

I sit in the farthest corner of the train, taking the two-seat bench to myself. No one is seated on the bench across from me, not yet. The crowd is normally sparse on weekdays. I take the left sleeve of my jacket, the one most out of sight from the eleven o'clock commuters, and remove my arm from it. I then move my arm down my back, as if I'm scratching it, but I continue down until my fingers are faced with two possible entrances. I take the first. I favor hedonism over sodomy, as every good woman should.

A young couple holding hands and staring up at the advertisements across from them

An older man with shut eyes and white paint on his pants

A leather-clad woman staring angrily into her phone

A young man leaning against the door with large headphones and polarized sunglasses

A girl underdressed for the weather clutching a large raggedy backpack in her lap

Two middle-aged men in suits laughing in between each loud word they say

A young man looking down at his shoes as a sleeping child leans against his shoulder

All unknowingly bearing witness.

It takes me three steps to lift off and five more to reach my destination. With one prolonged and dramatized fake stretch, I am back into my jacket. I leave with only the dingy silver wall where I wiped my fingers knowing what I'd done.



Work drags on in the tedious nature it often takes. Easy money, my mind repeats every time I remember to blink away the blurred image of the lobby. The lull of the afternoon hours is not the same as those that take up the late nights and early mornings. There is no memory of self-contemplation in

these dark moments, only the passing thought of my brain pickling in the briny fluid trapped inside my skull. The dark streets lend me only one task tonight, that being to check two tired Germans into their suite. Our exchange lasts as long as an exhausted, accent-full conversation can; that is average outside of a few “Sorry can you repeat that”s interspersed.

These nights are often filled with lazy under-the-pants fidgeting and occasional notes written to remind myself or the other desk-sitters of special requests made by picky clientele.

I review the blue post-it notes:

“Extra pillows 6A”

“Fluffier towels 2C”

“2 Bottles white wine 4G”

As if on queue, Theodore Chlebek quickly walks out of the elevator. His hair stands up in what seems to be its signature unkempt style and he wears a grey hoodie with black unbranded track pants that swish with each long step he takes. His foam slippers gently tap along the marble. He gives me a nod, a polite smile on his face. For that one moment, I’m recognized, not just an inanimate feature of the hotel. For that one moment, we’re equals. It humanizes him. He reaches the front door and nods again at David, who does not notice behind the horizontal screen of his phone.

I could watch videos on my phone as David does, or do crosswords and draw pictures like the ones the other secretaries leave behind. I could read novels and educate myself. I could change my life in these hours if I really wanted to. But I don’t. Occasionally I will use the computer and Google the random questions that come to my mind, such as when the new season of our show is coming out or whether or not it’s going to be an especially frigid winter. But more often than not I just stare ahead. I don’t wait for my snack break nor do I wait to leave. I bend over and wink at the monotony with each hour

spent, teasing it with false promises of a breaking point. I give myself to the mundane, it takes all it can from me each night.

Theodore returns in under twenty minutes, a small brown paper bag in tow. Barely large enough to carry a can of beer, the bag seems to be less than half full. He spares no nods this time, walking directly to the elevator. He presses the top buttons and waits. His shoulders are slumped and rounded. His posture is demure for a man of his stature. Seconds pass before he ditches his station and walks toward my desk.

“Hi,” he says, a suspiciously pleasant look drawn on his skeletal face.

“How can I help you?”

“I don’t know.” His black eyes meet mine, “Do you smoke?”

The elevator dings with impatience.

“I quit almost fifteen years ago.”

“Not cigarettes,” he smiles. “Green stuff. Have you tried it?”

The way he swats away the words weed or marijuana or pot comes off as immature. It’s as though he’s speaking in the same code teenagers might use in a hallway. His attention feels naughty. The mundane glares at me like I’m cheating on it.

“Not in a long time, why do you ask?”

The doors of the elevator close.

“How long has it been?”

“It’s probably been three years now.” Titillated by the foreign nature of these personal questions, I ask,

“What about you?”

He smiles, perhaps pleased that I’ve pretended not to be able to smell the contents of his bag since the onset of our conversation.

“Oh, I partake often.”

“Well that’s fine by me, it’s legal now you know.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed! Where I’m from it’s still not, but it seems like every deli around here is dealing eighths.”

His crooked smile warms me with its authenticity. I quit being charmed around the same time I quit cigarettes, but it seems tonight might smell of tobacco again.

“Yeah, that’s a new development. I guess the government hasn’t been able to deal with the consequences of its own actions,” I return.

“Not that I’m complaining, it beats meeting up with the sketchy guys back home. Out of all the shit the government puts us through it’s the least the bigwigs can do.” He stalls, looking at the desk and then again at my face. “Did you buy your own when you used to smoke?”

“Rarely,” I say. I bury the feeling that tells me to be wary of the manchild. His attention feels too good.

“I would stumble across it after a shift or when I’d meet an old friend. But I would sometimes buy a little from her to help me sleep.” The old friend in question was in fact my late, arthritic mother.

“Women hardly ever have to buy their own weed, huh? Must be nice.”

“Well, we have enough to deal with. Drinks and drugs should be free, it’s like a tax for being stared at.”

I’m careful to err on the side of mystery, as though I’m the type of woman who is often gifted things from strangers.

“Maybe you’re onto something with that,” he grins. “Would you potentially like to join me outside and break your, how long was it? Three years?”

“Just about.”

“Your three years fast with me?”

I want to. I wouldn’t expect myself to, but I do. I want to be in the cold air getting up to something PG-13 rated with a man, even if he is what my eighteen-year-old self would call a scrub. I want to be more than a jaded matriarch, just for one night.

I check the clock, only thirty-eight minutes lie between us and my hour-long break.

“I have a break in forty minutes. Could you stay sober for that long?”

He laughs, “I’m far from sober. Sure. I’ll be downstairs in exactly forty minutes.”

“Wonderful, the hotel is grateful to accommodate someone of your patience.”

He laughs again, “You’re funny. I didn’t expect that.”

I lift my eyebrows in response. I’m having more fun than I’d ever admit. If I had friends to recall this interaction with, I would characterize myself as colder, more mature and less enthusiastic, a real prize that needs to be worked for. But as I watch Theodore walk to the elevator, I feel the same girlish curiosity I felt before the word colostomy became a part of my vernacular. Just as the elevator dings, Theodore looks back at me and catches the glance I’d been casting on his concave back. He smiles and waves. I don’t wave back.

The forty minutes that pass take longer than any dusty afternoon or dissociative night shift. The mundane mocks me, batting its eyelashes in a sarcastic display of betrayal. I ignore it, knowing it plays the same toxic games as childish love affairs. I envision Theodore and I laughing on the sidewalk, brushing each other’s fingers sheepishly with every pass of the joint. If I really wanted to I could ditch my dead-end job and end up in his queen-sized bed. Or maybe my absence could go unnoticed. I check the computer’s schedule and just as I suspect, there are no more check-ins for tonight. So long as no one struggles with the digital room service feature or is disturbed by the loud intercourse we will undoubtedly have, I’m in the clear.

David.

I always forget about David. I look over at his corner and find that his eyes are shut. The thought of what might happen if a thief were to enter and find himself faced with a narcoleptic, unarmed, and middle-aged security guard passes my mind only briefly. It always feels better to go unprotected anyways.

Fifteen minutes remain.

I open my phone's camera application, normally only used to capture images of the cute way Eve falls asleep and the various items I ask her if she'd like me to pick up from the store. Confronted with my own warped reflection, I'm returned to a juvenile preoccupation with the width of my nose and the mole on my chin. I could not have chosen a worse day to look so haggard. I blend the patchy rouge into my cheeks with my fingers, using the excess oil of my skin to create a more natural flush. Hardly better, but better nonetheless. I dig in the pocket of my jacket for Teddy. Thankfully, I'd remembered to bring it along and I swipe it on my lips before blotting most of it away.

The remaining minutes pass quickly as I imagine how a hand on my face would feel, how it would feel for that hand to sneak downward.

Just as the forty minutes pass, the elevator dings. This time the ding is not one of impatience, but a call of warning for me to return to a facade of nonchalance.

Theodore is in front of my desk within seconds.

"Ready?" he says, smelling better than he had when we'd last spoken. His hair remains slovenly, but the effort of applying deodorant is enough for me.

"Born ready. I'm just going to clock out really quickly."

"They don't even pay you for breaks? That's the man for you, huh. Always taking."

"Yep. That's the man." I feel my words contort to suit his beatnik demeanor. Every syllable I speak reeks of awkwardness. "Wait outside for me for a second, I have to tell the security guard I'm leaving."

“Got it, do your thing, girl.”

It seems I've shed my ma'am status and re-entered girlhood. I purse my lips into a smile as he slips out the door. I pull my jacket from the chair and pull it over myself. I typically spend my break walking to and from the deli, where I purchase a salad or a sandwich and a tall bottle of lemonade. Sometimes I sit at the small table in the corner of the deli and watch as the sole employee uses the wee hours as an opportunity to restock. I can go hungry tonight.