

The Train Station

*“Now you know how much my love for you
burns deep in me
when I forget about our emptiness,
and deal with shadows as with solid things.”*

I could recite Dante’s lines in my sleep. Unconsciously. Leading up to the first time reading his work freshman year, I remember a feeling of dread consuming me. I genuinely laughed at the thought of my teacher thinking a bunch of awkward fifteen year olds could comprehend *The Divine Comedy*— arguably one of the greatest and most intricate literary works in the history of man.

But I’ll admit, I was completely and utterly enamoured from the very first line of Canto I of *Inferno*; however, I considered Volume II of Dante’s ungodly lengthy narrative poem to be my favorite. How anyone could write about such an unknown supernatural realm with such ingenuity and detail, I wasn’t sure. I just knew that Dante managed to do it.

The familiar woodsy aroma of sandalwood and orange peel drew me back into reality, and I met my grandfather’s wide-eyed smile as I looked up from my worn down copy of *The Divine Comedy*. My brothers and I always joked that if Pop’s booming voice didn’t give him away first, his signature cologne certainly would.

“I thought you’d be just about sick of that book by now with the amount of times I’ve seen you holding it,” Pop sneered at me. “We should start heading to the platform now. Grab this for me, would you?” He threw down his two bags towards me, and took a swig of his infamous watered-down coffee from his stainless steel thermos.

“Yeah, of course. Just one second.” I finished the last line of the stanza I was on, and went to crease the already crumpled up page in a hurry. “Shit.” The quick sting of the all too familiar papercut shocked me. Quickly, I brought my thumb to my mouth to soothe the cut out of reflex. I braced myself for the metallic taste of blood that I swore would come. But there wasn’t any. “Huh, that’s weird.”

Shaking off my hand, I slipped the book into my backpack, and then shrugged it onto my shoulders. “Jesus, Pop,” I snorted out with a laugh, “What are you keeping in these? Aren’t you just staying one night?”

“Listen, I don’t know how these city doctors work. One day they’re telling you that you just need to have a checkup on your lungs, and the next they might force you to stay for a week,” he remarked quite nervously. I must’ve had a worried look in my eyes because he quickly added “It was just a joke, kid. I’ll be home tomorrow. Just don’t forget to pick me up.” He managed a faint smile. “Now, let’s go before you make me late!”

I trailed behind my grandfather to the entrance while he kept the pace quick. Thinking about spending time in a train station again, even just to see Pop off, skeeved me out. Train stations and I weren’t the best of friends— I considered myself kempt and in a tidy fashion, and every train station I’ve ever been in has proved to oppose just that. Dirt seemed to be of abundance in every nook and cranny. Dirty people, dirty smells, dirty noises. But, I knew I had to get over myself on this one occasion, as my grandfather who has done such good for everybody around him has asked for me to help him this one time. How could I deny such a simple request from such a kind man?

Pop opened one of the double doors for me, and the wind created from its momentum swept my hair to its side. This specific station made me question my previous prejudice on them all. It was stunning.

The first thing I noticed was the sky light. It opened so wide that the eyes naturally navigate up the silver walls and right into its center. The glass panels were intricately adorned with gold wrapped like vines with roses protruding from the sides. They looked awfully beautiful today, as the milky white clouds reflected even more sunlight onto them.

“Shut your mouth, you’ll catch flies,” Pop whispered in my ear as he nudged me forward. “We have to get to the baggage check-in.”

“The baggage check-in?” Something wasn’t adding up to me. “I thought that was only for flying.”

Stopping in his tracks, Pop turned his head to me amusingly and said, “You know what? Me too. I heard it’s just a new thing they’re doing now just to make sure if your baggage is good enough for boarding.”

Good enough? I thought to myself. *Whatever you say.*

He guided me through the curiously crowded main floor. As I looked around, I couldn’t help but notice the sea of gray before me. I joked with Pop on the car ride here that one of us had to change because we both had the idea of wearing gray. Pop was modest, of course, with just a pair of gray slacks with a bit of a sheen and a plain white button-up. I, on the other hand, sported similar slacks (just with a checkered pattern), a cream colored knit sweater that I got this past Christmas, and a dark gray overcoat that could almost pass as black.

Nevertheless, here we were not just matching with each other, but with what looked like hundreds of perfect strangers. For the most part, there were older people filing through the

station. There was a white haired woman walking with her hands behind her back while whistling a tune that sounded all too familiar, but not enough for me to put a name to it. A younger man, I would say about 40, walked swiftly past her, and upon bumping into her, he came to a halt and apologized. I turned my head to the left and saw what could only be siblings bickering with each other. They had to be around my age, in their twenties, and when they felt my glare, they stopped fighting and gave me a nod of recognition. I nodded back with a weak smile.

The most memorable interaction, however, was a woman and her baby. Pop and I eventually reached the line for the baggage check, and I was just occupying my time by guessing the names of random people.

Marcus. Annabelle. Beth. Francis, John, Claudia, Andrew, George—that's definitely a George if I've ever seen one in my life.

And then her eyes met mine. They were the kindest eyes I had ever seen.

The brown of her iris sparkled like gold when the light from the ceiling reflected off of them. They were almond shaped with crows feet just emerging from the sides of her eyes; she must have smiled a lot, as I just have never seen ones so defined.

And her smile... God, her smile.

When I used to hear people comment on a smile that could light up any room, I took it as an exaggeration outlining how nice an individual's smile was. I think I truly saw what that phrase meant in that moment though. Her smile caused me to focus in on her energy, her being. My previous preoccupation with the architecture of the station and the people inside of it vanished. I could feel within myself a warmth that transpired in my core which then ran rampantly through the entirety of my body.

She was the heavenly source of light, it seemed.

My gaze worked its way down to her arms—arms that carried a sleeping baby boy.

“You’re going to hold up the line,” Pop murmured through almost closed lips, “Let’s go!”

It was our turn to get the baggage weighed.

I turned my head back once more to get a view of the kind-eyed girl again. But she wasn’t near the bench anymore.

Picking up Pop’s baggage off the floor, I struggled to reach the counter. Just as we were about to reach the scale for the bags, she walked right in front of us. Again, her eyes met mine, but this time she winked. I started to ask for her name, but she drew her index finger over her lips, and then glanced down to the sleeping child. She continued on, her white dress whipping my knees as it went past.

It’s okay, I told myself, I’ll get her name once we get our bags checked.

Ten seconds later, I realized that wouldn’t be possible, as she managed to reach the train car and board.

“Alright, now just put them on the scale,” my grandfather guided me, “There we are.”

“I got it, Pop, thank you.” The attendant behind the scale giggled under her breath at my straining under the bags’ weight. But then I realized something that caught me off guard. “Hey,” I got the attention of the attendant, “why didn’t that girl with the baby have to wait in line and check her bag?”

Once again, she laughed. “Her? She travels through here everyday. Work. We don’t need to check her. And do you really think that baby needs to be checked?”

“Oh,” I exclaimed embarrassingly, “no, I just thought that...” I trailed off.

I waited for a number to appear on the scale, but it never showed up. Nevertheless, the attendant smiled at my grandfather and said, “You’re good to go,” with a sincere tone of gentleness behind her words.

The process of how the attendant could tell if the bags were at an appropriate weight baffled me, but I was not about to question her again. The attendant took the bags behind her counter and threw them onto the luggage carousel, and waved us toward the platform. Pop gently nudged me, and we were off.

We continued to travel opposite the entrance, towards the platforms. The woman directly in front of us kept a steady rhythm of stilettos hitting the linoleum and vinyl flooring under our feet. All of a sudden, my ears perked up at the sound of music; it was definitely a horn playing, but which one I wasn’t exactly sure. Following along with the steady stream of people, we arrived in quite a crowded mass.

There were children, coincidentally all wearing simple white T-shirts, running around, chasing each other while wearing the look of sheer delight across their faces. As I was watching to figure out which playground game they were playing, two of them, both girls, whipped around me, and I turned quickly around out of reflex.

“What I would do to go back to those years,” I heard Pop whisper to himself with a soft smile. “Everything was so simple and innocent.”

I decided not to comment, as I felt like I would be intruding on his thoughts; however, I was also kept silent because upon turning around, I located where the music came from. It was a trumpet playing after all.

The performer was in his thirties, I would guess, and was beautiful. His skin was an enriched sepia, reddish-brown shade which seemed to illuminate honey when the light hit his

damp forehead. I couldn't describe which genre he was playing—all I knew was that it was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard. Our eyes met after a few moments and measures passed, and I saw his lips curl into a smile over the mouthpiece once he had a beat or two to breathe.

I couldn't return the favor because I suddenly felt something beside me... or rather the lack thereof.

My eyes opened wide as a cold sweat broke across my forehead

He isn't here. I know he didn't just leave me here.

And I knew he never would do that. Something was wrong.

Almost as if on cue, the hundreds of train passengers that were just standing stagnantly moments ago were now doing anything but. Stranger after stranger bumped into me as I tried to navigate which train Pop would have boarded, but there seemed to be no hope. The disorientation that came with the constant movement that was occurring all around me mixed with the fear that something had happened to Pop was a muddled cocktail which made my head swell and breaths short. I turned in circles and circles wondering where he might be, wondering what could have happened, wondering if I might see him before the trains are off.

But then, there she was again. The woman with the beautiful smile and crows feet. She was on the train to the left of me with her head sticking out the window.

In here, her eyes seemed to tell me.

And I listened.

I felt my legs move under me, running to the side of the train. I hopped across the small opening between the door and the platform, and landed recklessly on my feet. Straightening out my overcoat, I started to move cautiously between the cabins, trying not to look too conspicuous.

I had no luck after looking in six cabins, and I resorted to asking the other passengers if they had seen a man fitting the description of my grandfather.

But the most strange thing occurred. Nobody answered me, no, nobody even acknowledged me. It was as if they couldn't hear me. The siblings I saw earlier were still engaged in conversation. They didn't stop to answer my question. The older woman with white hair was sitting with herself, staring out of the window with sparkling eyes. She didn't turn her head towards me. And the man that bumped into her was just two cabins down reading a newspaper. He didn't look up from reading.

Just as I was about to lose hope, I heard his page shuffle, and saw his hand start to move. He was pointing his finger towards the very back of the train car, still without looking up and without words.

But just then, I almost fell backwards. I heard a loud whistle. The train was departing. Again, I collected myself and straightened my coat, and decided to find him. A night in the city didn't seem so bad after all.

I reached the last cabin in the car, praying my grandfather was inside. Strangely enough, call it intuition, I knew he would be sitting there. I turned, rather sharply, into the opening... and I found my stomach turning into knots and a single tear cascading from my left eye.

The cabin was vacant, save a stainless steel thermos with the remnants of watered-down coffee. A single glowing beam from the skylight shone through the window. It's light illuminated the dust particles in the cabin which seemed to bring them to life—almost to the point in which I started to believe they *did* have a life of their own. They danced across the light, pirouetting through the room and out the window. I watched them as they floated to the skylight, and until they disappeared.