

BRITT PIPER

*INTERVAL*

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Through the revolving door the air retreated and curled back in on itself with a low hiss. It shrunk and orbited vacuum-like in a slow circle, and when it came out it was the same as when it went in. The door was one part of a larger revolution which saw the same thousand people tread the same path day after day. The door revolved and the air spun, and when the people circled back they inhaled the same dead space they had exhaled hours before.

When he stepped through into the station, what he thought was a gust of fresh air was nothing more than a recycled draft of perspiration and premium blend coffee. The stale air was thick with proximity. It pulled around him in a tight spiral and ruffled his thinning hair.

He paused in the concourse. The hem of his shearling jacket whipped snakelike as commuters rushed past him. They scrambled back and forth, with eyes wide and hands gripped vice-like over recycled paper cups and faux-leather briefcases. He might have felt in their passing the noontime panic of a clock ticking in half-seconds. As he checked his wristwatch, he was a standing stone amidst crashing waves of frantic motion.

Ethan Cole had always found the train station unnerving. For three minutes it was madness, a frenetic chase across a laneless racetrack, a battle of lunging torsos and angry glares. Then the doors closed and the pistons pumped and the trains pulled away, and the station was as silent as an empty church.

Ethan was thinking of these things as he watched the crowd struggle forward. He was thinking of these things but he didn't put them into words. He saw only other people and himself. He recognized a contrast which was nameless to him. He thought in a limited sense, though with confident finality, that he was better than these people.

He saw the doors shut swift and scythe-like, nearly severing an umbrella from the chubby hand which clenched it, like clipping the end of a cigar.

Ethan flattened his hair and strode into the main gate area. He was alone in the station, or nearly alone. Only the custodian remained, pushing his broom across the floor, collecting gum wrappers and ticket stubs—all that remained of a frenzy already forgotten.

Ethan was early. He insisted on being early. He hated the pedestrian clamour of rush-hour commute. He preferred instead the slow countdown to departure, the easy passing of time.

He walked toward a kiosk. He smiled pleasantly and asked for a Coca-Cola. He waited patiently as the young girl struggled through a complicated sequence of keys on the register. She looked about seventeen. She might have

been older, but the silver braces on her teeth told him that she was probably still in high school. Her breasts were small, but they suited her slim waist and round buttocks. Her curves were accentuated by the cling of her polyester uniform. She was noticeably flustered.

“I’m sorry. This is still new to me.” She pointed to the pin on her shirt which read Trainee. He liked the way her mouth moved. She turned and opened the refrigerator door. Her small hands navigated around the cold bottles. He looked past her and his eyes caught the glow of the station bar and its neon sign. She turned back to face him. Smiling, she handed him the bottle.

For a moment, he didn’t notice her. She held her arm outstretched until his focus returned. Her tight lips formed into a smile around the metal gridlock of the braces.

“That’s alright,” he said. “I’m not thirsty.”

As he walked past the kiosk, the young girl replaced the bottle and on her face she wore a look of awkward bewilderment.

Ethan headed back across the concourse, guided by a grail in the shape of Gary’s.

He entered the bar and was immediately soothed by the darkness and the low hum of carbon-lines.

He sat at the bar. He set his black leather satchel beside him. He knew he had plenty of time.

“Rye, Coke, tall glass.”

The bartender nodded. He brought over a glass and a bottle.

Ethan watched as the cubes collided inside the glass, spinning sweetly to a slow stop. He watched the lip of the bottle balance itself with a gymnast’s precision over the rim. In his mind the glass nearly quivered with anticipation. The can opened crisply.

Taking a slow sip, he leaned back in his chair and shut his eyes. The electronic chimes of the station became a sound which passed through Ethan’s mind, a noise unheard, a thing which moved around his thoughts, always floating just outside of acknowledgement. He was thinking about train tracks curving across empty space, synapses between cities. He saw a line between dots on a map. He pictured in his mind cramped seats, overcrowded dining cars, an unending blur of repeat scenery, a horizontal flash of trees and bridges and the white noise of whining children. He felt a persistent pounding in his head, like some discordant drumming. He attached to it a vague feeling, what he thought might be a growing dislike for travel and travelers. The idea crept into his mind the first moment he felt the crush of bodies or the waves of voices crashing against a numerated shore.

The robotic station voice announced the time.

Ethan regained consciousness to the slow sound of footsteps. He opened his eyes and for a moment he felt the desperate helplessness that comes just after

waking. He wondered how long he had been asleep or if he'd even been asleep at all. The drumming had subsided to a low throb. The sweet-tar taste of the cola was still on his lips.

He turned and the sound of footsteps attached itself to a pair of pumps and two smooth legs which climbed into a cutaway skirt. A chino belt hung half-hidden by a loose corset top which cradled a pair of perky breasts. He noticed that she carried a fake Versace purse. Short hair framed a pretty face. His eyes lingered and then the parts became a whole and as he watched her walking, the drumming faded to nothingness.

She sauntered toward a set of payphones inside the bar. Ethan watched her lift the receiver. She held it to her ear, lowered it, raised it again. She drew a torn scrap of paper from her pocket. She moved her fingers and began to dial. She hung up the receiver. She looked as though she were about to leave, then with sudden and renewed vengeance she lifted the receiver again and dialed the number. After a long pause she hung the receiver in frustration.

She walked toward the bar.

He was looking cleverly at the Departures monitor when she sat down. She settled into her seat after checking her watch. She opened her purse, began rummaging through its contents and sighed audibly.

“Important phone call?”

“Aren't they all?”

Ethan appreciated the coy response almost as much as he appreciated the way she didn't look up to deliver it.

“I just thought that maybe—”

She turned toward him and their gazes met. Her eyes narrowed. “If a phone call isn't important, why make it?”

“I guess that's true.” He smiled. “I never thought of it that way.”

She began looking through her purse again.

“Versace?” he asked.

“Good eye. It's a fake, though.”

He waited but she said nothing else.

“You're not much of a talker, are you?”

She didn't respond.

Ethan laughed. “I'm sorry, did I say something to offend you?”

She placed her purse on the station floor and turned her body to face him. “You don't remember me, do you?”

He smiled again. “I don't know, should I?”

She turned away.

He reached for his drink and took another, longer sip.

“We met three months ago at Joey Russo's party,” she said without looking at him.

Ethan's memory pieced together a night he did not quite remember. He and a few friends had been involved in a fiery dispute over protein supplements,

quenching the argument over pints at Mickey Mantle's. One of them got a call and an invitation to a going-away party.

"Yeah, okay. Joey was moving to Portugal, right?"

"Puerto Rico."

"Wait, I do remember you." Ethan struggled to place her in a context he could recollect. He thought of one possibility, discarded it quickly, and decided that they probably traded numbers or maybe stepped outside together for a smoke. He hadn't slept with her—that he was sure of.

She turned back to face him, expressionless.

Then he remembered, and the connection flashed through his mind like an iron spike. "You said were a dancer and I asked which music videos you had been in."

Her eyes narrowed again.

Ethan leaned closer. "So, have you won a Tony yet?"

"Goddamn it, Ethan. You're a piece of shit."

"I'm sorry, it was a long time ago."

"Three months is hardly a lifetime." She was shaking with fury. "How could you not remember me?"

"Carrie, right?" His body loosened. "I remembered the dancing." He shifted in his seat. "I can't remember your last name."

She took a cigarette out of her purse and held it to her lips. "I don't think I gave it to you." She continued the frantic rummaging through the depths of her Versace.

"Here," he said, producing a silver Zippo.

He watched the mistrust leap back into her face. "Thanks," she muttered.

The tight metallic suck of oxygen carried the scrape of the wheel to Ethan's ears. She inhaled sharply. He click-clacked the lighter closed again, and placed it deftly into his jacket pocket. "You know, I don't think you're allowed to smoke in here."

She shrugged and exhaled. "Who gives a fuck?"

He watched her as she smoked. "Your hair is shorter," he said.

"Yours is thinner."

"Ouch." He pretended to be hurt.

"Don't worry," she said, crossing her legs. "It's not important."

He studied her for a moment. Unsatisfied, he turned back to questions. "When's your train?" he asked.

"When's yours?"

His smile teetered between amusement and frustration. He wondered how long they would have to spar, parrying and riposting. He did forget her name. He would have to make up for that.

The bartender walked over. "You'll have to put that out."

She looked around, sweeping her gaze across the empty bar.

The bartender scowled. "Well, at least order something."

“She’ll have a gin and a lime wedge. No ice.”

She stared at Ethan and seemed only now to see him. “The things you remember.” She looked up at the bartender. “I’ll have a water.”

The bartender looked to Ethan and back to her. “If you don’t let your friend order you a drink, you’re going to have to put it out.”

Ethan watched her intently. The smoke trailed off the end of the cigarette. “I’ll have a vodka tonic.”

Ethan reached into his pocket again, retrieving the lighter. As he struck the Zippo, he watched the way her slender fingers pinched the white paper of the cigarette, the way her mouth closed casually over the filter. Her eyes narrowed as she inhaled, a trait he remembered from the party. With every purse of her lips she seemed to be concentrating intently.

He lit another for himself. He inhaled, slowly and more delicately, a mannerism he hoped she would not pick up on. He held in the smoke as he gathered his thoughts. He felt the coil and burn inside his lungs. He exhaled.

She smoked in silence, a trait he’d forgotten about. Ethan disliked silence in the same vague way he disliked other travelers. He didn’t trust any situation where someone might get more out of it than he did. “Did you recognize me right away?”

Her pause was lengthy and deliberate. “Yes,” she said curtly. “You made quite an impression.”

She noticed the smile creeping into the corners of his lips. “Don’t flatter yourself, hot shot. You dropped a drink on yourself and tried to fight my boyfriend.”

“I’m sorry.” He stumbled over his words. He tried to catch himself. “Did I win?”

She took a drink. “Dan wouldn’t fight you. He was a grown-up.”

Ethan looked around the empty bar. “Where’s Dan now?”

“He and Joey left the next day. We tried to pretend that he wasn’t leaving. The party was supposed to be our last hurrah. He ended up sleeping on the couch.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” She inhaled. “It wasn’t entirely your fault.”

He expected her to wink at him, or maybe laugh. She checked her watch again.

Ethan maneuvered through his mind, thinking of something to say to fill the silence. “Is that the only impression I made?”

“I laughed when you told me you were the off-stage keyboardist for The Spin Doctors.”

“And ...”

She looked away briefly. “And I said ‘you’ll have to do one better; I’m going home with a grad student’.”

“What did I do then?”

“You had another drink.”

Ethan rested his elbow on the bar and his cheek in his hand. He was watching her chest as she took a long drag of her cigarette.

“So what’s next then?”

As Ethan watched her finish another vodka she seemed to be looking past him, through him. “Where are you headed, Ethan?”

“You mean on the train?”

She leaned closer. A line of ash fell gracelessly from her cigarette onto the bar. “Are you going to keep this up? A new girl at every station?”

“That’s not fair, we’ve met before.”

She stifled a laugh. “Keep floating, then. Keep swimming from bar to bar, party to party. Who knows—maybe someone will throw you a life jacket.”

“Are you saying I’m going to drown?”

“Something like that.”

He finished his whiskey. “What are you going to do when you run out of parties?” he asked.

She looked at him. “The party’s already over.”

He chuckled. He was watching her mouth as she talked.

“Don’t laugh. I’m done with it. All of it. The parties, the drugs. The drinking.” She dropped her cigarette butt into an empty rocks glass. The vodka sizzled and the ashes swirled in a circle before settling to the bottom.

“This is my last train.” She pulled a ticket out of her purse. “One-way, outbound.”

“Where are you going?”

“Does it matter?” she asked. “It’s leaving that counts.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“You don’t get it, stud. I’m gone. The moving van leaves with the train.”

Ethan ordered two more rounds.

The bartender brought the fresh drinks. He took the empty glasses back with him.

Ethan reached out and placed a hand on her thigh. “It won’t be the same without you.”

She brushed his hand off. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I know that we’re alone in a station bar and if you weren’t here, I’d be wandering around, aimless and bored.”

She stared forward blankly. “You’d manage.” She held the cigarette to her mouth and her lips closed hungrily over it. “You can’t have it all, Ethan.” She was still looking at the arrangement of bottles behind the bar. “You can’t expect to see me after three months and strike up a conversation and all of a sudden become my best friend.”

“I don’t want to be your best friend.”

“Oh, I’m sure of that,” she mumbled into the glass. Her voice took on a test-tube quality. She lapped at the ice cubes. “You’re so transparent,” she said at last.

Ethan felt the heavy burn of whiskey and tobacco. His tongue felt swollen. She was talking about something, but he was watching her mouth again. He could see her laid out on a bed, her legs folded seductively one over the other. She stretched her arms out over her head like a cat and writhed on the bed. The corset top had become a negligée and through it he could see the brass button points of her nipples. He ran his tongue over them and they were cool and hard. Yeah, man. It’s all yours. He closed his eyes and she ran her hands through his hair. His tongue moved down her midsection and lapped in a slow orbit around her stomach. His fingertips touched teasingly over her hips. She pushed his head down and his face was between her thighs and he tasted metal.

“What are we still doing here?”

“Sorry?” he asked.

“Where can this possibly take us?” The glass dangled precariously between her thumb and middle finger. “It’s not like we even know each other.”

He looked down. His hand was on her thigh. He wanted to light another cigarette but he would need to move both hands to do so. He reached for his drink instead.

“It’s not like we’re going to continue some long correspondence.” She was slurring her words. “You’re going to board one train and I’m going to board another. Bon Voyage.”

He was trying to look at her eyes, but they darted continually from one place to another. Her eyes looked tired. The rims were red. His hand crept almost unnoticeably up her thigh. “Who were you trying to call earlier?”

Her eyes closed and opened. “Ask me that again later.”

In his mind, Ethan pictured her naked body. She lay on the bed and he was naked too but he was standing at the foot of the bed. He was pacing back and forth but then he was high-stepping, pumping his arms one after the other into the air. You move like a stud, brother. Strut it out, man, strut it out. Shit yeah. We shouldn’t do this, she said. Who ever said no to Don Juan or Casanova? He beat his chest like a gorilla. He leapt onto the bed but then he was on a train and the seats were empty. She rode him pushing against his chest. Her legs were wrapped around his body and she wore a conductor’s cap. Strut it out, brother, strut it.

“I shouldn’t be drinking.”

He was looking at her. He nodded his head.

“Did you even hear me?”

“Look,” he said, with an easy twist of his body. “It doesn’t matter what happens tomorrow, or next week, or in three months. It matters now.”

“You’ve said that before.”

“You don’t give me much credit,” he said, as he dropped his cigarette into a glass. I’m going to the washroom.”

He rose, and walked precariously toward the washrooms.

Ethan’s mind swam. Synapses were bent, strained. He was thinking about sex, but no particular action associated with it. He was thinking only of the general pulsation of body against body, flesh straining to touch, feel, control. He wrenched the washroom door open. The sound of the hinges squealing made him think of mouths opening. He stuck his tongue out. It throbbed enormously. He rested his hands on the sink. He was thinking about the taste of whiskey, and the touch of cold metal. He thought about thighs and the way fingers parted.

The door opened and she stumbled inside. He saw her first through the mirror: slanted, unclear. When he turned, the image did not straighten. She saw him and began laughing hysterically. “You’re in the wrong washroom, jackass.”

He looked around frantically. When he spotted the urinals, he began to laugh as well. “Correction,” he stammered, “I think you are.”

She zig-zagged forward and fell into his arms. “I think you are,” she sputtered.

The synapse severed.

She grabbed his jacket and pulled him close. Their mouths slammed together. Her tongue writhed electric, wire-like. He shoved her back against the condom dispenser. The dull banging of their bodies against the cold metal reverberated like a drum. Bang bang banging backward and forward. Their bodies moved to the washroom stall. The door closed and the lock slid into place. She tugged at his belt and yanked the zipper down. He lifted her skirt and pulled at her thong. He heard the band stretch and snap. He lifted her and placed her on the toilet seat. He lifted her legs. If a hapless child would have wandered into the washroom, all he would see was a man pissing vigorously. He tugged at her bottom lip with his teeth. He tasted blood. He slipped his fingers between her legs and moved them mechanically. She moaned. She wasn’t wet but she reached out and guided him inside. He wasn’t all the way hard and she still wasn’t wet, but soon he fit it in and they were fucking. You can’t be stopped, brother, ’cuz you know how to roll. They want you, man. They dig it. No chick has ever dug this hard. Swagger and strut. “Feel it.” Let it all out. Shit yeah, man, you’re a natural. Born and raised to bring it on home. Swagger and strut. “It’s gonna come.” Swagger and strut, man. Strut it. Let it all come out. “It’s gonna stay inside you.” Strut it on out, man. Oh, baby, strut it out. That’s right, brother. Let it all come out, glory hallelujah, and one—more—time.

“No!”

She pushed him away. He fell back and lunged forward again. She pushed him again, harder. He stood there, panting, his half-erection hanging ridiculously before him. “What the fuck?”

“I can’t do this.” She was shaking her head.

“Some bitch you are, I didn’t even finish.”

She slapped him across the face. The fleshy snap echoed through the washroom stall.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shoved her against the wall. Her face was expressionless.

“You goddamned cunt.” For a moment they just looked at one another. He let go of her shoulders and she moved away.

She tried to pull the torn thong up past her thighs. “I can’t. Not now.”

She exited the stall. He did up his pants and followed.

“This is bullshit.”

She was fixing her hair in front of the mirror. She wiped the blood from her lip.

“I have to start taking control of my life,” she said.

“I call this taking control.”

“Really?” she asked, turning. “I call it giving up.”

She left the washroom.

He followed her out into the concourse. The station was beginning to fill with commuters.

“Carrie, wait.”

She stopped and turned. They stared drunkenly at one another.

“What now?”

She smiled. “You know, the French call this place the Terminus.”

“Sorry?”

“Goodbye.”

She walked back to the bar to collect her purse. She left half the tab on the table.

She started back across the concourse and then paused. She walked back in Ethan’s direction. He smiled.

“Do you still want to know who I tried to call earlier?”

He nodded.

“I was trying to call you.”

He stared blankly.

“I’m leaving town. For good. I thought you might like to know before I left. I aborted your baby last month.”

He suppressed a laugh. “Seriously?”

“Joey Russo’s party was shit.” She started to walk away again. She looked back over her shoulder. “Oh, and Ethan—washroom sex doesn’t suit you. Don’t make it a habit.”

She was gone.

He stood for a moment in the concourse. He straightened his jacket collar. He returned to the bar, paid the rest of the bill and grabbed his satchel. He checked his watch. His train would be arriving any minute.

He walked toward the Departure gate. An old man sat in a seat reading a newspaper. A young girl with pretty lips sat on the other side. He felt the dull throb of what remained of his erection.

Ethan was thinking of train tracks again, crossing over empty space. He thought of push brooms and travel time, passing in intervals.

He walked over to where she sat.

“Sorry,” he said, smiling, “do you have the time?”