Invisible

There had always been something comfortable and familiar in the way the subway worked. Something secure in knowing that there was a path I could follow, a place I could go to with little difficulty. Today, though raining and cool, was no exception.

When I got on in the early morning, I was pleasantly surprised to find myself alone in the car. Nobody had anywhere to be at 6:30 on a Sunday morning except, apparently*,* me. I settled myself in a corner seat at the back, close to a window and far from the door which closed in a moment. The train lurched to a start, the rhythm of the wheels turning steady under my feet. My yellow rain boots had created a dripping path from the door, my footprints marked in the most impermanent of ways. They would dry soon enough, and there would be absolutely no proof of my being here, a sad thought I grant you, but perhaps I preferred to leave the world with little evidence of my Sunday morning train rides. Perhaps I preferred to become invisible.

I hauled my messenger bag on to my lap, soaking my pants underneath and shrugged. Olive would have hated the feeling I was sure. She never liked wet fabric against her skin, but I couldn’t have cared less. The rainwater smelled like adventure and I craved any sort of escape from the monotony of daily life. From the bag I produced a paperback copy of a novel. Nothing special, just a corny romance (the kind 40 year old women read when they are bored and not getting any action). Nonetheless, the story line had sparked an interest in me.

Love stories, after all, were the best kind.

So I settled in to my Sunday morning rhythm. An empty subway car, my book and the odd feeling of safety and peace that came with it. There was a storm brewing on the streets of Toronto, but I would be dry and content down here until I chose to leave.

A half an hour later at the end of the line, I stayed in my seat watching with fascination as the subway turned around, ready to go East. The last stop was usually my favourite for its quiet emptiness, nobody was ever on the platform this early and I relished the feeling of being alone. Today however, a man entered my car. He was tall and broad shouldered, wearing a dark red baseball cap out of which brown hair poked. He wore a black pea coat and slung across his chest was a mahogany coloured messenger bag. He must have been at least six years my senior, twenty-six if I could gauge him properly. He smiled at me, a polite curve of the lip and sat by the door facing the wall I was against. I returned the smile and went back to my book, flipping the page and continuing the story.

I tried to ignore the fact that I was no longer alone in the car, but I felt the man’s presence at the back of my mind. I could hear him breathing quietly and hoped he would get off soon so I could have the car to myself again, but to my dismay he sat through the next four stops, all the while looking at me over his shoulder. Though he was certainly attractive, I didn’t know why he kept doing this. It was Olive, not *me* who made the strangers stare. Olive and her golden curls, dainty nose and twinkling eyes who made the boys blush. She was always at the centre of their attentions, guys surrounding her while I stood in the corner waiting to go home. It happened everywhere: New Years Eve parties, club fairs, even the grocery store. Wherever Olive went there was something magnetic in the way she laughed at their jokes and something incredibly tantalizing in the curve of her lips and the softness of her voice. It made them crazy. I was always the boring brunette in the corner, Olive’s plus one most of the time, and though I sometimes felt passed over, I preferred to be left to myself. I preferred to make friends with the host’s cat and look at their family pictures and eat my tortilla chips in peace, without having to make awkward small talk with a boy who, really, just wanted to ask me what Olive’s favourite drink was.

She was a natural. Probably some descendant of Aphrodite, and always knew exactly what to say to get what she wanted from them. But Olive was not here and I couldn’t think of anything that made me look interesting. Were my clothes weird? (No. Jeans and rain boots are as normal as it gets.) Was my hair frizzy and a mess? (For once in my life, no.) I wracked my brain for anything that could be drawing his attention but came to the sudden conclusion that there was something else, something I couldn’t know. Though it was an unsettling feeling, my stomach was soon lit with a forgotten flutter of excitement. The attention was always Olive’s and I preferred it that way, but it was nice to have the light to myself once in a while.

In truth, the whole situation reminded of one of those awful romantic comedies they show on the W Network. Lonely estranged girl meets a handsome stranger on the subway and falls in love immediately. Of course he would meet Olive later and probably change his mind about me, but I indulged myself for a moment, imagining what would happen if this was a scene from a movie. He might write a poem on a napkin about how dark and delicious my eyes were, and would drop it by my feet casually. I would read it, acquire some sort of super human courage and kiss him. Then of course we would run off to Paris together and live in blissful happiness.

*Good lord, save me from myself*.

Olive, were she here, would have told me to be bold, to make a move and flirt back, if he was flirting at all. Dearest Olive, though we’d known each other for years, she overestimated my flirting abilities, a talent she seemed to be born with and one I could not seem to understand. However, I felt I owed it to her honour and loyalty to do *something*, so I looked up and caught the man’s gaze. He nodded gently, and smiled once again but did not look away. I hadn’t thought this far ahead. What should I do next? What would Olive do? What would she say to a handsome stranger staring at me in the subway?

“What are you reading?” the man asked before I could formulate an Olive approved response.

“A book.” I said sheepishly, holding up the paperback. He laughed.

“Yeah, I can see that. But what’s it called?”

“Oh.” Of course he knew it was a book, stupid Ava. “It’s called *A Summer in Rome*.” I said, showing him the cover. The man nodded and stood. My heart sank as the train came to a stop at another station, but the man continued his walk to the empty seat in front of me.

“May I?” He asked, motioning to the seat. I nodded and he sat down, turning to look at my book. “What’s it about?”

“Just one of those cheesy romances.” I said, marking my page and setting the paperback on my lap. “It’s stupid.” The man nodded and took his baseball cap off, running his fingers through his hair. It curled gently at the sides and framed the rest of his face, he looked younger this way. Maybe twenty-four.

“I never understood the whole romance novel craze.” He said, his blue eyes staring in to mine. My face turned bright red and I ducked my head, examining my finger nails.

“Yeah, well it’s just a fun read I guess.” I mumbled.

“Love is fun?” He asked, his mouth curving in to a grin.

“It’s supposed to be, isn’t it? I think deep down, all anyone wants is to be loved.” I said. The man held out his hand and his eyes twinkled like Pa’s in *Little House on the Prairie*, only they were bigger and bluer and I think I could write some pretty damn good poems about them. Olive would die of laughter if she heard any of this. She would poke my ribs and ask when I’d become such a softy, when had a boy’s blue eyes inspired my poems? I would respond with a shrug, cringing at my own cheesiness.

“I’m Ian.” The man said, his mouth spread in to the most gorgeous smile I’d ever seen. I shook his hand and smiled in return.

“Ava.” Ian nodded, his eyes studying my face. A grin lingered on his lips for a moment and then disappeared.

“You seem pretty wise for your age.”

“You don’t even know how old I am!” I exclaim.

“Enlighten me.” Ian says. At this point even a blind man could tell he’s flirting with me.

“Alright, guess.”

Ian nodded, his face suddenly serious. “Twenty-four?” He asked. I shook my head. “Older or younger?”

“Younger.” I replied.

“Alright, how about twenty-two?” he asked.

“Nope. You want one more go or are you done?”

“One more.” He said. “Give me a minute.” I gave him more than a minute while he stared at me, his eyes studying my own, and his lips drawn up tight in concentration.

“You’re twenty, aren’t you?” He said finally.

“Ding, ding, ding!” I replied, laughing. Ian smiled. “How old are you?”

“I’ll let you guess. You get one shot.” He explained. I nodded, choosing my newest guess. My best guess.

“Twenty-four?”

“No. I’m twenty also.” He replied.

“You look older.” I said, surprised.

“You look younger.”

“Well I wish I was if that’s any help.” I said, watching him intently.

“Why?” He asked, fumbling with the baseball hat in his lap. He looked nervous and though I never thought nervousness suited anyone, Ian looked cute.

“Telling people I’m twenty is scary. I’m not a kid anymore. I’m a real live adult and apparently I have to do real live adult things like work and pay rent and graduate.” I said.

“That’s true. But I’d rather be twenty than eighteen, or nineteen even.” Ian replied.

“Why is that?”

“Because eighteen was shitty and stressful. You’re on the map, you count now and the whole world sort of does a 180. I always remember being so lost at eighteen, so confused about life and who I was. Nineteen wasn’t much better.”

“This is true.” I replied. We were silent after that, looking at each other, out of the corner of our eyes and at our feet. Ian was not the only boy to ever speak to me of course, but he was the only boy to make me feel comfortable in his presence, and though I’d only known him for the ten minutes we’d been speaking, I felt I knew him better than I knew some of the people I called my own friends. He was scared of things. He had weakness. He had taken an interest in a strange brunette sitting in a subway car, and I liked that Ian was this person. I liked that he in his own way, on this Sunday morning, had shown me what it was to meet someone and start off on a good foot.

I wanted to stay and talk to him, I really did. I wanted to learn about his favourite band and what Christmas movie he watched year round. Olive would have pinned me down, forced me to stay until I knew what his dog’s name was and until our numbers had been programmed in to each others phone’s, but Olive was not here, and the sensible part of me, the part not yet overcome with cheesy love songs and hearts and roses, knew that I had to leave this on a high note, that I had to go before I messed it up as was accustomed. So I looked up at the line map and smiled sadly, my trip had come to an early end. I stood.

“The next one is my stop.” I said, looking down at Ian. His gaze dropped a moment and he nodded.

“Well, it was great meeting you, Ava.” He said, his eyes avoiding mine. I would indulge my inner romantic and write poems about their blueness later.

“Likewise.” I replied, walking to the exit. Leaning against the wall and staring in to the glass of the door in front of me, I could see Ian’s reflection. He was turned away, looking out the window, and suddenly I knew that I couldn’t go without him. It was cheesy and somewhat ridiculous, but he had taken a leap by speaking to me and it felt only right (and very much in the spirit of boldness) to take one myself. The station came in to view slowly as the train pulled in, and I turned around.

“Do you want to get a coffee with me?” I asked. Ian looked up and my stomach lurched, for fear that he would say no. “I mean if you’re not busy or anything.” He was silent for a moment, his eyes searching mine.

“I’d like that.” Ian said finally, joining me at the door. When they opened he was the first out, looking back at me as he replaced his baseball cap on his head. I smiled at him and followed, only looking at the floor behind me briefly.

My wet boot marks had dried, and I was officially invisible once again. *Ava the Ghost train rider, the lone ranger of the TTC*. I had always loved the subway for the the anonymity it gave its passengers. I was just a girl reading a book in the corner, and when I decided to get off I would go. No eyes would follow, no words would be said. My boot marks would dry and I would be gone again. Invisible. This was how I had preferred it. But this time I would not be, because Ian would remember me, and perhaps I liked this idea of being remembered, perhaps that was all anyone needed, to be remembered by the tall, handsome stranger on the subway.