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West 91st

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West 91st

Cover Page Footnote

This piece was written and workshopped in 18F.

West 91*

Amelia had never seen the girl before. This wasn't necessarily unusual. People came through here all the time. It was a good hiding spot, depending on what you had to hide from. Anyway, the rain couldn't get in and people hid booze all over — stuck under the old benches, tucked between the tracks that had long since lost their electric sizzle, under the stairs — so the station saw its fair share of strangers.

The girl who sat at the other end of Amelia's bench was more than her fair share of strange.

The girl glanced down at her wrist occasionally, twisting it and squinting as if to check the time on her watch. She was not wearing a watch. She also scrutinized the busted notice board every few minutes, making noncommittal noises and murmuring times under her breath. The notice board had not been lit up for at least five years.

Quickly, quietly, so as not to attract the girl's attention, Amelia took stock of her belongings, inspecting her clothes and the area beneath her bench. Shoes. Blanket. Her sister's bracelet. Coat. Backpack. Nothing was missing, which either meant the girl hadn't been through it while Amelia was asleep or, if she had, she hadn't taken anything.

"Oh good!" Amelia jumped at the sound of the girl's voice - how had she slid up next to Amelia so fast? "You're awake! I was about to get you up. Wouldn't want you to miss your train. Mine will be here soon. I hope."

Amelia blinked at the girl, and blinked again for good measure. The old West 91st station wasn't easy to find, and most of the crazies who got down here weren't nearly as put together as the girl was. Lots of muttering, usually, and trying to find their way out.

The girl was still there no matter how many times Amelia blinked.

"Your train will be here soon?" Amelia repeated dumbly.

"Uh-huh! Arriving in eleven minutes. I'm on the four to Grand Central — I'm heading home this evening. What about you? Where are you going?"

Amelia's MetroCard had been stolen months ago. She hadn't had the money for a new one. She wasn't going anywhere.

"I'm, uh, headed downtown, too." Not technically a lie — eventually she'd have to go downtown for something.

"Cool!" The girl grinned. Her freckled cheeks pushed upwards like balls of clay, squishing around the sunshine splitting her face. Her hair, dun-brown like the back of some small animal, fell in wisps around the clay and the freckles and the sunshine. Her eyes were green. Did Amelia care? Why did Amelia care?

"Oh, I can't believe I didn't even introduce myself! Although, then again, you didn't introduce yourself either, so I guess we're even. Anyway, I'm Sasha. Sasha MacLauren."

"Amelia."

The girl — Sasha — stuck out her hand — oddly, her left — for Amelia to shake. Amelia fumbled for a second, grasped it with her own left hand, shook. Sasha had a nice, firm grip.

A firm grip in a handshake, Amelia thought. Her grip on reality is a little more tenuous. Seriously, what the fuck is going on with her? Should I, like, call someone about this?

No, of course she shouldn't call someone about this. No phone, and besides, Amelia didn't trust anyone she would've called.

“No last name! Very mysterious. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Amelia.” Sasha smiled brighter, if that was possible, and looked at her bare wrist again. She still didn’t have a watch.

“So. Uh. Sasha. What brings you to the city?”

Sasha laughed like a canary, delighted at this half-hearted attempt at small talk. Amelia felt something move in her chest. She wondered if it was a heart attack.

“I was visiting a few of my friends from school, actually! I live upstate, but we like to keep in touch and see each other when we can. For some reason, no one wants to come visit me in Poughkeepsie.” Sasha rolled her eyes. Amelia nodded, like she could totally relate.

She couldn’t have pointed out Poughkeepsie on a map, in all honesty, but she was pretty sure it was a real place, which was more than she could say for most of Sasha’s world.

At once, Sasha let out a breath, steepled her fingers, and said, “So. Mysterious Amelia. Why are you waiting for the four downtown, arriving in...” She checked the busted notice board, then her imaginary watch. “...nine minutes?”

Without knowing quite why she did it, and certainly without any time to plan, Amelia spoke. Most of what she said was a lie. For some reason, she couldn’t bring herself to ruin Sasha’s picture of the subway station — still dank and full of graffiti, Amelia was sure, and grey and smelly and liminal, but full of warm people and bright LED displays and the clear, cold sounds of faraway trains.

The parts of the story that weren’t lies were the parts that made Sasha smile the most.

In return, Sasha told Amelia all about Poughkeepsie — the college, the sketchy areas where there were always teenagers doing drugs, her friends back home — and her version of New York — the dazzling lights, the roaring trains, the cute strangers on the subway. This last she said with a raised eyebrow and a prolonged, awkward blink.

“That — what — can you not wink?” Amelia asked.

Sasha snorted. “Damn, I was hoping you wouldn’t notice! No, I can’t. I just turn my head to the side and blink really slow.”

“Oh my god.”

“Right?”

When Amelia got her giggles under control, she glanced at the dead black of the notice board and winced. “Oh, man,” she murmured. *What are you doing, Amelia?*

“What? What?”

“Looks like there’s something wrong with the tracks.” *No, no, what the fuck, Amelia?* “The whole — uh — the whole line is going to be down for half an hour, at least.”

Sasha squinted at the board. “That’s alright — I mean, it sucks, but I don’t have to be on the Amtrak for another hour, and besides, I’ve got good company.”

Amelia thanked every god that she could think of.

The half hour passed too quickly. It was a rush of conversations about favorite candies and wishes for the future and questions, so many questions, many of which didn’t even need to involve lies. Sasha never said anything about it, but the truth always, always made her grin a little longer and lean a little closer. Amelia wanted so much more of this, but she was too scared to try to push it further. Who knew whether she’d be able to influence Sasha’s reality again? Maybe it was a fluke.

Besides — though she hated to admit it to herself, hated to realize she was slowly buying in to Sasha, that she was, oh god, she was not *into* Sasha, she was just interested, it was different — Amelia was dying to know what would happen when the train arrived.

Three minutes. Two minutes. Companionable silence. Amelia racked her brain for anything to keep Sasha here for a couple more seconds, even. Sasha checked her imaginary watch.
Might as well.

“Hey, where did you get the watch? It’s beautiful.”

Sasha grinned. “Ex-girlfriend. She was actually kind of horrible, but I couldn’t bear to part with the watch. I’m such a sucker for rose gold.”

“Well, it suits you.”

“It sure does, doesn’t it?”

Amelia turned her head to the side and blinked, slow — a Sasha wink. Sasha sent herself into gales of canary laughter over this, and Amelia thought, just for a second, that they could be like a pair of normal strangers in a normal subway station, having a normal rom-com meet-cute and falling in normal love at first sight — *dammit* — instead of. Well. Whatever this was.

Sasha cocked her head, a dog listening to a faraway doorbell. “Well, that’s me,” she said. She hefted an incorporeal suitcase from the ground, dragging it behind her to the edge of the platform. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Mysterious Amelia. Maybe we can — I dunno — stay in touch?”

No phone. And if everything else Sasha had was imaginary (well, everything except Poughkeepsie, which Amelia was now fairly certain existed), who knew if she had a phone either? Amelia said nothing.

“Alright. Goodbye, I guess.” There was no sunshine. There was no clay. There was no canary. Amelia couldn’t stand it. She jumped up off the bench, casting what few things she owned to the ground, and soared the three steps separating her and Sasha. When they kissed, Amelia swore she could hear her heartbeat screech to a halt with a groan like a train on electric tracks.

“We’re holding everyone up,” Sasha whispered, smiling against Amelia’s mouth, closing her delicate fingers around Amelia’s wrists.

“I don’t care.”

“Then neither do I.”

When Amelia opened her eyes — she had meant to leave them open, to memorize Sasha, but they closed of their own accord — Sasha was not there. She was not anywhere. The notice board was still broken. Amelia’s possessions were still all over the ground. The whole place still smelled like stale beer and rats. Nothing was different.

I didn’t even feel her let go.

Amelia’s heart started beating again and sounded like nowhere.

As she bent to pick up her coat, she felt a cool heaviness on her left wrist, matching the weight of her sister’s bracelet on her right. There, physical, somewhere, real, was a weathered rose gold watch.

Amelia laughed.