towards the edge of the platform and looked down at the tracks. Seeing the body made her whole mind feel even emptier. The deserted platform was silent and the train was still, but she was still hearing the sound of the wheels against the tracks over and over. Then the faint thud. She was a statue for thirty seconds and then called the police.

---

Two days later, the conductor sunk into her favorite striped armchair. A bowl of reheated noodles in her lap, she turned up the volume on the television. The screen flashed from a car commercial back to the evening news. A journalist with a black scarf and slicked-back hair stood a few feet behind the train platform where she would never go again. He held a big, blue microphone and spoke slowly, picking a word to exaggerate every few seconds. Viewing this unfortunate coincidence as a test of will, the conductor did not change the channel. She held tight to the fork in her hand and ate another determined bite of noodles.

“And we're back, at the spot where the *horrific* incident happened. Right here, research analyst Andrew Marino was *pushed* in front of the 1:40 AM train heading to *Jackson Square* on Monday. As of a few hours ago, the individual who pushed him has been *identified* as 22-year-old Bree Gallagher. Based on her official statement to the authorities, sources tell us that she is standing by

her decision because Marino was allegedly *stalking* her. Gallagher states that Marino had stared at her throughout her ride home, from Downtown Crossing all the way to *Roxbury*. Marino reportedly followed her off the train and *pursued* her until she, quote, did what she *had* to do.”

The fork made a loud clinking sound against the bottom of the bowl, and the conductor finally stopped to look down. She had furiously eaten each and every noodle, never breaking her gaze from the glowing screen. Biting the inside of her lip, she set the bowl down on the floor and turned the volume up two notches. The screen had flashed to a petite young girl standing outside the train station. Her looks were striking in a frantic sort of way, and her face looked utterly defeated. The girl was talking softly, only looking up into the camera every so often with big, round eyes, bright blue like a Disney princess.

“I had already been harassed once that night by another man. And this guy, I guess his name was Andrew, he just watched it all happen. There was something off about him. His clothes were all wrinkly and he stared at me with no shame. I think he was entertained. He didn’t try to help me, and he never looked away. I moved to the opposite side of the train car, hoping both men would leave at some point, but this guy didn’t move until I got off. This isn’t the first time I’ve experienced something like this, so when he started following me on that empty platform, I just needed to feel safe. I’m not a violent person. A lady on the train saw his creepy stare, too. Really, I think any woman would understand what happened, why I had to-.”

The screen cut back to the man with the shiny hair. He resumed his slow monologue, not missing a beat. “We’ll keep you updated on any further—” The conductor turned the television off. Her face was scrunched up like she’d eaten something raw, even though she’d barely tasted her

dinner. She couldn't shake the feeling that there were eyes on her. She looked at the black screen, winced as she heard that thud one more time, and closed the shades before going to bed.