

Last Run

“All aboard!”

Jessica Douglas lowered the brim of her conductor cap to shield her eyes from the harsh overhead lighting of 30th Street Station. *Thank the Lord, it's last run*, she thought, flexing her aching feet in her boots and lifting her braids off her sweaty neck. She was used to the drunken fools on the late weekend trains, but the crowds on the trains out of the city on Christmas Eve had been ridiculous: raucous shouting matches, vomit in the bathroom, glass bottles rolling on the floor. Didn't these people have homes?

Usually, Christmas Eve was Jessica's favorite night of the year, when she and Marcus would bake cookies, eat them for dinner and fall asleep to *A Christmas Carol* on the couch. Even when Marcus was tiny and they had had almost nothing, Jessica would bundle him up in an old blanket and walk by the Christmas lights in the neighborhood. On those nights, when the white glints of light shone out against the deep December darkness, Jessica knew that they would be alright.

But this year, Marcus had chosen to spend Christmas with his father.

No one could deny that Randall had made an effort this year, showing up to Marcus's school concert, taking him out for burgers, and making sure he was one of the first ones to meet his new sister. So when Randall had asked her about his son spending Christmas with him for the

first time in twelve years, she had agreed to let him extend the invitation, knowing in her heart that Marcus would decline.

But he didn't, and Jessica had watched Marcus climb on the bus to Camden that morning with a thousand pounds weighing on her chest.

"Looking good, Jess?" her colleague Frank said with his usual good cheer as he stepped out on to the platform with her.

"Looking good, Frank," Jessica said.

"Now say it like you mean it!" Frank said. "It's Christmas!"

"Bah humbug," Jessica deadpanned.

Frank laughed, his cheeks shaking. "That's the spirit! At least that snow didn't come through." He checked his watch. "Let's get this show on the road, shall we?"

"Gladly."

"All aboard!" Frank called out as the train blew its whistle. A flurry of last minute travelers jumped through the side doors, and, with a mechanical lurch, the cars pulled away from the platform.

Last run, Jessica said to herself.

"Tickets!" Jessica called out, pulling her ticket punch from her belt. "Have your tickets ready!"

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The crowd was rowdy - the girls in tank tops with no coats, the boys in oversized Eagles jerseys, and every one of them loud, laughing with gaping mouths and talking a mile a minute.

"Tickets, please!"

In the first car, four girls were giggling and passing around a bottle in a paper bag, but they were polite, searching their tight jeans for their tickets and handing them over with a “Merry Christmas.”

Bah humbug, Jessica thought, handing back their stubs.

The next car was quieter, with just a few late travelers and some regular commuters. Jessica took their tickets and had almost moved on to the next car when she spotted a body pressed in the corner of one of the three-seaters. She approached with loud footsteps and tapped the nearest shoulder.

“Hey. Wake up.”

The mass shifted and two teenagers emerged, their cheeks flushed from their recent closeness. They were younger than the crowd in the last car, maybe sixteen. The girl was giggling, embarrassed to be caught, but the boy – a young man, really – was serious, his eyes dark and direct.

“Sorry, ma’am,” he said in a respectful tone. “Won’t happen again.”

Sure, Jessica thought. “Tickets, please,” she said.

As they dug for their tickets, Jessica thought of her and Randall at that age. It was blinding, that early love. The physical and the emotional reflected off each other until there was nothing else – no school, no parents, no consequences. They had been together a few months when she had found out she was pregnant. Her mom had cried and hadn’t spoken to her for weeks. Randall’s parents had grounded him from everything, including seeing Jessica. That year, alone in her bedroom, Jessica had read *Romeo and Juliet* over and over when she was supposed to be doing homework. She just knew that once the baby came, they would all see that she and Randall were family and that they were going to be together forever.

Of course, it hadn’t turned out like that.

“Jefferson Station, next stop. Jefferson Station!” Frank’s voice crackled over the loudspeaker.

The young man handed over the tickets with a charming smile, but Jessica didn’t smile back.

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At Jefferson, there was a large turnover in the passengers, and everyone was loaded down with suitcases and packages and bundled under large coats. The wind rushed in behind them, smelling frosty.

“Tickets, please.”

In the second car, a man in a large orange and blue ski jacket was staring down at his phone and didn’t hear her. *Privileged asshole*, Jessica thought.

“Tickets, please!” Jessica said loudly, right above his head.

The man jumped and then looked up, giving her an apologetic smile. “Sorry, ma’am. Just trying to figure out our stop.”

“Tickets, please,” Jessica said again.

“Of course.” The man started unzipping the many pockets of his coat. A small head poked out from behind the puff of the jacket.

“Hi!” the boy said brightly, his hazel eyes fringed with dark lashes. He couldn’t have been more than six. “My name is Andrew. What’s yours?” Under his winter coat and oversized knit hat, Andrew was dressed for bed, his pajamas covered in prancing reindeer. One cheek made a deep dimple as he smiled up at Jessica.

“Jessica,” she said, returning his smile in spite of herself.

“Are you a real train conductor?” Andrew asked.

“I am,” said Jessica, touching the brim of her hat.

Andrew’s eyes grew even bigger. “Do you get to drive the train every day?”

“Conductors don’t operate the train,” Jessica said. “Engineers do.”

“Oh,” Andrew said, tucking his chin down into his coat but still looking up at Jessica with wide eyes.

The man located the tickets in an inner pocket and handed them to Jessica. “Here you go. Sorry about him. First ride on a train.”

“Ah,” said Jessica, punching the tickets. Andrew was still looking at her, but his dimple had disappeared. *Don’t take your mood out on the kid*, she scolded herself.

She handed the boy the tickets and asked, “Do you like trains?”

The dimple reappeared. “I loooooooooooooooooooooove trains,” he said.

“They are pretty cool,” Jessica agreed, then added: “Do you want to try my hat on?”

“Yes, please!” Andrew said and practically leaped over his father to grab Jessica’s hat. As all three of them wrestled his winter hat off and tried to balance her cap on his small head, Jessica started to think this hadn’t been the best idea. But when it was said and done, with Andrew admiring his reflection in the dark train window and the man smiling, she was glad she offered.

“Thank so much for this. It’ll be the highlight of the trip. He’ll give it right back.”

Jessica shrugged. “We’ve got a bit before the next stop. Where are you headed?”

“I’m not sure. Do you know where we should get off for Chalfont?”

“Depends where in Chalfont.”

The man smiled again. Jessica recognized the bags under his eyes. “It’s my wife’s parents’ house, and we haven’t been there in over a year. I was trying to find the address in my email, but so far no luck.”

“Your wife doesn’t know?”

The man’s eyes flattened. “She died two years ago.”

Jessica felt her cheeks heat. “Sorry.”

“Thanks.” The man looked at Andrew, who was still admiring himself in the glass, now with the hat backwards. “Last year was tough. But this year has been better. So I thought a trip to see Lynn’s parents on a train would be an exciting thing for us to do. But with directions, of course.”

Jessica thought for a moment. “Any landmarks?”

The man squinted. “It’s a station under an old stone bridge. And maybe a narrow building on top?”

“You want the first Chalfont, then. It’s coming up next.”

The muscles in the man’s face released a little. “Thank you so much.”

“No problem.”

The man looked at his son, who was now occupied with a toy in his lap, her hat drooping perilously low on his head. “I thought it was about time, you know, to try again. Last Christmas, I couldn’t face her parents. It was like looking into a mirror. And I couldn’t handle that, you know? I had to stay focused on him. Make sure things were okay for him.”

Jessica’s throat closed up.

The man flashed her a smile. “Sorry. My counselor got me working on ‘articulating my feelings’ and now I can’t seem to stop.”

Jessica opened her mouth.

“Chalfont! Chalfont, next stop!” Frank’s voice blared.

“Guess this is us,” the man said. “Come on, Andrew. Give the conductor back her hat and grab your bag.”

Andrew turned over the hat with much more grace than Marcus would have managed at that age, grabbed a small red duffel bag from the seat and hopped down to the floor. The man pulled down a suitcase and a shopping bag full of shiny paper from the top rack. Jessica moved aside to let them into the aisle and followed them to the doors. As they all waited in the vestibule for the train to stop, Andrew said something to his dad that Jessica couldn't hear over the sound of the train. The man nodded and opened the shopping bag. As the train slowed to a stop, Andrew reached in and pulled out something which he presented to Jessica. It was a candy cane made to look like a reindeer, with pipe cleaner antlers, googly eyes and a red pom-pom for a nose.

“For you,” he said and smiled at her.

Now she was going to cry. “Thank you, Andrew. This is a great reindeer.”

“You're welcome!” he said, the dimple deep in his cheek. He glanced over at his dad, then motioned for Jessica to lean down. He cupped his hands and whispered in her ear: “You made my dad happy. Thank you.”

Oh, baby boy, Jessica thought, wanting to hug his neck close.

Instead, she whispered, “I think you make him happy.”

“Let's go, Andrew,” his dad said. “I see Grandpa on the platform.” Andrew smiled again at Jessica and followed his dad outside. Jessica stepped out after them, watching the boy run down the platform into the arms of an older man. In the station's yellow flood lights, small flakes started to glint and swirl. The man turned back and shouted something.

“What?” Jessica called back.

“Merry Christmas!” he yelled.

“Merry Christmas!” she shouted, but as she said it, the train blew its whistle and she didn’t know if he heard.

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The snow was starting to cover the ground as they pulled into the last stop at Doylestown.

“Really coming down now,” Frank said, blowing on his hands for warmth. “I’ll do the last check if you take the platform.”

As Frank ambled back into the train, Jessica looked up. In the dim light, she could see the snowflakes, twinkling white and silver against the dark sky. Jessica thought of Marcus, asleep in his father’s house, dreaming about Christmas morning, and she hoped, with a hope that went down to her bones, that Marcus knew that all she wanted in the whole world was for him to feel loved.

I’ll call, she decided. I’ll call in the morning. And then, when he’s home, we’ll do Christmas again. Cookies and A Christmas Carol, just like usual.

“So, Jess,” Frank said, exiting the train and giving the engineer the all clear sign. “Looks like we’re all good here. You?”

“Yes,” Jessica said. “I’m good.”

The End