No Service

The ambulance sirens echo through the train station staircase, their sound amplified by the deserted terminal. Claire Blegan shivers as she struggles to find the thirty more cents she needs to board. She puts down the hospital-food chicken salad sandwich – which she managed to snag before the leftovers of the day were thrown out – onto the ledge of the ticket booth.

“Cold night, huh?” the woman in the booth comments with a warm, radiating grin. She zips up her jacket, intensely staring at Claire.

“Yeah, I just want to get home and get out of these scrubs,” she replies, sliding her change under the window, “To Gates Station, please.”

The woman in the booth nods, “Late shift today? You’re about to catch the last train of the night, or morning actually,” she says.

Claire checks the time on her phone. 12:17 am. “That’s great. Thanks, goodnight.”

She finishes her sandwich and walks upstairs to the platform. There isn’t a person in sight. It's a windy, autumn night. The cold air freezes her breath. She checks her phone again. Her fiancé, Daniel, had messaged her. *“Text me when you’re on the train”,* it read. She was eager to get home, to see Daniel, and to sleep. The train arrives. She adjusts her purse and walks through the automated doors. The cart is nearly empty. There is a boy sitting near the front doors, about three rows ahead on the right aisle seat. Claire sits on the left window seat. She can see the boy through the cracks between the seats. His earphones are in and he is holding a sketchbook. His pale white hand is sketching a drawing of the lamppost outside. Claire watches him draw. She notices a tattoo on the bottom of his right thumb, curving around to his palm. It looks like a bunch of odd symbols, like slashes and periods. It is either that or some type of foreign character. The train starts to move again and Claire pulls out her phone from her purse. *No service.*

*Great*, she thinks. She is irked and impatient to reach Gates station, *just four more stops.*

Claire marvels at every minute that passes, every second means she is inching closer to home. The train screeches as it slows down for the first stop. She looks out the foggy window to see broken trees and wet leaves on the ground outside. The train is deprived of its momentum. It stops. An old man walks in through the front doors. He walks down the aisle, passing the boy, and out of all of the potential seats, he sits right next to Claire. His oversized grey suit reeks of cigarette smoke. Claire coughs. The old man looks right at her.

“What a lovely evening. How are you?” he asks, smiling wide enough to see his big yellow teeth. The sound of his voice is strained. He seems overly enthusiastic.

“Um, fine. And you?” Claire responds, too weary to process the abnormality of the situation.

“Wonderful!” he says, still smiling.

She looks back to the boy. He erases the edges of his page. Claire’s dazed eyes slowly gaze at the drawing in his hand, soaking in every pencil-marked fiber of his sketchpad. The boy drew a picture of the aisle. There were the ten empty seats, Claire, and the old man. The boy's hand rests on the pad and Claire looks around. She is startled at his speed and accuracy, frightened by his choice of drawing. She checked her phone, *no service.* She looks at the old man. He is asleep. She looks at the boy and he isn’t moving. The lights flicker and the train stops with a jolt. A draft of wind passes, Claire shivers. The doors open but the train hasn’t reached the stop yet. She looks at the boy’s sketchpad. She sees a new picture of the seats. He’s drawn her again. This time, however, Claire is in tears. The boy drew the same sight that Claire sees outside her window; broken trees, wet leaves and a black lamppost. The drawing also features an additional old man in the row across from her. She looks around, scared. She wipes the fog on her window in desperation to see someone who could help her. She hears footsteps coming down the aisle behind her. Too frightened to turn around, Claire’s body remains frigid. She looks at the boy’s sketchbook. The picture has changed but she hasn’t seen the boys hands move. The second old man is still shown seated, looking and smiling at Claire.

The man walks down the aisle and sits right in the seat that the boy drew, in the seat across the old man, on the right side of the aisle. Claire starts to cry.

“What’s wrong, darling?” he says.

He is wearing the same grin, the same stained teeth, and the same suit. The two old men are identical. Claire doesn’t respond. His eyes are red; his pupils are drowning in the blood trapped behind his cornea. Claire notices a tattoo around his thumb, just like on the boy. She looks at his sketchpad, tears streaming down her face, trembling. He was drawing something new. She looks at the old man next to her. He is still asleep. He is silent but his chest is moving up and down. The lights flicker again and the lamppost outside dims. The wind shakes the branches of the wet trees outside, slamming them onto the side of the train carts.

“Please start moving, please start moving,” Claire whispers under her breath.

“What’s that you say?” the second old man asks, still grinning.

Claire doesn’t respond. She looks out the window and down at her phone. *No service.*

She looks at his tattoo and it starts to bleed. A drop falls onto his pants. A drop of blood forms on the sleeping old man’s pants as well. She looks at the boy and his bloody hand is sketching another image of the train cart. It’s almost the same; the only difference is that Claire is no longer in the picture.

Word count: 1,018