

MAN ON A TRAIN

The man sitting across from me does not like trains, I think. It is a beautiful sunny Connecticut day, and he chose an aisle seat diagonally across from my window seat. He is facing the opposite way of our direction of travel – backwards two and a half hours to Boston, the train will propel him while he sleeps. Perhaps he will dream of where he's going, or else where he wants to be. Perhaps he won't sleep at all while the train buffets us along the coast and boarding passengers jostle their luggage past his shoulder. He is wearing khaki shorts and a pink and white striped button-down shirt without a tie, a silver watch clutching his right wrist and thick-rimmed square glasses that are slipping down his nose as he tries to sleep.

His hair is long and auburn, just past his ears, with bangs that he has neglected enough that they fall mischievously across his forehead, a light layer of grease working as a natural gel. He has enough scruff on his chin to prove he hasn't shaved in a day or two. I wonder how old he is. Maybe late twenties? He doesn't look over thirty. He has faint laugh lines creeping in at the edges of his eyes but his forehead is smooth. His cheeks are tanner than the rest of his face and his nose is freckled and red, maybe from a day on the beach and careless sunscreen application.

He clasps and unclasps his hands once, and switches his legs from straight out to crossed. Frustration creases his forehead and his eyes snap open. He gives up on sleep, taps the train's rhythm onto his sneaker which he has propped onto his knee. Out my window trees fly by – fences, yards, houses, ocean – hidden places only trains can see, tucked away into corners of land that no one bothers

to explore except in passing.

The man is falling asleep again. We pass a marsh and a marina and a fallen telephone pole as he rubs the crinkles from his forehead.

An hour in I hear him moan a little in his sleep, waking himself up. He looks around sheepishly, probably hoping no one heard him. I keep looking out the window and I pretend not to notice he's awake. I am prepared to ignore him for the rest of the train ride – it's a little late to be exchanging names, an hour in.

When we hit Providence, I realize I need to use the bathroom. He is asleep again, so I try to step over him without disturbing him but he's made it difficult for me. His legs are stretched across the space between his chair and the empty one across from him so that they form a human hurdle. Once, on a thirteen hour flight from Honolulu to New York, I held it for six hours. Just sat there and waited for my bladder to explode rather than disturb the drunk man on my left and the teenage boy on my right who seemed more afraid of me than I was of him.

On the train, gingerly, ever so carefully, I lift one leg and then another over the man's hurdle and hurry to the bathroom. It feels good to move my legs again, so I stretch and wash my face, lifting smeared mascara from beneath my eyes and running my fingers through my hair. There's something about traveling that makes me feel grimmer sooner than normal. All I do is sit in one spot for too long and suddenly I begin to feel this intense desire to wash my hands, or to shower or at least change my clothes. It must be something about the stagnancy of it, the trick of passing through many places in a matter of seconds while actually remaining in one spot for hours on end. My body can tell that I'm cheating at getting from one place to another, letting a machine carry me instead of moving my own legs

and feet.

I think bathrooms on trains and buses and planes are less claustrophobic than most people assume. The isolation of it is freeing. Instead of being one among many in rows of chairs and luggage, I am the owner of some small space that, for a few minutes, I can call my own and lay claim to – even if it does have a toilet and the soap smells like baby powder mixed with hand sanitizer. I don't think anyone is waiting outside so I linger, enjoying the calm of the white walls and the softer quiet of this room, softer than the chug of the train and the rush-by of graffiti'ed walls and the sleep-breathing of the man sitting across from me. I prefer to ride trains without company.

When I come back from the bathroom my venture across his hurdle is less graceful. My back foot gets caught on his shin and I tumble into my seat, all knees and hips and elbows.

“Mmmph,” he grunts. I've woken him up. Shit.

“I'm so sorry,” I say, still avoiding eye contact. I adjust my shirt so it hugs my hips instead of bunching up around my belly button.

“It's okay, I should wake up anyway,” he says, pulling his legs back and reaching his hands into the air, yawning. I don't respond, but after a moment he looks at me and asks, “Do you know which stop is next?”

“I'm not sure... We were just at Providence though. I think we're halfway to Boston.”

“Halfway, huh? Thank God.” He pauses, re-crossing his legs. “I'm Roger, by the way.” He has a thick Boston accent, all 'ah's and no 'r's. He extends his hand in greeting but I catch on too late and he takes it back.

“Audrey.” I say, and smile. Or I think I'm smiling. I've been told my slight smiles actually just

look like a straight face, and my straight face looks like I'm miserable. Hopefully he thinks I'm smiling at him.

"Where are you headed, Audrey?" he says.

So now the names are exchanged, an hour and fifteen minutes in, and I'm having a conversation with the man sitting across from me.

"Uh, Boston," I say, a second late enough to feel awkward.

"Boston," he echoes. "Me, too. Headed home." He pauses and adds, "You probably guessed that."

I did, the accent gave him away. But I don't say so, just chuckle and shrug. "I'm just passing through," I tell him.

"Visiting a friend?" he says.

"My aunt," I answer. "It's her birthday."

"Oh wow, tell her happy birthday for me," he says excitedly, as if he actually expects me to. My aunt would not appreciate a happy birthday from a random stranger on the train. She would probably think it were an invasion of privacy for someone she's never met to know when her birthday is, let alone for this stranger to have the nerve to wish something upon her.

"Okay, I will," I laugh. "Not that it'll mean much to her, coming from you."

"Ouch!" He laughs, too, and tries to explain himself. "I don't know, if it were my birthday and someone I didn't even know truly wanted it to be happy, I think that would mean a lot to me. Wouldn't it mean something to you?"

As he asks the question he leans forward in his seat. We haven't broken eye contact for a few

moments, and I notice his eyes are a dark green, speckled with brown. A silver necklace slips out of his shirt, dangling a hand-shaped charm.

“I guess it would,” I say, a little embarrassed. My gaze slips from his and down to the necklace. He notices and takes the charm between his left thumb and middle finger.

“What is that?” I say. “I think I’ve seen it before but I can’t remember what it means.”

“This is a hamsa,” he says. “It’s a right palm, open to the world. It’s supposed to bring good luck and protection, and ward off the evil eye.”

“The evil eye?”

“Yeah... like, when someone gives you a creepy look or something. But mostly it just means when someone wishes you ill will or sends you bad vibes. The hamsa protects you against it.”

“Like a dream-catcher? A bad-catching spider web in the form of a hand?”

“Sort of. I like it because it’s not particular to one religion. Jews, Muslims and Christians have all used the same symbol to mean almost the same thing.”

He stops talking abruptly and reaches underneath his seat, looking for something. He pulls out a brown canvas messenger bag, reaching in for a pen and notebook. The notebook is one of those small spiral ones, plain black. He flips through the pages until he finds an empty one, and I see a couple sketches and what look like to-do lists, with dates on the pages. With the page empty, notebook on his knee, he uncaps the pen and a bit of ink latches onto his finger without him noticing. His glasses have slipped down a bit and he pushes them to the top of his nose with the inked finger, smearing a blue line up the ridge. I wonder whether or not I should tell him.

“Um, Roger?”

“Yeah?” He looks up at me and I point to my nose.

“You’ve got – ink. On your nose.”

“Oh!” He laughs, looking at his blue fingertip. “Whoops. ‘Scuse me.”

Roger gets up and walks to the bathroom. His walk is leisurely, not like mine. I can see that he is more cautious, though, in the way he looks ahead, careful to place his feet in between the rhythm of the chug-chug. He is more aware of the train’s movement, and how it could send him off balance if he isn’t on his guard. A minute later he returns, ink-free, and sits down again, wiping his hands on his khakis. His hamsa is hanging out of his shirt and he gives off an aura of baby powder and hand sanitizer mixed with some sort of man’s deodorant – maybe Old Spice. I like the smell; it makes me think of afternoons in high school after I had spent the morning helping babysit in the church nursery, scrubbing the baby diaper smell off my hands into the sink where my dad had shaved that morning, his aftershave lingering on the marble. Roger picks up the pen and notebook again, opening to the same blank page. He starts to sketch a hand onto the paper.

“You don’t really look like the kind of guy that would wear a ...hamsa? Is that what it’s called?”

I say.

“Why’s that?” He looks down at his pink and white stripes. “It’s the shirt, isn’t it?”

“That and the khakis, yeah.”

“My mom bought me this shirt while I was away last year,” he says. “She sent it in the mail, straight from L.L. Bean’s fall clearance. I couldn’t not wear it the first time I see her in a year.” He brushes a clump of auburn hair out of his eyes. I remember that it’s been months since I’ve cut my hair; I can barely run a brush through it because the split ends catch each other. At least I washed it today. I

stop myself from staring at Roger's hair and take a clump of my own hair in my hand, inspecting for breaking points.

"I didn't mean— well, I didn't mean you look uptight or anything. I just meant... you look like a New Englander," I say. I spy at least three split ends splaying out from between my fingers. In my peripheral vision I can see him grinning.

"So, uptight," he affirms. He crosses his arms and tilts his head, still smiling. "It's okay, I know the stereotype."

"No, I mean... sorry," I say. I am ready to end the conversation. Maybe if I escape to the bathroom he'll be asleep again by the time I get back.

"Are you still in college, Audrey?" he says, slumping back into his seat. He's probably around 27 and already has a steady job. People who wear fancy silver watches and thick glasses like that must have some sort of handle on life.

"Yeah, but I'm home for summer break," I say. "I'm graduating next year. I go to Notre Dame." I pause. "What about you?"

"I had to drop out a few years ago," he says. "But I've been saving."

What do you say to that? I try to think of something that doesn't sound patronizing. All I manage is, "Oh. Well, good for you." I don't even think to ask him where he went to school before he dropped out, or what he studied, or what he's been doing while he's been saving. I notice I'm biting my fingernails and force myself to stop by sitting on my hands. I seem to have killed the conversation with my last comment. I think about pulling out my iPod, or a book, but Roger hasn't given up on me yet.

"Here," he says, and slides the notebook back into the pocket on the side of his messenger bag.

He still holds the pen, though, and looks at me with sudden intensity. He holds out his hand.

“What?” I say, thinking he’s giving me something. His hand is empty. Does he expect me to just give him my hand? Maybe he wants a piece of gum.

“Here, give me your hand,” he says.

“Why?”

He keeps looking at me but doesn’t answer. His hand waits there, in the air between us, expectant. I stare at it for a few seconds, but he doesn’t take it back. Just waits.

“Fine.” I reach my hand out and place it on top of his. His palm and fingertips are cold, and the pad of his thumb is smooth. He turns my hand over so the palm is facing down, takes the pen and starts to write something. The tip of the ballpoint drags and digs into my skin for a second.

“Ow!” I tense my hand but don’t pull away. He looks up quickly. I avert eye contact but let the muscles in my hand relax.

“Sorry,” he says. His thumb presses into my skin for a second, to stabilize my hand. He has nice hands, strong. And tanned, dark around the knuckles. He has a freckle above the nailbed of his right pointer finger. I can feel blood smirk behind my cheeks and hope he doesn’t see. The pen is rolling quicker now; it doesn’t hurt. He draws the hamsa silhouette on my hand and starts to add intricate details. There are tiny swirls in each of the fingers, climbing and connecting like ivy vines on a wall, or like the veins beneath the surface of the skin he’s drawing on.

“Now you’ll have protection, too,” he says, “while you roam around the city this weekend.”

I try not to let my hand shake while he works. I can feel my palm sweating. Roger’s lips are pressed tightly together in concentration. He is about to draw the eye into the center when the train

lurches to a halt.

“Mass Pike: Route 128. Next stop: Boston Backbay,” the conductor announces. The pen skips and drags back, drawing a ragged line through the hamsa where Roger’s evil eye would have gone.

“Damn.” Roger leans back a little, still holding on to my hand, and admires his sketch. “I guess it’s not that bad.”

“Thanks,” I say. “Maybe you should be a tattoo artist.” The train starts up again, beginning the fifteen minutes to Backbay. I look at the blue ink covering the back of my hand and chuckle.

“What?” Roger lets go of my hand, but I continue to hold it in front of me.

“It’s just kind of funny – a hand on a hand. Do you think that doubles the protection value?”

Roger laughs. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“What happens when I wash it off?”

“It’ll still work, I think. It’s the thought that counts.” He smiles, a green and brown eye winking at me.

The train goes around a corner and we’re shifted abruptly in our seats. I drop my hand to brace myself and it lands on Roger’s knee. I quickly take it back and rest my hand on the edge of my seat. Roger doesn’t notice. His messenger bag tilts to spill its contents onto the floor. I hear him swear and see him stoop down to pick them up, hastily stuffing them back into the bag. He continues to swear. He scans the floor, searching for something still, and then grabs a pen that has landed by my foot just before I am about to reach down and give it to him. He glances up at me quickly before leaning back and replacing the pen in a side pocket. He exhales.

“You don’t like trains, do you?” I ask.

He pauses before he answers. “They’re not my favorite mode of transportation, no.”

“Then why’d you take the train?”

“I don’t have a car,” he says, shrugging. “And to be honest I’d rather ride a bicycle, but sometimes you have to sacrifice desire for practicality.”

“That’s a sad thought,” I say.

“It is a little, yeah. But I guess a healthy dose of discomfort is good for you sometimes.”

I look from Roger to my hamsa-stamped hand and nod. Roger takes out his notebook again and starts writing something; I can’t see what it is. I look out the window and wonder if my aunt will be waiting at the station when we get there or if I’ll have to take a cab.

We spend the next ten minutes in quiet. When the train stops again Roger stands and pulls my bag down for me. I thank him and apologize for its heaviness but he shrugs it off. He pulls down a red camping-style backpack, complete with zippers and pull ties, the kind someone might bring to Europe with them for a couple months to hop from hostel to hostel. I imagine Roger hitchhiking through Italy, or hiking the Appalachian Trail, just him and his backpack.

While we walk down the aisle to get off the train I mention that I haven’t had a coffee yet today. Roger jokes about the number of Dunkin Donuts per square mile in Massachusetts. He turns his head slightly as he walks to make sure I can hear him while I follow.

“Did you know D&D’s outnumber Starbucks ten to one?” he asks as we wait for the door to open.

He gets off first and then takes my bag and hands it back to me as I step onto the platform. After I land, both feet safely away from the yellow line marking the edge, I shake my head.

“I bet it’s the munchkins,” he says. “Dunkin Donuts has the oompa loompa power on their side.”

I laugh, but I can’t think of anything witty to say in return. We are walking side by side. I switch my bag from my left hand to my right and back again, trying not to let it hit Roger in the process. Roger is still musing about the difference between a coolata and a frappacino, but I am wondering what will happen when we start walking different directions, and when exactly this moment will come.

We walk all the way to the entrance doors of the station together but then I pause before advancing. Roger notices and hangs back, too. He adjusts the straps of his backpack on his shoulders and drops his messenger bag to the floor beside him.

“Well, Audrey, I guess I’ll see you around, maybe?”

“Maybe,” I say.

I am looking at my feet, swinging my dufflebag against my shins. The handle digs into my fingers. Should we hug? Or shake hands? I don’t know what’s appropriate. I decide to follow his lead.

Roger steps forward and opens his arms as if in a question. I smile in response and he wraps his arms around me. Hug it is. I drop my dufflebag so I can hug him back. I’m hesitant, but the hug ends quickly enough. The French think hugging is even more intimate than kissing – your entire body, pressed up against a person, melting into their bubble. To them, the cheek-to-cheek kiss-kiss seems less vulnerable, but there is something about lips and faces that I think the rest of us are right in labeling as highly personal. Somehow your consciousness gets stuck there, behind your face.

Roger steps back and replaces the messenger bag on his shoulder. Staring at my feet again, I force myself to look up and meet his gaze.

“It was nice to meet you,” I say, searching for goodbye phrases that are appropriate to use with people whose last names you don’t even know. “Thanks for the hamsa.”

“You, too,” he says, warmly. “And don’t forget to tell your aunt happy birthday for me.”

I let him walk out the door ahead of me and I call my aunt. She is waiting for me at home, which means I need to hail a cab. This is not a skill that I have, having grown up in the suburbs. I hope that being a girl might get me attention, but aggression is probably more important.

I step outside and there he is, waiting on the sidewalk and scanning the traffic. We’ve already said goodbye so I don’t want to say hello again. It’s not that I don’t like Roger, but it would just be easier. I like to pretend people don’t exist after I say goodbye to them. I almost walk back into the station so I can exit out the other side, just to avoid the trouble of another goodbye, but Roger sees me in his peripheral and turns.

“Audrey! Are you catching a cab?” he says, just as a taxi pulls over to the curb in response to his outstretched arm. I nod. His face lights up. “Let’s share one.”

I can’t think of a reason why not, so I climb in the cab with my dufflebag on my lap and he follows after me. The cab driver looks up into the rearview mirror, making eye contact with Roger.

“Bay Village, please,” Roger says, then looks to me.

“Oh – that’s where I’m headed too.” Of course.

“Your aunt lives in Bay Village?” He sounds surprised. “Huh, small world.”

The cab pulls onto the road. It sounds like that Beatles song is playing on the radio, the one from the Target commercial. Roger is quietly singing along: “You say goodbye, and I say hello... Hello goodbye, hello goodbye...”

I fiddle with the zippers on my bag and glance at Roger before looking out the window, anticipating the ten minute drive. I feel guilty for the silence.

“You haven’t seen your mom in a year?” I say, turning to face him again.

He stops singing and looks over at me.

“Yeah, the last time I was home was last summer, before I moved to Seattle. I thought I’d live with my old college buddies for a while, look for a job. But I missed the East Coast.” His face tightens a little. I want to ask if Seattle was a mistake, or if he was running away from something, or if now he’s running away again, running back. He probably doesn’t want to talk about it.

The cab driver looks up into the rearview mirror again. We’re in Bay Village. Roger looks out the window.

“Oh, this is fine. Stop here please,” he says. My aunt’s house is about five blocks further. Roger insists on covering the entire cab fare, despite my protests. He steps out of the cab with his backpack on one shoulder and leans in to say goodbye again. I catch a whiff of that baby powder and Old Spice scent.

“Goodbye,” he says. This goodbye is different, it sounds more like a question.

“Again,” I say.

He smiles. “I told you I’d see you around. It just happened sooner than I expected.”

I smile back. “Goodbye, Roger.”

As he closes the cab door I see a woman run out of the building we’re parked next to. She is wearing blue slippers with flowers all over the tops, a pink housedress and a cardigan, and her auburn hair matches Roger’s as it flies behind her. He turns just as she reaches him, and they embrace. One of

her hands is buried in his hair, ruffling it as the other arm tries to reach around as much of him as she can, hindered by the backpack. I can't see Roger's face but the messenger bag is on the ground and the notebook has fallen out again. He looks like he's shaking. His mother takes the backpack off his shoulders and hugs him again.

The cab pulls away from the curb and the driver confirms my aunt's address. I nod, still looking back at Roger and his mom.

That night in the guest-room of my aunt's house I am brushing my teeth and washing my face and I notice a trail of blue running down my arm. The hamsa is bleeding. I wash my hands and my arm, letting the hot water linger on my skin. Blue ink stains the sink. The air conditioning raises goosebumps on my arm where the wet hasn't evaporated yet. There is a pale blue hamsa left, like a watermark on stationary, on the back of my hand, and a darker blue mark where the train jerked to a halt and the ballpoint dug in. Now my hands smell like lavender-vanilla instead of baby power and sanitizer. I trace the hamsa to remember its shape, try to follow the spirals inside each finger.

“Goodbye again,” I say.