

12 Minutes in a Subway Car

The train rattled through the darkness, swaying and turning, the lights in the tunnels dancing along the grimy floor, illuminating the tired, worn-out faces. The sign at the top of the train flashed the next stop and the time— 6:49— over and over again, shifting every few seconds. There was a sense of unity in the car, everyone going in the same direction at the same time, on the same train. The train began to slow down, the unmistakable groan in its breaks echoing through the car as the train slowly stopped, in between two stations, waiting in the darkness.

She was trapped in the corner seat between a pair of sisters. She could tell it wasn't going to be a pleasant train ride as soon as she saw the way the older one ignored the younger one, the one who radiated impatience and energy. The little girl keeps bouncing in her seat, her sparkly bag pushing into her leg and confining her in the small seat. She was trapped in a dark tunnel, the walls slowly caving in. She could feel her breath slowly constricting in her chest, but she pinched her hands until she broke the skin and tried to remember how to breathe. In and out, in and out. As long as it didn't show from the outside, she was alright. She had mastered the art of collapsing on the inside while keeping a calm demeanor on the outside. The girl next to her kept squirming, pushing into her. She clicked open her phone, the bright light contrasting against the darkness of the car. 6:52. The hum of the engines had quieted down, the lights had flickered off, and the train had stopped moving, waiting quietly in the darkness of the tunnel. She was trapped in this train, trapped in this city, trapped in this country. And now she was going to be late. If there was anything she hated, it was being late. The train had come to a solid stop mere minutes away from her station. She pressed her face against the window, and the cool plastic fogged up with her breath. If she focused hard enough, she could make out the art on the walls; if she focused hard enough it didn't feel as though the walls were going to crash and push into her, suffocating her until all the air in her lungs was stolen. The little girl's leg was bouncing, and she was talking with her sister. Or, more accurately, talking *at* her sister. The older girl, her arms folded with her head resting upon them, seemed to be in a sleep tainted by the need for awareness of her surroundings. Every few minutes, she would crack open her eyes, scan the car, shift in her seat, tell the little girl to quiet down, then lean upon her bag again. Young people these days. The girl had probably been out all weekend, partying and wasting away her life. No wonder she couldn't keep her eyes open. The door connecting the cars groaned open, the only sound in the otherwise silent car. A man walked in, exhaustion etched into his features, his posture. In his hand was a worn out cup, rattling with coins. He glanced around the car, as people around her began to avert their gazes. She pulled her bag closer to her body, and fixed her eyes on a loose thread on her sleeve, counting how many times she could wrap it around her finger until all blood circulation was cut off.

What he hated most were the averted gazes. No one had the courage to look him in the eyes. He hadn't made sincere eye contact with anyone, for who knows how long. It was easy to catch the shift in the car, the one that people tried to conceal. Legs were tucked under the chairs, bags were pulled closer to their bodies. Conversations ceased, eyes fixed somewhere in the car, anywhere but him. He began his way down the car, watching as people pulled away from him, in the subtlest of motions, as if his very being was a different chemical makeup, his magnetic field one that repelled all around him. People glanced at him quickly, they watched him when they thought he couldn't see. He could see the pity etched around their eyes, a pity they brushed off as soon as he was out of their sight. The car had been frozen in its spot for the past four minutes; he could see impatience flowing through the car, nestling in everyone's core. He

was halfway through the car at this point. An old woman sitting by the window seat was picking a piece of loose thread from her orange sweater, unraveling it row by row. If she pulled at it anymore, the entire sweater would collapse around her, a pile of string tangled onto her limbs. Music was floating from a man's headphones, barely audible. A little girl was sitting beside her, staring at him with a pang of true sadness, the only one he knew was authentic in the car. Little kids, he believed, were the only ones who truly saw the world, through their untamed emotions and unwavering enthusiasm about what they saw around them. He smiled at her, a warm smile he hadn't had a chance to use in a while. The little girl nudged her sister, an older girl sleeping on her backpack, a wariness in her face that seemed as though it shouldn't belong to someone so young. The girl glanced at her sister, then at the man, then back to her sister's wide eyes. The little girl continued to nudge her as the older girl began to dig around in her pockets. She took out a few crumpled-up dollar bills and handed them to the young girl. The old woman sitting next to the little girl glanced at the sister, then at the man, then turned back towards the window, as if looking for something in the darkness of the tunnel. The little girl looked up at him with a warmth in her eyes as she reached out to him with the money.

"Thank you, dear. Have a wonderful day," he said warmly. The girl, who couldn't have been any older than five or six, smiled back up at him, then turned away and held her sister's hand. The man continued on, no longer minding much about the diverted eyes. In the darkness of the still train car, he knew that there were still people in the world that would make it a better place. And with that little ounce of hope, he opened the door and stepped into the next car.

Her eyes were magnets, pulling towards each other. It felt as though she physically could not keep her eyelids open; the silent world of darkness and sleep kept pulling her. Leaning against her rough bag, one part of her mind awake to keep an eye on her sister. *What will happen to our family if you fail? Imagine what will happen.* The words echoed through her mind, not quieting down no matter how hard she squeezed her eyes. *I worked so hard to give you all of these opportunities, and all you are doing is wasting it.* She felt a nudge on her shoulder, then once again more insistently. Looking up, she saw a man walking their way slowly, a cup in his hand rattling with coins, then her sister's wide eyes and insistence. Sighing, she looked at the man again, then at her sister. It seemed as though gravity was stronger today, pulling her head toward her bag as if her body was no longer strong enough to support it. *You need to set a good example, you need to set a good example.* Was kindness one of the values her mother hoped she instilled in her sister? Reaching into her pocket she took out a few crumpled bills, the money she was saving for lunch today, and handed the dollars to her sister as her head fell back into her arms, the darkness and stillness of sleep beckoning to her. She felt as though slowly falling into an abyss of darkness, yet having to consciously keep herself from giving in, making sure they didn't miss their stop. If they were late to school again, she wouldn't hear the end of it at home. Looking up again, her vision blurred as she scanned the car, she realized the train had come to a stop. The time read 6:58, the mechanical light blinking and blinking. Her sister was swinging her legs happily, humming a song. She could feel the judgemental look of the old woman sitting next to her, her bright orange sweater slowly unraveling. The woman's breaths seemed off, an inconspicuous movement. The train still hadn't moved; she wasn't sure if she was relieved for the few more seconds of sleep or riddled with the anxiety of being late. Her head felt heavy, pulling her towards her arms, her hair cascading over her eyes to black out her surroundings. As she drifted once again into the brief, unfulfilling, ready-to-jump up at any second type of sleep, while being mere minutes away from descending into the absolute darkness in her subconscious, she noticed from the edges of her senses a muffled sound coming from a few seats away. Notes from a

song, escaping the man's headphones, barely audible to the rest of the world yet enough to become a steady rhythm in the otherwise silent car, lulled her to sleep, her hand on her sister's knee.

The music vibrated through his body, loud enough to numb his ears yet still not loud enough to ease his mind. He had hoped these new headphones would be an upgrade from his previous earbuds, and at first they had been. But as he continued to listen to the music at a higher volume, he got used to it again. He had to find a way to let the music completely and absolutely wash over all his senses, until every muscle, every cell in his body was trembling along with the sound, absorbing it in. Only once he had reached that point would his mind dull down, cease for a second, let him take a breath. He had tried many solutions before ending with music. Running, exercising, and pushing his body until he was in too much pain to focus on his mind. Acting, theater, to separate his soul from his body, to become someone else, however short it may be. Reading, constantly consuming media, and completely attaching himself to it so that whatever emotions the characters felt, he felt as well, as vividly as if he were one of them. He continued and continued, but with each approach, his mind kept catching up with him; he could not separate himself no matter how much he struggled. So now he has turned towards music. As long as the volume was all the way up, and he closed his eyes, he could completely transcend into the music, transcend life and time and dimensions, only to open his eyes and remember where he was. Which was currently in a train car, his head leaning against the cool metal of the door, his hand holding the grimy rail. The train had stopped moving, yet how long they had been stationary he couldn't tell. The time on the wall read 7:01. He noticed a young girl glancing at him, but then falling back into her arms and closing her eyes. Perhaps she was also trying to stop her mind. He closed his eyes as well, just as the music began to swell and crescendo, completely washing over him. He sighed in relief as the sound filled his mind, pushing down everything else, as the train slowly creaked under him and began to move once again.