

The Train

I was walking down the beaten dirt path when I began to notice the leaves losing their color. Not browning, or changing for the season, but losing their vibrancy. My eyes felt foggy but I could almost swear the leaves were becoming a little gray in the distance beyond me. This place felt so familiar to me. I couldn't remember how I got here, but it filled my body with warmth. Somewhere between nostalgia and déjà vu.

I couldn't feel my feet moving, but I could hear the crunch of the graying leaves beneath me. As soon as I began to notice the sound, it was overtaken by the scream of an incoming train.

A train station, I realized as my head jolted to the left where the track lay beside me just through the veil of tall oak. Emily, my best friend, used to live in a neighborhood near here before she moved away. I had walked down this path on nights when my mom had forgotten to pick me up from her house.

The train moved in from the distance. The crunch of leaves appeared again. This time, I realized I was only standing, and the noise approached from behind me. A large man with a blurry face, or a colorless face, or something imperceptible entirely, approached me. What I could make out of it was bordering on overgrown brown stubble and messy hair above a long gray coat.

As he came toward me, he reached out his hand. Without question or any need for thought at all, I placed mine within it. He led me to the tracks. The last thing I heard was the train coming toward me.

I woke up in a sweat. With my senses back and the fully colored star stickers on my ceiling gleaming yellow back at me, I remembered the reoccurrence of this dream. I had talked to my therapist about it a few times in our first sessions. I felt more interested in dissecting the metaphorical rather than the literal. That was before she had finally had enough, and began to force me to describe my mother and father's relationship in as much detail as she could squeeze out of me in the fifty minutes our insurance allowed.

Back then, she asked me if I thought that the man was leading me to the train station to kill me. I remembered my head moving back involuntarily, being broken from my implicit trust of the mysterious man for the first time. I explained that the dream comforted me, which led to a cryptic conversation that made me wonder if she was considering hospitalizing me. Eventually she dropped it though. Leaving it off with an idea that the image of a train appearing at an abandoned train track was a symbol of anxiety about change due to my parent's filing for divorce.

"It doesn't really affect me," I had told her. "There's less yelling in the house which is good for Matty."

Matty was my five-year-old brother. He cried a lot before my mom moved out to the apartment. He'd sneak into my room in the night to escape the sound of my parents' screaming. My mom was usually louder, but sometimes she got Dad so riled up enough to a point of exhaustion that he would scream back.

Matty missed Mom, but he cried a lot less since she left.

I was okay with her gone, but I started to wake up earlier to help Matty get dressed in the morning and ready for school. Dad said I didn't have to do that, and that it shouldn't be a thirteen-year-old girl's responsibility. But he got busy doing it all by himself and I didn't mind helping. Today, I shifted in my pool of sweat to look at the clock on my nightstand, realizing that I had overslept. I jolted up, my muscles tensing and working themselves into newly forming knots in my joints, and ran to my closet. I threw on the closest and easiest clothes I could find that left me presentable and brushed my teeth for about thirty seconds before running out into the hall.

Dad was carrying Matty around in his right arm, and I sighed in relief at his khaki-colored pants and little green sweater. Dad came up to me and kissed the top of my head. "Want some eggs, sweetie?"

"I have to catch the bus in fifteen minutes."

"I'll drop you off down the street on my way to the elementary school. The eggs are on the stove," he replied, walking away to retrieve his tie.

School was boring without Emily here. The classes dragged on and I felt like I was waiting all day to leave most of the time. Except for today, knowing that my mom was waiting outside to pick me and Matty up.

At first, Emily and I facetimes a lot, but she stopped answering as often since she was busy with ballet and her new friends. My face got flushed with jealousy when I thought about how Emily was already making so many friends in her new town in Wisconsin, while she was the only real friend I had made living here for the past five years.

I had friends at school; but they were school friends, not people I wanted to bring back home. When Emily came over and my mom would be the way she always was, Emily would just shrug it off and ask if I wanted to walk down to the diner and get coffee. Emily's parents didn't let her drink coffee, so she loved that when she came to our place my parents didn't ask a lot of questions about where we went or what we did. Emily didn't care when my mom would slam doors in the house while yelling at my father. Emily also didn't care when my mom would stay in her room ignoring us for the better part of three weeks and Dad would be so busy the house would start to reek with the smell of forgotten trash.

I was walking out of my last class thinking about how much I missed Emily as I watched the blue bubbles of my phone left with no reply. I could try to call her, but the phone ringing on and on was even worse. I needed to talk to her about how it was Friday and my mom would be outside of the school waiting for me. I was still lingering on our messages waiting for her to start typing when I walked up to my mom's car and opened the back door to get in.

She already looked like she was in a bad mood the moment she saw me. Combing her bobbing black curls in the rearview window, she made eye contact with me. "How was school today?"

"The same as every day," I mumbled back.

She pursed her lips and started driving while I checked if Matty's seatbelt was buckled right before my mom slammed on the breaks, causing my faced to slam into the headrest in front of me.

"Can you slow down?" I asked.

“I was barely going thirty, Frances,” she rolled her eyes.

Mom’s new apartment was a few minutes away, and we talked in this stilted way the entirety of the ride. When we got back to her apartment, I wasn’t surprised to see the mess. Dirty clothes and crushed soda cans littering the floor. A half-full trash bag hanging off the closet handle with a few flies accumulating around it. I thought to myself that without Dad being here nobody would ever clean this up. When dinner came, I laughed at how right I was.

“Can you clear the table for dinner?” she asked me. Dinner was a pepperoni pizza she had ordered.

I cleaned up paper plates filled with half-eaten food and a few beer bottles off of her crumb-covered kitchen table. There was a sticky residue where I swiped my hand to push away the rest of the mess of random mail.

My mom got out ceramic plates, as if that would make this fine dining.

“So how is your father doing?” she asked as nonchalantly as she could muster while placing Matty’s pizza in front of him.

I tried to swallow my annoyance. “I’m not going to talk to you about Dad.”

She scoffed. “You can’t talk to me about your dad but the two of you can say whatever you want about me to each other?”

My eyes narrowed. “Me and Dad don’t talk about you either, Mom.”

“You talk about me to your little therapist your dad had you get. What do you two talk about when he comes to your sessions?”

“My grades, Mom.”

“Oh please, you’re not going to therapy to talk about flunking Algebra,” she mocked, moving around the kitchen erratically while grabbing another slice of pizza to slap on her plate.

“Maybe Dad put me in therapy because he actually cares about me,” I said, blood rushing to my cheeks.

Mom slammed her plate down on the counter and there was a loud shatter. “Fuck!” She yelled angrily at the remnants of what had been the plate. Matty jolted in his chair and looked at me for reassurance.

“Jesus, Mom!”

“Just shut up for one second!” she screamed back, scooping up the broken ceramic with a hand towel.

Tears burned at my eyes. “Fine then just leave me alone. I didn’t want to come here anyway,” I stormed off to the “living room”, which had no real wall between it and the kitchen. I kept my back turned to her while I opened my book on the couch.

I heard her comforting Matty while he cried and couldn’t stand the sound of it. I checked my phone and still no texts. I longed to be anywhere else but here. But really, I longed to be with Emily. That’s when I began to think about the train track.

I couldn’t go to Emily’s old house, where the memories of Emily lingered. But I could find them somewhere else, too. In the woods, by the tracks, where she had walked me home and listened to me rant about my mom and how little she cared about me or Matty. How my mom would sometimes get red in the face when she talked about her coworkers, or the neighbors, or anyone she had met at the grocery store that day.

“You should just say ‘fuck off, Georgia’,” Emily would say and we’d both giggle at the profanity here in the woods where we could get away with it.

I told my mom I was leaving to get some fresh air and found myself walking toward the abandoned tracks. To our place. I wouldn’t admit it to myself at the time, but I was thinking of him, too. Maybe I wouldn’t accept it because I didn’t want to think I was slipping into some kind of psychosis. My therapist had teetered on suggesting that once, too.

I had mentioned to her that sometimes I would see the man with the blurry face in the corner of my room while I held Matty crying. Dr. Breton seemed alarmed by this, until I managed to convince her that I didn’t really see him, but more so thought of him. The truth was somewhere in between the two, I guessed.

His presence there was a comfort, too. He felt more like a family member than a scary figure. Somebody related to me somehow. I figured that a hallucination would not give me comfort like this so I decided not to dwell on it. Consciously, at least.

My feet crunched familiarly on the ground as I made my way to the wooded path, past the blue-gray creek, its vibrancy stolen by the clouded setting sun. I had brought mine and Emily's favorite book to read. Once I got there, I thought it would be ironic to lay on the abandoned tracks.

The sun was setting quickly and the world around me was sinking into a deep gray that made it become growingly impossible to read. I rolled on my side impatiently, thinking about going home, when I saw a little smoke coming toward me from above the trees. My head twisted and I slowly stood up on the tracks. Tuning my ears in, I heard the sound of a train, and then the crunch of leaves.

My head flipped back and forth between the man and the smoke beyond the trees. I looked down at my hands and was alarmed at their vibrancy. I was not dreaming, and the man with the blurry face had a quite clear face, with the same familiar stubble. Only he was quite gray.

"Don't be afraid," I thought I heard him say.

He disappeared between the trees and my thoughts came back to me. I scurried off the tracks only a minute before the rusty, red train came to a screeching stop before me. The door slid open and I peeked my head inside.

The only person on the train was the gray man sitting at the end of the cart. Without another thought, I jumped onto the train. There was nothing inside me except for curiosity. Until the train began to move and my heart pounded.

Where was this train taking me on an abandoned track? I raced through the possibilities, telling myself that there was no way that a train would be running without anyone knowing about it. Somebody had to know where I was going, and my mom would eventually find out where I was and that I wasn't on my way back home and throw a fit. And Dad would find out too and be worried sick about me.

But then there was a gray man in front of me. And I couldn't get myself to take my eyes off of him.

His face was a paler gray than his coat, his hair a salt and pepper mess that didn't match the semblance of youth still left on his face. He must have been thirty-five, at the oldest.

I tiptoed down the cart to him. He didn't meet my eyes until I was sitting directly across from him. "Where are we going?"

"This train only goes to one place," he answered simply.

"Where is that?"

He shrugged and pursed his lips as his tongue struggled to find the words. "The place that comes to anyone that needs to escape," he finally answered.

I leaned back into my seat and decided to stop asking questions. The train didn't take long to get to the place, but then I couldn't quite tell the passage of time as we waited.

When we got off the train together, I peered down either side of the street. There were small rundown houses, an obscene number of stray cats hiding in bushes and scurrying around trash cans, but otherwise seemingly empty streets. It was some kind of suburb, the tracks nonexistent. Not even paint-lines or street lights existed anywhere in sight. And everything was absolutely gray. The kind of deep gray that brought your eyes to it to try to find any twinge of green in the grass, or faint colors in peeling house paint. The air held a thickness to it like a heavy fog, but it was indiscernible from the rest of the muted town.

Overwhelmed with questions, I began to fire off at the man as I followed him down the street. He walked with his head pointed at the ground and his hands in his pockets

"Do you live here?"

"For now, yes," he replied.

"In one of these houses?"

"All of the doors are locked."

"Why are there so many cats?"

“They were abandoned.”

“How is everything gray?”

“You can only see the gray,” he turned and gave me a side-eyed glance at the end of this one. “You still have a little color on you, though.”

I stopped walking now and lowered my voice. “What were you doing in my house?”

He stopped and turned back to me. “I wasn’t trying to go into your house. I was just trying to leave. I kept ending up there.”

“You only ever came when my parents were fighting,” I murmured.

“Emotions can open the door.” He added “I think.”

“Bad emotions?”

“Similar emotions,” he began to walk again. “But there aren’t many good emotions here.” As we walked, I started to look around more and began to see what he meant. There were people every few corners crouched on the ground. They were looking off into nothingness with no recognition of someone walking in front of them. Some of their mouths hung open, and a few even had their faces pressed flat against the ground. I had to keep my eyes locked on them for a moment to make sure they were breathing. It looked as if the souls had been ripped from their bodies.

“Who are these people?” I asked.

He shrugged.

“Why don’t they notice us?” I lowered my voice, feeling self-conscious in case they could hear me.

“They’ve been here too long.”

Those words made my stomach turn, but the thought of going home to my mom made me sicker. I asked how long the man had been here. He said months, so I was safe for now I knew. I could wallow here in this land outside of the world and stay in the comfort of this familiar feeling that softened my senses.

Lewis, I came to know him as, explained to me that I wasn't really gone from the real world. I could still go to school and sleep and maintain simple conversations. Talking to people would become harder, but short bursts were doable in the autopilot mode my body was on. I thought to myself that with Emily not calling me, I had no need to talk to anyone for a long time anyway. Dad was too busy, and the thought of talking to mom without having to actually talk to mom sounded like something I could live with for a few months.

Lewis told me that as long as I didn't begin to turn gray, I should be safe. This made me frown at his colorless skin but I looked away before he noticed. Time passed; days, or weeks-I wasn't sure anymore. My skin's color dampened but was still there so it didn't really matter.

Wandering through the town, there was always something new to me. But it seemed that Lewis was tired of this world and had nothing new to learn. Once we passed an elderly woman who was walking, too. Less upright, sluggishly swinging her arms in front of her knees. I tried to call out to her and get her attention.

"It's useless," Lewis explained.

"Why is it that we're the only ones that can talk to each other?"

"Well, we haven't been here as long as some of these people. And I must have kept coming back to you for a reason."

I liked the thought that I was important in some way to him, and to this place.

"You know, it's funny, I don't think I had spoken to anyone in months before you came here. I even stopped talking to people back home before I came," Lewis said.

"Why?"

"I felt angry. At the world, at myself. I felt angry when I went to the grocery store and the clerk smiled too big at me. I felt angry when the neighbors tried to make small talk with me. I felt angry when family or friends called to check up on me. I just wanted to be alone and stop having these people try to dissect me and my life." There was a kind of light in Lewis' eyes when he talked like this. Not hope, or joy, but something. Something that reminded me he wasn't like the people out there rotting on street corners.

"I stopped showing up to work because talking to people there became exhausting, too.

So, I'd take time off a few times a week. At first, they understood and said they knew I was going through a hard time. But eventually, I had taken too many days off and the company was losing money keeping me, so they had to cut me loose. And I had never been more alone than after that. I started to get unemployment, and I used it all to get my groceries delivered. I didn't even see my neighbors for weeks at a time sometimes."

"I know how you feel," I replied. "Sometimes my dad would get home so late at night from work that I wouldn't talk to anyone for days. I stopped talking to everyone at school, really, because they kept asking about my parents and my mom moving out. But then five minutes later they'd be talking about themselves or gossiping for the rest of the time that they even bothered talking to me at all. I started wondering if they only ever asked about my mom so they could gossip about me with their other friends, too."

There was some subtle kind of peace in conversations like this with Lewis. So, it became everything we talked about day and night. Despite the fact that the night here didn't seem to work on a normal cycle, and it only sometimes became a deeper shade of gray. All of the stray cats would disappear for a while and I figured I'd call that night.

At the night which wasn't really night, the sound of the train rang through the air more often. Sometimes you would see the head of one of the unfortunate people on the ground perk up for a brief moment. I wondered if they wanted to go home. I couldn't see any reason to, though.

Things weren't cheerful here, but I felt calm here with Lewis. If we could stay here and talk forever, I didn't care what was waiting for me back in the real world.

Lewis got tired of walking aimlessly eventually, as he explained that he was getting more exhausted with time. So, we sat on the side of a street. Lewis sat upright and his eyes stayed moving, so I trusted that his soul was still salvageable. Plus, he still talked to me sometimes.

"When did the train bring you here?" I asked once.

"After my husband died," he replied.

"Oh," I looked guiltily at my shoes.

"Why did you come here?" For the first and only time, I recall seeing a glint of something I thought were tears filling up Lewis' eyes. "You're so young."

“Dr. Breton would probably say my parents’ divorce. But it started way before that. I always felt like there was something different about me and the way I think. I think the kids could tell so at school, too. Except for Emily. Or maybe she did, too. But she still liked me. Emily was really cool.

You know, I started having the dream about the train way before my parents started fighting all the time. I think I was nine or ten. Maybe I was always supposed to end up here.”

“Don’t say end up here, Frances. You aren’t supposed to stay here forever.”

“Can I stay here a little while longer?” I looked up at him expectantly.

He shook his head. “I can’t tell you that. I can’t find a way out myself.”

“Why can’t you just take the train? I hear it running all the time.”

“I don’t anymore,” Lewis said.

And that was the last time I ever spoke to him. As the time passed, Lewis’ shades of gray blended in to one big smudge of a singular hue encompassing his entire being. His chin rested in his hands and he stared into the distance aimlessly. I would have cried for him but I couldn’t find the strength. Plus, I started to notice the tips of my fingers turning gray.

I began to wander after Lewis stopped responding to me. By myself felt a lot lonelier, but I still couldn’t bring myself to walk toward the sound of the train. I walked until I passed shops with blankets up in the windows. They all read “closed” on the signs. If you looked closely in the corners of the windows, though, you could see the sparkling of some kind of trinkets or jewels inside. Lewis was right that every door was locked.

I reached out toward a little gray cat one day that looked like it had once been a tabby. It hissed and ran away. Nothing was here that wanted to be perceived by anyone. Even the trees shed their leaves as if to say:

Keep walking, do not admire me.

I was drifting toward the curb one day, or hour, or week, thinking about the growing ache in my feet. I thought about how good sitting down would feel and approached the side of the street when I heard a familiar crunch. My eyes darted to the sound, a pang in my chest telling me

I would see Lewis walking again. My heart twisted altogether when I saw blotches of color scattered over a woman's frame.

My mother saw me and stopped her mindless walking. Her body stiffened into a rigid frame so still I almost thought it was breaking when her arms began to shake. The skin on her face contorted and stretched to accommodate her eyes opening as wide as I'd ever seen them. Taking me in. Then, thick blots of tears fell off her face as she stumbled into a run toward me.

Crashing into me, her arms enveloped my body forcefully, "what are you doing here, baby? What are you doing here?"

I froze there, my mind a million pieces. Had the train arrived to her, the night I left? Or had she been here since my father served her the divorce papers? Cooped up in her room, with rotting food in the kitchen. I stifled a sound of sorrow as it occurred to me that my mom must have been in this world much longer than I could realize. Was the mother that I knew a wandering body like mine back home?

She cradled the back of my head in her hands and tilted it up, as if to pour my spiraling thoughts onto the ground beneath us. My mouth opened into a wail. I began to not be able to tell the difference between her thick tears raining onto my face and my own sliding down my cheeks. I breathed in and out heavily trying to slow the spasms of my lungs. My jaw shook so much that my teeth chattered as I gasped out "Mom, is it really you?"

She breathed onto my face. I felt the familiar warmth of tequila on her breath. "Yes, baby, it's me."

"I didn't know you were here," I croaked out.

"Baby, why are you here, baby?"

We stood in each other's arms crying for a long time. Her arms steadying my back as I tried to stop my nails from digging into hers. I couldn't recall the last time I stayed in my mother's arms this long without resentment between us. All that I wanted was to stay in this safety. A feeling I can only remember ever having vaguely before this moment. Lost, in a crowded grocery store, finding my mother searching for me. Reaching for her hand and knowing as soon as our fingertips met, I was safe.

Hiccupping with my head hooked under her chin, I leaned back slightly. I scanned her body for color. She was half gray with islands of color formed around her body as if they were the last territories holding out in war. I held onto her with my grayed hands.

“Mom?”

“Yes, baby?”

“Can we go home?”

The sound of the train echoed from the tracks.

She smoothed back my hair and kissed the top of my head. “Of course. We can go home and never come back.” I shielded myself under her arm as we walked toward the sound of the tracks.

The train transformed from a small smudge of red in the distance, to a screeching halt in front of us so that the door was lined up with our waiting feet. It was only here for us.

We walked onto the train together, quietly finding our way to a seat. Her arms and my arms still bound up together, holding on with a silent fear that the other might disappear into this world forever.

On the way home, Mom spouted a list of apologies and promises. I recall laying my head on her shoulder and thinking to myself that I trusted her. I could see her, and the soft pink hues were returning to her skin.