

Late Night Train



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He first sees her standing at the far end of the platform. She's leaning against a lamppost and keeping within the protective circle of its weak fluorescence, long coat pulled all the way around, clutched to her in defensive posture. Elbows in, bag held close. She has a book in hand, a tattered paperback. Stringy black hair falls about her face as she looks down to it.

She must be young. Not high school young, more like university young. Nineteen. Twenty. A student, if he has to guess, what with that satchel over her shoulder and who else but a student would travel alone this late at night? Who would risk such cold train platforms in the dark? Anybody older, with more cash and more sense, would have a car in which to return home. Faster, warmer. Safer. It's near an hour between trains this time of night, at least.

'Hey, someb'y give me a fucken smoke. Fucken Kristy stole my fucken smokes. Fucken mole.'

A shaven-headed kid screams it out, riding up and down the platform on a patched together pushbike, yelling to his mates, a clutch of them loitering, lingering. Teenagers. Brutish, confronting. They're not drunk, but maybe they're high? Who knows what kids like them might be on. Dropouts, lanky in their tracksuits, hair dyed

all sorts of colours. Should be home in bed at this hour, but their parents probably have no idea where they are and no doubt are just as bad.

He jerks back as the bike skids past, frowns down at the boy riding it, who is all of fifteen. The child snarls back, a laughing glare full of implicit threat.

But she, the girl, has not looked up. The coarse teenagers have not disturbed her reading and thankfully they show little interest in going near her. She looks vulnerable up there, all on her own. He does not like to think of what might happen should these feral kids, growing bored, look for an easy target to scare or mug and take notice of her.

He looks around. Nearby stands a man in a suit, briefcase, headphone buds in his ears. Older, mid-forties maybe. Solid and sober, but self-absorbed and alert only to his own world. Beyond him, surrounded by smoke and the horrid stench of roll-your-owns, a drunk with a bottle in a brown paper bag. Further down still, a twenty-something with tattoos up his neck, a trench-coat and evil look. Two older Asian men chatting in their own language, rude because he can't understand it, and a big woman, chunky, swearing back at the kid on the bike when he gets too close. That's it. Nobody else, not even a station attendant.

The boy on the bike is endangering everyone, riding up and down like a lout. Somebody should say something, something should tell the kid off. Nobody does. Nobody looks interested. Worse, nobody else seems to think a young girl alone on a dark train platform late at night might need watching out for.

'Fucken Kristy!'

At the far end of the platform, the bike almost runs into the girl.

He starts forward as he sees her finally look up from her book, the girl forced to step aside to let the teenager ride by. It's time somebody told the swearing boy enough is enough. Somebody needs to make sure the girl is okay, that she is safe. The teenagers argue now, too close to where she stands, with loud voices and violent language. Apparently Kristy has taken exception to being called a mole. Two of the boys flare up, chests puffed out, vocabulary foul. The bike is forgotten amid threats in the air.

The girl watches them. Maybe she is wondering if she should move. She should. She is too close. If they start fighting, she could be dragged in and hurt by a stray fist. They could tumble over her. In their aggression, they might even turn on her.

He'll tell her so. That's the right thing to do. Go up and suggest she move to safety.

Before he gets there, someone else steps up instead.

'What are you reading?'

It's a man, tall and thin. Maybe thirty. Maybe thirty-five. Short hair and looks neat enough, jeans, a shirt that's ironed. She shows him the book and the man nods, starts a conversation about it. Seems polite. At least she's not alone around those feral kids.

That's good, she's safe now. He turns to go back to his spot on the platform. Only the man beside her is asking further questions, keen. Persistent. Too persistent. The girl's answers are short and non-committal, but the talker keeps trying, another question, drawing another unengaged, if polite, response. Is the girl trying to step away? Perhaps it's not a conscious movement, merely instinctive. Maybe she's genuinely uncomfortable with the man's presence.

Strangers making conversation, unasked, unable to see when it's unwanted.

He hesitates from where he watches. Should he intervene? The conversation seems innocent enough, but the talker's persistence is a concern.

The train arrives before he can decide.

It's one of the older ones. A rattling silver thing with torn seats and graffiti that never washes off, no matter how many attempts are made to clean it. Black smudges left in streaks across cracked plastic and torn fabric. Inside lingers the stench of the combined sweat of the day's travellers. Into this tired carriage they all pile, the last of the stragglers, the girl, the too-chatty man trailing after her, the suit with his briefcase and headphones, the black-clad young man with the tattoos.

The drunk.

'Heeey. Heeeeeeeeyyy. Is dis da train ta Uppa Gull?'

The drunk weaves down the central aisle between the uncomfortable seats. Threadbare t-shirt barely stretching across a distended belly, grey hair thick, matted, unwashed. Are those vomit stains down his disintegrating denim jacket, or is it possibly dried blood? The drunk carries a small sack that clinks tellingly as he walks and in his other hand is that precious brown paper bag from which he occasionally swigs. A cloud of alcohol radiates three-feet around him.

'Yes, this train goes by Upton Gully. I think it's three stops ahead.'

The girl speaks. Her voice is calm, pleasant and she accompanies her words with a friendly smile, before she chooses a seat next to the window in a pod of six. The drunk beams, gap-toothed, probably not used to someone being so polite for he sure doesn't deserve it. Staggering over, falling into a seat in the pod in front of her. Which must irritate the trailing conversationalist, who's still persisting with his

questions about her book and following her into her pod, sitting diagonally opposite.

They've practically blocked her in. He watches carefully and tries to position himself further back in the carriage, so he can observe from enough distance to be alert to danger. The book-loving stranger stretches out elongated legs, while the dribbling drunk leans over the back of the seat in front. If she wants to get out she'll have to push past both; it's almost like a trap. It's not safe. She isn't safe. But nobody else seems to notice.

The suit seats himself across the aisle and pulls papers from his briefcase, burying himself in work. The trench-coated young man loiters at the opposite end of the carriage, sitting first with feet up on the seats, then standing to examine the half-ripped line map stuck on the wall. Unable to keep still. Is that a sign he's on drugs, the ones that makes them fidget? ICE, is that it? Tattoos crawl up his neck and strain against knuckles clenched tight to hold on as the train rocks them all this way and that.

The drunk cackles, a delighted kind of laughter at something the girl has said.

'Is da signs. Da signs are fucked, scuse m'language.'

'They are often wrong, aren't they? Makes it easy to get on the wrong train by mistake.'

'Fuckin' true! True!' is the vehement, inebriated agreement, before the decaying old man takes yet another swig from his awful brown bag.

The train hurtles through the night. Black outside, closing around their carriage and turning the windows into mirrors. It's useful for keeping an eye on everyone, so he stands up back and watches them all, gripping onto the cheap plastic handrail and fighting to keep balance as the train tosses them about. He's reluctant to select one of the

filthy seats, he'll lose sight of the girl if he sits and there's an agitation in his bones keeping him upright. A concern about her, the position she's in, surrounded by alcoholics and strangers and threatening dark types. Something isn't right. This is a young girl alone surrounded by potential danger, but she doesn't seem to realise.

A station passes. Another. Darkness speeding by, the old carriage shaking. It's hard to hear their conversation over the rattle of the train. He has to strain his hearing. Only the drunk is easy to make out, raucous and slurred disapproval of the managerial skills of those running the public transport system. His ranting drowns out her quiet, courteous responses, his tone raised with alcohol and increasingly aggressive.

Spittle flies from the drunk's mouth, working himself up over something. One hand whacks hard against the plastic at the top of the seats, emphasising a drunken point with a slap that sounds like a fist against a face.

She jolts back. From his position too far back in the carriage, sudden concern clutches his chest and he starts forward to intervene before it is too late.

But the train begins to slow and the drunk staggers up. A lumbering movement, thick body shuddering forward with little grace, gripping tight to the brown paper bag and his clinking sack.

'Gotta go.' The drunk leans forward with that grin again, breathing alcohol all over her. 'Bye sweetie, bye love, you nice person, you are.'

'Oh. Thank you. Goodnight.'

Not wise. Not at all. While it's all very sweet of her to respond to the drunk with a kindness the intoxicated fool doesn't deserve, it's also risky. Doesn't she realise it's dangerous to invite the attentions of one like that, who could get angry or violent or aggressive when

fuelled on booze? She must be very naïve. Somebody should tell her. Somebody needs to let her know her behaviour is foolish, travelling alone on trains so late, talking to just anybody. If she gets hurt, who else can she blame but herself?

Yet already she is talking again to the stranger about books and looking at some hardcover he's pulled from his bag. She says she hasn't read it. The stranger enthuses she should, all the while leaning too close, too presumptuous. Crossing too many unspoken social boundaries. Apparently the book is of some literary merit and well worth her time.

'I've read it.'

The man in the suit. Ear buds hang loose out of his ears now, drawn from his self-absorbed world. They turn to the suit and he nods to the book, says it's a good read. The book owner is delighted and twists to give this new conversation partner all his attention, turning his back to the girl. Good. But rude. Totally rude.

The suit keeps looking beyond the reader to the girl. Keeps trying to pull her into conversation, eyes lingering on her face, on her long, fine neck and narrow shoulders. Every response includes an explanation for her. The briefcase on his knee looks heavy. The suit has to lift it so as to shift across a seat, to get closer to them. Nearer to her. Something awkward in the way he handles that case.

Something strange about the case itself.

A tension suddenly catches him watching, the breath in his throat. From his vantage point further back, he stares at that briefcase. Something is very wrong there. What? What is it? Is it the way the suit carries it, so keen to hide what's inside? The man is careful to keep it with him, clutched tight in his hands.

The suit opens it now, but quickly, reaching in and rustling with one hand while looking at the girl with hungry, hungry eyes.

Oh. Oh no. This is not good.

Unease steals up from his toes and he sees now just how wrong he has been. How he has allowed appearances to deceive. So stupid. It's not pushy strangers or obvious drunks this girl need worry about, it's the mild-mannered, the precisely dressed. It is the professional with the heavy briefcase that surely contains more than just business papers. Anything could be hidden in a case like that. A knife, for example.

A great, big, sharp knife with a silver, gleaming blade.

There is no choice. He must intervene before the suit makes his move. Jolting forward down the carriage to stop this before it's too late, but the train shudders to a sudden stop and he nearly falls back. He wastes precious seconds struggling to balance, while ahead the man with the book winds up his lanky legs, stands and declares this is his stop. It frees up space around the girl, the way now open between her and the suit. Nothing to stop any lunging attack from across the aisle, she is perfectly alone, desperately vulnerable.

The suit clicks his briefcase. Stands. Heads straight towards the girl.

Shit.

Too far. He's too far away to stop it. Finding his balance again and bounding forward, mouth open with soundless, shocked warning. It was the mildest of them all along, the one who looked least threatening was the one hiding the real danger and the girl, naïve, polite, never knew. Not until too late. The suit walks towards her, fishing in his briefcase, something in his hand. Stepping closer, lifting something out, it could be a knife, it was a knife, a great big kni

Car keys. The suit retrieves car keys and passes the girl with a nod before slipping out onto the platform.

Automatic doors slam shut. The train rattles off.

Relief makes him drop with exhaustion. Adrenalin finds his joints weak, his hands shaky from the tension then release. Tragedy so near averted. He'd been so sure the suit would attack he could almost smell the blood, hear her screams. See it happening before his very eyes, with him too far away to stop it, the knife coming down two, three, four times, that flashing blade opening her up, blood splattering everywhere, across walls and windows, seats and floor, and her cries, strangled and desperate, trying to scream as the knife plunges again and again and again...

Nothing has happened. She is okay.

He draws breath, flexing fingers until they're free of tension. When he looks up, he finds himself staring straight into the hating glare of the trench-coated young man at the other end of the carriage. The threat in the youth's charcoal-rimmed eyes is palpable.

The brief moment of relief evaporates in an instant.

There are two stops to go. He tries to swallow against a dry mouth, against the understanding this isn't over yet. He's been wrong about the suit, but his caution, his sense of unease, that's dead on. He'd just got the wrong guy, but it was never the suit. It's this one, the one in black, anything but innocent, you only had to glance at him to tell. The way he stands and snarls. The long black coat hiding a multitude of sins. He could have knives under there. Multiple knives, lots and lots of them. He could be readying himself to attack right now.

As if reading his mind, the youth at the other end of the carriage steps forward.

With still breath, he tries to match the movement. Standing and stepping forward himself, feeling his hand shake.

Trench-coat walks down the aisle. Towards the girl.

He forces himself forward in unison. It's like he's moving through water, through air thick with suspense. Not fast enough. But he can't let himself be too far away this time. Can't let Trench-coat get there first.

'Hey lady,' Trench-coat says.

The girl glances up. 'Yes?'

'See this guy behind you? Be careful of him. He's been watching you since Murrumbinsy Station.'

When she glances back, their eyes meet. Hers are serious, grey. Considering. She bites her lip, a flash of worry, and it's all he can do to shake his head in pathetic denial. No. No, it's not like that. Really. He's looking out for her, protecting her. Keeping her safe from all the dangers a young girl like her, so alone on a late night train, might have to face.

It's Trench-coat who's the psychopath, not he. Not he.

Silence. A sense this can't be real. Can't be happening.

She smiles, soft and reassuring.

'Thank you, but it's okay,' she says to the dark young man. 'Your concern is very sweet, though.'

Trench-coat hesitates. The train is pulling into the station. He looks out the window and back to the doors. Down to the girl.

'You sure?'

'I'm fine, I promise.'

'Yeah, well. Watch him. Next station is end of the line, there's a guard there. Check in with him, hey,' the youth says, advice he no longer sounds so sure of, faltering in the face of her confidence. Looking back up to glare down the train. 'And there's CCTV in this carriage mate, so don't even think of trying anything.'

That little freak. What a horrid little turd. Such accusations! How dare he? Trench-coat was the one with eye-makeup like a girl, with

black nail polish and tattoos that obviously meant he didn't have a job and never would. That one was the weirdo around here, but he still dared make accusations? Accuse *him* of being a danger to the girl he was only trying to protect?

He watches, dumb with burning impotent fury, as the youth gets off the train. The doors close and the train pulls away again, snaking through the night to its last stop. The final destination.

Gone. All gone. Only the two of them left now. Finally alone. He sinks into the nearest seat, chest in his stomach and mind a swirl. What must she think of him? Such accusations. And from one who looked most dangerous of all. Maybe that's it. Maybe the dark young man had planned to attack, take a knife hidden in the folds of his coat and slash out, but was too afraid while there was someone watching over her. Maybe the accusations were the kid's attempt to scare him off, get rid of him, so the girl would be left vulnerable.

Well it didn't work. He has saved her.

His breath shudders.

The train pulls into the final station and he gulps back shaking nerves. The girl gathers her bag, car keys in hand. She smiles at him as she passes, but his return expression falters. He watches her get off the train and head towards the station building.

He steps off the platform and follows. Keeps maybe ten feet behind.

She doesn't go up to the window at the station, behind which a light spills across the sheltered concourse. The station guard is in there somewhere, but she hoists her satchel over her shoulder and shoves her hands in her pockets and walks down the ramp in the direction of the car park. Leaves the station building, with its light and relative safety and station attendant on call, well behind her.

He follows down the ramp, steps into the crisp night air. The car park is a dark place, remote and lonely. Hidden from view by trees on three sides. A long way from any help. A flickering lamp struggles to offer poor lighting half way down one side, while on the other side the lamp isn't working at all. It's so dark here you'd never see anything coming, an attack could come from anywhere. Anything might happen in a car park like this.

And nobody, not a single soul, would hear her cries if it did.

Only three cars are left to be collected, two all the way down the far end. She heads towards one of them. A small red hatchback down in the most remote, darkest corner of the lot.

Step for step, he matches her pace. Ten feet behind, gaze never wavering from the back of her head. Creeping closer now, just a little quicker than she. Not wanting to spook her, he don't want to catch up too fast too soon. A girl like her must be afraid, out here all alone in the night with nobody around and nobody to help. Even if she screamed. Nobody would hear.

The rattle of car keys. She is about to reach her car.

He steps down a hard crunch behind her. She jolts around to see him.

'H...Hi.'

When he speaks, his voice sounds cracked, strangled. He tries a faltering smile, but she does not return it.

He swallows and tries again. 'I...I just wanted to check. That you were okay. Car park like this, more dangerous than the train, you know. Could be any kind of danger.'

She studies his face. Shadows play havoc with her expression, light from the distant flickering lamp and the full moon overhead the only illumination. After a moment's silence, she nods.

'Yes. Yes, I understand.'

'I'm sorry if I scared you.'

She shakes her head. 'You didn't scare me.'

She drops the strap of the satchel from her shoulder and holds the bag in one hand, rustling inside it with the other.

'You don't need to worry about me,' she says, searching the bag. 'I know all about car parks like this. About late night trains. About the dangers that might be on them.'

She finds what she is looking for and lets the bag drop to the ground by her feet. In her hand is a cold glint, an unexpected nasty silver. It's hard to drag his eyes away from it. He only has time to open his mouth in silent, sudden comprehension, before there is a flash of something long and metallic and oh so very sharp.

As sharp as the dark smile now growing across her shadow-wrecked face.

'Because I'm it,' she says and raises the carving knife with both hands.

He tries to scream, but nobody is around to hear.