

The Blue Line

Martin had to end the affair tonight.

He didn't know her last name and suspected that Thea wasn't really her first, and he'd never been more miserably infatuated. She was probably married, as he was, but he never got around to asking. Sometimes she wore a ring, sometimes she did not, and occasionally she splayed half a dozen of them across her hands. He had never seen more than a glimpse of her profile or a lock of her hair, but Thea was the most alluring woman he had ever known.

Every morning he swore he would break off the relationship that night, but thoughts of her consumed him when they were apart and the prospect of being with her again would start his heart racing. He had to stop while doing so was still within his power, yet when she slipped up behind him on the ride home, all he wanted was to be with her.

The two months since they met on the Blue Line passed in a blur, even as the hours Martin spent fantasizing about her trudged along like battle-weary soldiers. They rode the train from Federal Center to Van Dorn Street, where Thea left him. Weekday evenings, around ten minutes after five, Thea was his for the precious shared interval of their commute on the DC Metro. Twice, he had transferred to the Yellow Line, driven by guilt to avoid her, but each time she slipped up behind him and wrapped her arms around his chest.

The train was always crowded, commuters pressing them together, but as they progressed and riders thinned out, they held their embrace. The first time they met, when she approached and whispered for him not to turn back, he obeyed her. In the following weeks, he made no attempt to set eyes on her, preferring the magic of the image he had created in his mind.

He felt her warmth and the beckoning of her perfume at odd times throughout his day. He recalled her flawless manicure and the firm grasp of her arms around his chest. The hairline scar at the tip of the small finger of her left hand somehow proved that she wasn't a fantasy, but that she was real and she could be his. The silky memory of her long, dark hair tormented him through clashes of conscience at his desk when he should have been working. She was tall and he had an imprecise idea of her slender shape, and he knew the feel of her breasts pressed against his back, but no more. He had seen her beauty confirmed in other men's eyes as they passed, but he didn't need their stares to confirm what he already knew.

They had only met on the train, but momentum was threatening to change that. They whispered to each other, the gentle pressure of her body a counterpoint to his, and swayed together as the train slowed and started again. They spoke occasionally of the theater, of travel, or their dreams. Anything but life. He savored the warmth of her breath in his ear when she spoke, but so often they rode in silence, her chin nestled on his shoulder.

Something would happen soon. Martin both hoped and worried that she would suggest getting together, perhaps for drinks. He would be helpless to say

no and couldn't convince himself that he wanted to. He had never envisioned himself as the type to cheat on his wife, and she deserved better, but like Martin's marriage and career, meeting Thea on the Blue Line was just another link in a chain that he had not forged.

His lack of focus at his job created trouble for him in recent weeks, so he brought work home for the weekend instead of traveling with his wife and daughter to Pennsylvania to visit his in-laws. He had been distant at home and the climate there was icy, so his wife didn't object to leaving him on his own for a few days.

Martin found a seat on the train that night and tried to muddle through work as he rode, though the document he was reading could have been the scribbles of a Chinese doctor and he wouldn't have noticed. A portly woman with her arms folded over her midsection sat to his left, dozing. Across the aisle a young pair, tattooed and pierced, stretched out their interlocked limbs, challenging anyone to give them a sideways look, yet angry at the world for ignoring them.

He sensed her. She wouldn't approach him while he sat, but not seeing her didn't make it any easier for him. Part of his dilemma was his commitment—not just to his wife, but also to himself—and part of it was his desire to preserve the fantasy. He made it all the way to Reagan National Airport, staring at his report like he was expecting it to do something, when she finally got to him.

The train stopped and Martin bolted. Her perfume had trumped the less subtle smells of public transit and had just about teased his gaze away from the report to seek her out, but the doors rolled open and he ran. He might have continued all the way home, but the scent lingered in his mind and he stopped on the platform, savoring what was now only a vivid memory. He spent that evening scavenging through department stores searching for her perfume. He did the same for most of the weekend and when he finally found it Sunday morning—Issey Miyake—he dropped ninety dollars on a bottle he could never give her.

He ignored his work the rest of the weekend and paid the price Monday morning when his boss called him in. Now going home, Martin's head was throbbing. The game with Thea was supposed to have been a harmless little castle in the sky that he could escape to when life on Earth didn't measure up. Instead, his gut had become a twisted knot that required a bottle of the pink stuff a day to keep untangled.

He boarded the Blue Line and took his place, ready to call it off and determined to put an end to this magnificent misery. She may have seen that he was upset, he couldn't say, but the train had already passed Foggy Bottom and he saw no sign of her. Martin drew in a long breath with the thought of tracing her fragrance, but detected nothing. He was about to find a seat when she clutched him from behind and kissed his neck. She wore no perfume this time, but she had a faint, soapy scent that was somehow more dangerous.

His headache disappeared and her contact banished his work and family concerns to some deserted island in his mind. "I spent the every minute of the past weekend thinking about you. About what I want to do with you."

"We need to—"

She cut him off, massaging his temples. Martin closed his eyes. It felt like she was prying bent nails from his skull and he wanted to kick himself for enjoying it so much. "I made plans for us tonight," she said. He drew her hands down and was about to speak when she added, "Room service at Four Seasons."

"I have to get home."

"No, Martin."

"We can't do this."

A woman sitting near where they stood let out a huff and tramped away, heaving an elbow into Martin's ribs as she passed.

"We can do what we want," she reminded him. "This is our fantasy."

"It's over." Martin gave a nod of satisfaction. Now that he had said it, the pressure eased.

She had her hands on him again, wandering. "Who will know?"

"I will." He let her hands run their course.

"We make the rules, Martin." She had said that from the beginning.

"You don't understand."

She quieted him, pulling her body tighter against his. “We can meet once a week. Once a month, if you like. It’s your decision. No phone numbers and no promises.”

“I can’t.”

“Do you want to?”

“Yes,” he said too emphatically.

“Then you can.” She smiled from behind him—he felt it pass through him—and said, “You’ll never forgive yourself if you don’t do this.”

“And you’ll never be more desirable to me than you are right now.” He reached back, savoring the slippery feel of her dress as his hand toured the curve of her hip. She suggested that he had underestimated her and Martin sensed a hint of pain in her voice. “In the end, all I have is the fantasy,” he said, “but that’s enough for me.” Completing the act with her would be reckless and redundant. Anything could spoil it for him. Something as commonplace as a bit of dinner trapped in her teeth or as trifling as the way she sipped her wine could wipe out his image of her. “This has only ever been about the fantasy.”

She asked if he wanted her to leave and he nodded. Her grip intensified. “I’ll make you an offer,” she said. “Turn to me. If you can tell me the fantasy is lost, I’ll leave this train at the next stop and never ride it again. If not, we go to the hotel right now.”

Martin thought about this, intrigued now more than ever. He took her hand in his and turned.