

All set, thank you

The train is full of business people. Men and women in suits varying in color from gray to beige, lifting slim briefcases into the overhead compartments. They all know each other, exclaiming acquaintance with a handshake and hug while I sit silently, shrinking into myself. Alone.

“All set, thank you.” says the conductor sweeping through the car, scanning tickets and placing a small card above each seat.

The train continues to loiter in the station, perhaps waiting for more businessmen or perhaps someone has flung themselves onto the track ahead in despair. There is no way to know.

“All set, thank you.” A man helps a woman with her bag and they laugh. I smile too, but my amusement doesn’t exist in the same world as theirs.

Outside the window two policemen are standing in front of a woman. They are White. She is Asian. She carries two large canvas bags that are still swinging from the momentum of her flight down the stairs. She hopped quickly—foot to foot, step to step—an old habit from the unburdened urgency of childhood. Now her head aches and her long, straight, coarse black hair hangs limply, caught and bunched under the bag on her left side. The policemen move, circling their prey. One stands in front of her and the other blocks her pathway back up those stairs—as if she would run. If only every step would take her closer to the world that was.

“All set, thank you.” the conductor scans my ticket now, there is no beat in his stride. I am no different than any other ticket holder he has encountered today.

The woman outside looks flustered. People hurry past her, jogging to catch trains and gulping coffee as they wait—she is the eye of a hurricane, frozen.

“Where is your ticket?” police officer 1 asks.

“In my bag,” she replies softly, knowing that the words will not protect her, tainted as they are with jerky syllables and accented intonation.

“Open it.” he demands.

She does.

“Get the ticket out.”

She has been melted in her entirety by his scorn, poured and squashed into the mold of a child. He looks down at her and she shrinks further and further into the dirty red tile. His secure superiority sucks her strength straight into his puffed out chest. The diminisher looms over the diminished. The diminished searches desperately in her bag for that shred of dignity contained within a scrap of paper. Her fingers scrabble in the bag on her left arm, and unbalanced, the one on her right slips from her shoulder and spills its contents over the policeman’s boots. Bumpy, thick skinned fruits and vegetables roll across the floor near a faded black umbrella. A shawl and some

tattered board games keep each other's company at the edge of the platform. Dozens of pamphlets are sprinkled, radiating outward from the tipped bag. They are a brightly colored collection from insurance firms, environmental organizations and amusement parks—all merrily offering instructions on how to fill life with cheer. She drops to her knees beside her fallen bag, continuing to search through the one wrapped around her shoulder, the one with the ticket. Her fingers brush against a thin, delicate slip of paper and she pulls it out victoriously. Her fingers loosen with relief as she waves it in the air, trying to get the policeman's attention. He is staring in distasteful fascination at the pamphlets at his feet. A train hurtles into the station on her other side. Wind gusts through the platform and grabs the slip of paper from her hand with greedy digits. It flutters slowly out of her reach, landing perched atop the grimy rails of the tracks.

"All set, thank you." The conductor scans the ticket of the man sitting next to me and rips a piece of paper from his pad, placing it in a slot above our heads. He'll know we are supposed to be there, the next time he passes by.

The policeman's attention is back on the woman, "Where is your ticket?" he asks, his voice edging with impatience. She is small and surrounded. Alone and afraid. Without that ticket, the crowded train station is a midnight alleyway, moonlight or fluorescence throwing monstrous shadows. They could push her into the train tracks or throw her into a cell, leaving her there until she is gone, fading away unknown. A slightly torn photo in her son's wallet: the only evidence of her existence. And they knew nothing, and cared nothing, about that photo and the malleable old wallet and his gentle smile, still that half inch of gap tooth of an exuberant boy who spun around on the barstools in the restaurant as she finished her waiting shift.

"All set, thanks." The conductor is leaving our car. The man beside me shifts in his seat, opening up his computer. Oblivious to the story playing out in front us.

"I need to see identification." the policeman says. The woman looks around her, but no one meets her eyes. I helplessly avert mine too, even though I would be of no use to her anyways.

"Why are you stopping me?" she asks, grabbing the remnants of her bag and pushing to her feet. The look in her eyes sparks with defiance.

"I'm monitoring this station, making it safe for all law-abiding citizens."

"I haven't done anything wrong. I need to catch a train home." she argues, straightening and speaking with the sternness of a mother. She is weary, but angry. Unwilling to give up now.

"You will be taken into custody if you don't produce your papers." the officer warns. He looms over her, her head barely reaching his chest, a spiky badge glinting in her eyes.

"All set, thank you." Above me a piece of paper proclaiming belonging.

Another train pulls into the station behind her and she throws herself into the wind it brings, pushing past the policeman at the stairs. He takes a staggering, off-balance step towards the other officer, his foot coming down and squashing a gray leathery fruit that explodes yellow onto his polished black shoes. She leaps up the steps two

at a time, feeling her bent knees' coiled power with each step. Her arms pump, the bags slamming against her ribs setting a tempo to her flight into fresh-air. When she emerges, the brisk May air cools her flushed cheeks. Her hand fumbles with her phone as she calls her son, walking briskly to the next subway station. Ready to board a train that will take her home.

"All set, thank you." But I don't know anything, really. The train filled with businessmen pulled out from the station as her bags fell to the ground. I hope she doesn't fling herself onto the tracks in despair.