

The Time Is Coming

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It wasn't until we reached the central transfer station that I realized what the man was doing: drawing the faces of the people on the train, those facing front and those facing back, sketching the grimaces and vacancies that passed through their faces throughout the trip. It was everything glorious on one sheet of paper: all the wrinkles my eyes had caught, the hairpins I remarked on, then dismissed . . . he captured them on paper.

I've always been like this—always watching people, always finding a thrill in eye contact with a stranger. I'm in near-ecstasy on these Metro trains, letting go of the anxieties of the day and sitting cozy in my marigold-orange seat. The people-watching is the best part, undoubtedly. Scottish men giggling hysterically at the station names (“Tenleytown! Foggy Bottom! Begorrah, I can't stop tittering!”) And burly women who punch at each other's garish magenta handbags, and police officers who drop their guns when they can't keep their balance.

It's like a traveling circus, a mobile theatre. With farecard in hand, I sit down and watch the show under fluorescent lighting. The best character—they're all such players in my head—was the man who sat next to me last week sketching. Maybe thirty-six or so, he came on board at Grosvenor-Strathmore in full mailman regalia, a U.S. Postal Service uniform and messenger bag. We briefly smiled, and I moved my coat so he could sit. He did, eagerly collapsing, and withdrew a small notebook from his stiff navy suit that smelled like envelope gum and sandalwood. This man found a similar desire to remark on the presence of the unknown around us—I couldn't believe that somebody besides me could take such a keen curiosity in the company of strangers, studying their behaviors and recording them. Even their flaws were rendered beautiful on his notepad. On a single page of crumpled notebook paper, he told the story of two dozen people crammed together for half an hour. His pencil left nothing sacred. It invaded and exposed, neither evaluating nor criticizing, but simply documenting the moments as they passed. Soon enough it was my turn to pass through the doors and out the turnstiles.

I gathered my coat into my arms and snuck one last peek at his masterpiece to familiarize myself with these faces I'd soon abandon. I noticed in the far corner of the page he'd added me, looking over at the other passengers with headphones on and a vague smile.

I looked at the mailman as he put his pencil back into his bag, pulled out a blue pen, and colored in my eyes. I grinned, looking at the sea of graphite scribbles and two blue smears gazing out at the passengers. With the same hands that carefully toted bags of creased and ink-stained paper to those eagerly awaiting good news and holiday bonuses, he shook mine, chuckling and standing up to let me pass by.

"We're real lookers, aren't we?" he said. I thought so. And I am. Like that gas-station attendant in Edward Hopper's painting, I am distinctly isolated, looking constantly for some vitality absent in the world around me. I'm transfixed by the vacant canvases that strangers in strange places become for me. We're alienated, yes . . . but there's that brilliant looming possibility of connection in the distance. Despite the melancholy shadows that mark the pavement, there's a light waiting to illuminate our lives.

And maybe that glimmer will come from New York where I now live, temporarily. It certainly is something to write home about. Day after day I come back to my room with flimsy, insincere sentences in my head, ideas for postcards I'll never end up sending. My words won't even make it into the hands of that mailman I met on the train back home in D.C. He'll never have to carry the burden of these unresolved thoughts.

Things are spectacular. It's terrific here. I miss you—in the vastest sense of the word "you," though, as strange as that may sound. I'm just at the intersection of regret and panic, knowing that I'll likely never meet so many people—and even if I do meet some of the ones I never expected to know, how many other millions of senses of humor are out there that I'll never appreciate? How many millions of hands will I never shake? And if I do find you—if we do share secrets and bitter coffee and a bed—there's no promise of tomorrow. You'll still be a stranger to me in the morning, and I'll be nameless and loveless and distant again.

Some days are hard. Like yesterday. I have a cold, and once again it's pouring rain, and my umbrella has blown inside out. It's one of those storms that demands a little seed of sadness be planted in the pit of your heart. *I remember a storm like this.* A swirling mélange of dusk and damp, witnessed through my curtainless windows, as the street was punctuated with thunderclaps and raindrops, some primitive and timeless percussion. Kamikaze precipitation hurled itself

to the sidewalks, bursting at first impact with the concrete—leaving only a tiny moist circle as a testament to some greater cosmic cause.

My mother was standing in her pajamas in the middle of the street. Wet cotton clung to her matronly frame, the arms that so often had held me and soothed my anxieties. Her salt-and-pepper hair was plastered to her head. Rain streaked down her elementary-school librarian glasses, but she couldn't tell. *Her eyes were closed and she was smiling.* My brother and I watched, captivated by her utter abandon, and delighted in her simple pleasure in the storm. She stood there for a few minutes, illuminated by the occasional lightning and made vibrant by her song. She was a beautiful stranger to me for those moments, and I've never been able to look at her the same way since. How often do those revelations occur, when we are markedly a new person after having experienced them?

More postcards. *So I'm walking home in the evening after Language of Film*—fluent in nothing but the mascara-streak of resentment sliding down my cheek and realizing that I'm alone in a massive city and soggy and perhaps nobody believes in me anymore. It was a fairly sad day—remembering that just four weeks ago I could hug and love and sing in the rain to my heart's content—not to say that I can't do that anymore, but I don't have exactly the same liberties as I did. And imagine the stares I would draw! I'm nothing remarkable. Don't look at me like that.

And I'm only seventeen, damn it, and that's awfully young to be fighting for myself in New York City. I remember moving when I was twelve. I slept, in those early days, wedged between boxes and carpets tightly rolled like the sunken forms of so many fallen trees. I lived out of my suitcases, refusing to transfer my sweatshirts and socks to my new chest of drawers. I'd only eat with plastic forks and paper cups, rejecting any concept of permanency. This couldn't be home. My young ideals were shattered—how could you, in good conscience, pack your dolls and dreams and let some grubby-fingered fellow named Stan toss them out of the back of a U-Haul truck, stand by as he unceremoniously deposited the remnants of your childhood and the dawning seeds of your adolescence in a heap in front of a white house with a rusty mailbox and empty linen closets. I'm not so different from that young girl, when I think about it.

But I'm resigned, here, as I scrawl more upbeat phrases on the picturesque postcards in my mind. *I do love the city. Still—it's not home.* I don't think it ever will be. I could never call my apartment building home, not when in my mind it's only a cavernous building of stacked humanity, lives piled on top of lives with trembling TV reception and water only as hot as the tea your

grandmother would brew in the microwave for you. Why do I stay, then? For the stories. For the characters. For the epiphanies promised by one of my favorite quotes by Dr. James Hillman: “You come to New York to find the ambiance that will evoke your best. You do not necessarily know precisely what that might be, but you come to New York to discover it” (142).

I don’t care how many mailboxes I passed by on my way back from class. I wouldn’t mail those letters. I can’t pretend things were fine when that haze of doubt kept churning in my mind. I planned to come to my room, lie on my bed, and have a little cry, filter my despair through the balm of tremulous songs, and realize just why I’m here—to follow what I’m passionate about. But sometimes hope seems lost, and it’s rather lovely just to wallow in your sadness and focus on how miserably wet your feet are and how everyone in New York looks like a model and your once passable curls are now drenched in urban precipitation. It’s a comfort to let yourself fall into depression. A dangerous comfort, of course, but such a luxury.

I get to the corner of 14th and Broadway, thinking of my mother’s burnt toast and sticky kitchen floor. Just then, a young man with dark hair and watchful eyes passes by. Something about him seems so familiar, and suddenly all I want is to have someone hold me and sing with me and remember some home in Maryland that’s irreplaceable, even by this dorm full of laughter. Did he miss his father’s toolchest? Remember the water bottles shoved behind the couch? We cross the street together, me wishing for some hand to hold mine, and thinking of how this man must mean the world to someone, that he’s rushing home or running errands and that he too must have insecurities and fears. I wonder what he calls home. Some quiet suburb in Maryland? Or is he too finding that portions of home can be carried around in your heart, revived in apartments overlooking boutiques and by men who sleep with city haze as their only roof?

So this is my holiday from the real. Life away from the familiar is good, you might say, but I’ve been using far too many adverbs these past weeks. Everything is “tremendously” this or “ultimately” that or “precisely” what I meant not to say. I wish I could be like the other girls and rave about my boyfriend or the parties I’ve been to this weekend. Instead I’m unhappy with my verbs, anxious about my adjectives, and I’m making myself content with these modifications. They’re vague commitments of sentiment to some action I’ll only half-perform, half-concern myself with.

I could sit here listening to some soundtrack of hot July ballads and peppermint tunes with songs chosen just for the arch of my shoulder or the color

of my hair. Instead, in my mind, it's at long last October, and it's time for harvests and dismissal of summertime flings.

*The time has come for colds and overcoats
We're quiet on the ride
We're all just waiting to get home
Another week away—my greatest fear
I need the smell of summer
I need its noises in my ear*

—Lacey

Freckles fade and squash blossoms bloom, and all is well again with the first snowfall. Or so says the farmer's almanac. In the pit of my stomach, I doubt that this yearning will be so easily quelled. Until it is—that far-off moment when loose ends are woven back into place—intangible hopes about Greyhound busses that carry you to the diner you've always loved, or taxis without fare that bring you to a doorstep that's not known the tread of your shoes for months—these are the dreams that sustain.

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