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I wrote this for a short story competition and later submitted it, refined, to a class workshop. The web is still the only way this story has seen publication. Too dark or something.

Station

I hate to wait.

Always have, since I was young. I've waited a long time.

The station was quieter than it had been all day. Patrons were sparse and the hour was late. I'd been there for several hours. Waiting. This was my first time. I wanted to sleep, pass the faster, but I was a little too edgy for that. The bench was too damn uncomfortable, too. I fingered my briefcase. Its cool metal surface almost reflected my face back at me.

My watch read 11:45.

I watched the others around me. Same thing I'd been doing all day. Only now, it was more enjoyable. This late, there were fewer patrons around, making it was easier to isolate individual conversations. Nearby, a man and woman argued. I watched her. She was pretty enough, with brown hair and eyes, petite figure. He, on the other hand, was rather homely. A pinched face, ghostly pale skin and squinted eyes. What did she see in him?

"I don't want to go."

"Emily, we agreed to see her."

"You agreed. I was working."

"She's ill. Very ill. Dad says she won't last more than a week."

"Good. Then she'll be out of our lives forever. Honestly, Jeff, I don't know why you let her run your life."

"If you're going to be like that, I'll go alone."

I lost interest. A typical family dispute. In the end, he would guilt her into going anyway, despite her personal feelings. I looked around, scanning for something to keep my mind occupied. I saw the lady at the ticket counter glance my way again. She had been working since five. At about seven, she came up to me and asked if everything was all right. I nodded to her. She asked if I was waiting for a friend. I pretended not to hear. She left

saying I should let her know if I needed help. Nosey, pretentious bitch. She should mind her own business.

Once again, I was tempted to stand up and approach the newspaper stands and buy one, just for something to read. I remained sitting, rereading the headlines. More allegations against the president. Earthquake in India. Youth violence rate up. Fanatic suicide bombing in Israel. Nothing new ever happened. History was caught in an ugly rut.

Across the station, a man sat with his wife and two boys. She was dead asleep, leaning on his shoulder, and the boys were laying down, one to each adult lap. The younger boy, less than five years old, stirred at the noises around him. The man kept fighting sleep, trying to stay alert to the announcement of their bus arriving, yet his head kept nodding. He didn't look happy.

I wondered at his story. Everyone has a story. He probably married young, only 19, and never completed college and got stuck with a low paying job as janitor. His older wife domineered and ruled him. He felt old and impotent at 28. Their current bus trip to Niagara was her idea, not for vacation or pleasure but for family and duty. Their car was unreliable and they couldn't afford to fly. Finally, the tired and unhappy man allowed himself to sleep. The restless sleep of a traveler.

What I was doing? I hated busses since I was young. My father sent me on the longest bus-ride when I was seven. California to New York. Alone. He assured me my mother would be there to greet me, but how would he know? He never talked to her any more. I never saw the bastard again. Mother wasn't there, either. I waited for three hours alone before she came.

I checked my watch. 11:52.

A woman with too much luggage under her arms walked by, trying to reach the ticket counter before the next bus arrived. She was in her mid-forties, and wasn't bad looking, but looked like the stress of travel had gotten to her. In her hurry, the woman dropped a small carry-on bag. She just stopped and let go of her suitcases, letting them drop with twin thuds. She stood there, looking helpless and tired, ready to burst into tears. I supposed she was leaving her husband after a big argument. She finally caught him in his lies. Tonight she confronted him with his girlfriend. Afterwards, rather than stay in town, she left to stay with her mom. Some things were easier to face with a friendly face near.

Another woman took pity and rushed over, offering to help. The first woman shook her head, standing proud for a moment. After a second offer for help, she finally consented to help, a look of relief on her face. Each woman took a large suitcase and a carry-on and walked toward the ticket counter.

Perhaps I should have helped. Didn't think of it at the time. I was a spectator, lost in the moment.

Glancing around, I saw the security cameras strategically placed on the ceiling around the station. In the past, incidents had happened which caused officials to worry. Still, it was safer than flying. I spotted the large convex security mirror. I could see the entire station as a warped, miniature world. My own reflection was small and distant.

I heard the announcement of bus 1104 to Rochester. With help from the other lady, the woman with too much luggage rushed with her burden toward the forming line at bay 2. I saw the man with his small family wake up and urge his sons to do likewise. Then the arguing couple joined the growing line, still bickering. I knew she would go. Like cattle, they waited until the bus had emptied of its previous passengers and began filing out the door. They had no present and hoped their future would improve with a simple bus ride. I wondered how they could live like that, with such pathetic hopes.

I wondered why I did the same.

11:57. My bus was next.

The transfer-ticket holders from bus 1104 settled into the station as the bus drove away. New faces to study. A young girl, 18 or 19 settled down on an uncomfortable bench with her duffel bag beside her. Probably returning early from her spring break vacation. I suspected problems with her boyfriend down at Myrtle Beach. South Carolina was a long drive down and a longer bus-ride back, but he had gone too far and she was through with him. Weary from the long trip, she nestled down to sleep right away. Amazing that she could be so trusting, a young, pretty woman, asleep in a public place late at night.

An orthodox Jew sat a few seats away from her, his clothing giving him away. He sat up straight and read a book, not appearing tired. I could tell he was a chronic reader. How sad. He never lived, preferring to live his life through the words of others. I didn't know if it was sacred writings or the latest thriller he was reading, but I doubted he had much of a life, either way. I liked to read, but I knew how to get things done, to take action in my life. I had learned the hard way not to let life bypass me. He glanced up, as if he felt me watching him, and smiled at me. I turned away.

Glancing around, I saw an elderly man and his wife were hobbling over to a set of chairs. They were traveling light and looked wide-awake. Their faces were lined and leathery, their hair silver with age. I became uncomfortably aware of my own body, my own skin. Some day, I might live that long. I hoped not. They took a painfully long time sitting, their bodies not bending as fast as they once did. He looked like he was recovering from his most recent heart attack. Why would anyone want to live that long in this cruel world?

12:02.

A Puerto Rican man walked by, sweeping the garbage of the day with his wide broom. This job was no challenge and had few benefits, but it paid the bills. Every night, he went to work with little to look forward to but the dirt of others and no respect from his boss.

Still, it must be better than his life back on the island. I figured he'd been in the U.S. for two years and still working toward his citizenship, now wondering if it was even worth it. The simple life of San Juan may have been in poverty, but everyone was poor, there. He kept sweeping, not trying to avoid the feet of an indigent man sleeping on a seat, his head leaned back against the station wall. A regular who had no place to sleep on cold, snowy nights. When the broom hit his feet, the man woke with a start and glared at the back of the Puerto Rican man. He finally sighed and said nothing, preferring a place to sleep to a confrontation that would get him kicked out again.

The announcement came for bus 1113. My bus had come. It was 12:08.

Making sure I had my briefcase, I stood to join the line at bay 1. In front of me was a large woman with too much make-up on her face. She clutched at her small, lavender suitcase protectively. Single, working in a dead-end job and unhappy, she was heading to meet a prospective boyfriend in Albany. His whispered promises had taught her to believe again in love. She was divorced and her now grown children never called or wrote. She had no close friends. The only people she knew were at church. None of the men there were interested in a forty-year old divorcee who had two children by twenty and had to get married. This man in Albany was her last chance.

The line grew behind us. I glanced out the dark window to the waiting bus. Passengers from Ithica and farther wearily stepped off and headed for the warm station with their luggage. I refocused my eyes and saw the dark reflection of those around me in the mirror. This strange dark view of those around me almost made me laugh.

I left the line and headed for the bathroom. The lonely lady ahead of me offered to save my place in line. Rather than argue that I didn't need any help, I just nodded and left. In the bathroom, I relieved myself and moved to the closest sink to wash my hands. I felt dirty. The mirror in front of me was cracked in a couple places and the sinks were filthy. I avoided looking directly in the mirror. I've always hated my reflection. I washed my hands once, then twice, then a third time. I would have washed them a fourth time when I saw my watch and realized how late it was. 12:15. I barely had time to dry my hands before rushing out the door.

Running, I almost hit a young Asian girl, only sixteen or seventeen, in a wheel chair. Where had she come from? I stopped for a long moment and stared at her. Her disability was probably accident related. Her boyfriend must have been driving and made a turn too fast on a slick road. Hit a tree at sixty-five miles an hour. He walked away, unharmed, while she lay bleeding and broken.

She had delicate features and a slight frame, but it was her eyes that affected me. Those eyes. Something about her made me hesitate. A small portion of compassion was awakened within me. I almost gave up my plans, gave up everything. She brought out the humanity in me again. Perhaps because she, of all the people I saw that day, knew what suffering was. I wanted to at least talk to her.

I didn't.

I reentered the line behind the lonely woman just as we started out the door into the cold New York wind. The shock of cold cut through my trench coat. I looked up and saw the full moon, peering through a light cloud cover. It was going to freeze tonight. Unsafe traveling weather. The bus driver, a tall and handsome black man, took our tickets. He probably studied at Harvard with a basketball scholarship. Graduated with honors in English literature and performance art; he wanted more than just sports in his life. He couldn't get any decent job with his degrees and settled for driving a bus across the state for a living. Made less than his drug-dealer brother.

He smiled at me. The same smile he gave everyone. I didn't respond. Just handed my ticket to him and boarded the bus.

I found a seat near the back of the bus and sat down before I realized the lonely lady sat right across from me. I decided against finding a new seat. I just hoped she wouldn't talk to me the whole trip. I was gratified to see very few people board the bus. It should be a quiet trip.

I got a little impatient, waiting for the porters to finish loading all the luggage. 12:21. Come on. I wanted to leave. After an agonizing wait, they finished and the driver boarded. He made sure everyone was sitting and started the bus. We began to pull away from the station, slowly. Too slow. I realized I was rubbing my hands together and made myself stop. Others would see me and know how nervous I was.

Finally, we were on our way. I watched the station grow smaller. Then as we drove through down town, I absorbed the lit up city. Lights flashed from billboards and buildings, creating a pseudo-world of enticing advertisements. Occasionally, I saw pedestrians braving the cold, even at this hour, to taste of the cheap pleasures offered by the bars and sex palaces. We were nearly out of down town when I searched for the moon. It was behind a tall, dark, tomblike building, its light giving the building a strange, glowing outline.

Finally, I let myself relax. We were on our way. 12:24. I was so tired and let my eyes close peacefully. Gone were my fears and worries. Also gone was my desire to read or be distracted. I wanted rest only. Rest and solitude.

The lonely lady in the next seat leaned over and interrupted both. "Excuse me. Didn't you have a briefcase with you?"

I looked her briefly and shook my head. She said "Ah," and settled back in her seat.

Just then, my briefcase, resting under the sink in the bathroom of the bus station, blew apart, taking the station with it. I saw through my eyelids a large flash just a moment before I heard the muffled explosion. 12:25.

Startled, everyone in the bus jumped and looked out the window at the rising pillar of flames, several blocks behind us. The driver pulled the bus over quickly and began calling on his radio. I watched with the other passengers, so I didn't arouse suspicion. It was over.

I didn't feel as satisfied as I thought I would. I thought of the young college girl, sleeping on the bench. I thought of the reading Jew. The old couple. The Puerto Rican janitor. But mostly, I thought of the Asian girl in the wheelchair. Her face haunted me.

I closed my eyes and allowed myself to be taken to the next station.