

## The Rattling Tracks

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The air was cold over all of New York. Yesterday had been a pleasantly warm spring day, but the temperature began dropping at dawn and didn't stop until nightfall. In Midtown, a man leaving his office shivered and hailed a cab. Further north and a little west, a sophomore at Columbia University got out of bed to shut her window, annoyed. A homeless man sleeping under a skeletal construction frame on Lexington tucked his blanket even tighter around his legs, then sighed and watched his wispy breath fade. Just south of Gramercy Park, a young man named Jonah stepped out of a bar, hunched his shoulders, and began walking away.

The chilly air bit at Jonah's face as he trudged up 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. Thumping music spilled out of the venues as he passed, blending into a harsh din that made his head throb with the beats. He squinted his eyes as much as he could to relieve the pain. People slid by him like ghouls, obscured from his view by the yellowish haze that had settled over his eyes. Every time a stranger's face got too near, he would blink rapidly until they were just a fleeting blur. He turned left on 14<sup>th</sup> and continued on.

He glanced up at a small apartment building just as a torpid shadow folded then unfolded itself on the curtain of a window, inky and dark against the mild fabric. Out of his line of sight, it's owner moved lazily, and the shadowy wraith slowly stretched over backwards. The dark figure pulled its hair back before letting it drop to its shoulders in a shady cascade. There was something about the movement of the shadow that caused his blood to burn hot and loud in his ears. Caro. The light was clicked off, leaving only a black window its place.

Shivering slightly, Jonah returned his gaze in front of him and put his hands in his pockets. What would the shadow have thought of him had its owner glanced out from behind her window to the street below? He peeked backwards at his trailing shadow and saw that his own dark companion was fickle, first wispy and bloated, then small and intense. Repeat. As he passed under the yellow streetlights, it would disappear for a moment only to return twofold, threefold, and then just one. If the window shadow had seen his shadow, would her shadow-blood have run hot and loud in her shadow-ears?

The lights and noises were growing around him. Jonah's head jerked to the side as he thought he caught glance of a familiar man in a dark blue blazer. No. He checked his watch. Past one in the morning. No four, just six, shame. Fitting though. He dropped down into the station just before crossing 4<sup>th</sup> and the tepid subway air cocooned him; it was almost comforting. The air over all of New York may be cold, but the stuff that runs through the veins of the city is still warm and pungent. The station was quiet; too late for the families and early risers, yet too early for the majority of the night's drinkers. Most of his friends refused to take the late, drunk subway, but for Jonah it was a habit.

Three rats were mingling a few feet from where he stood. One of them had half a tail. He liked it more than the others and wondered if he would ever see it again. He also wondered how many different rats he'd seen in subways and how many were the same rat. Saw six at once last week. Could just be those six over and over. Hm. But half tail makes seven. The rats dispersed suddenly, most likely having felt the rumbles of an incoming train before they were big enough for Jonah to notice. Sure enough, a 6 squealed into the station half a minute later.

He walked in and sat down. No more rats to distract the thoughts. He placed a hand over his right pocket. How could those have been her eyes tonight? Those were not Halloween eyes. He sighed and glanced around, examining the three other occupants of the car. Two of them were together, sitting across and to his left. They were holding hands and looked content. Must be a couple, probably been together a while. To his right stood an older man in a crumpled suit with an expensive-looking briefcase in his right hand and a crisp newspaper in his left. He didn't need to hold the pole. Seems like a true New Yorker.

Jonah closed his eyes and, as he feared, the night began to replay. Not in any sensible order, of course, but rather in a cloud of fragmented moments. Mainly her eyes. He couldn't accept that those had been her eyes tonight, staring into his with a frigid passion. Those were not Caroline's eyes. They could not have been the same eyes that had looked up into his last year at the Halloween party. Those eyes had been so close, so uncomfortably near to his that he knew he had to kiss her as hard as he could, pushing his body into hers, and theirs together against the wall until she gasped.

He glanced backwards down the train and sighed again, his gaze returning to the happy couple. They looked to be in their mid twenties. The man was taller by a foot or so. As Jonah was watching, the man smirked and leaned over slightly, mumbling something to the girl. She giggled. Maybe they were coming from an anniversary dinner. Probably been dating for two years now. But why wouldn't they have taken a taxi home? Must be their thing, to always take the subway. Very notable. Jonah glanced down, not wanting to intrude on their intimacy any longer. He wondered if they even noticed he was there.

The question of loneliness was on Jonah's mind. More specifically, the relationship between the number of occupants of the subway car and his loneliness. Which would be worse, an empty car or one packed to the brim with strangers? Depends on how loneliness worked. It could be like a gas, expanding to fill the container it's in. The last man on earth would be lonely enough for the entire planet. Or maybe loneliness shares a love of company with misery. Then again, wouldn't the company eliminate the loneliness? Depends on the company. Jonah looked up at the man in the crumpled suit just as the man glanced at him. Maybe he is lonely too...

The man looked back to the paper in his hand, but Jonah stared for another moment. The man looked tired, and Jonah wondered if he was just now coming home from work. Live to work or work to live. Living sounds better. Tired eyes. Her eyes weren't tired tonight though; they were just hollow. Jonah sighed. What awaited the man in the suit upon returning home? Maybe a sleeping wife and a kid and a little golden retriever puppy. Maybe a glass of scotch and some TV.

Jonah sat back and reached his hand into his right pocket. His fingers brushed the piece of string inside and suddenly his eyes filled with tears of frustration. So fucking stupid to have brought the fucking string. Like a piece of yarn could change anything. He looked down at his shoes to hide his face. Not like anyone was watching him anyway. He pulled his hand out of his pocket, but the string felt like it was burning into his leg, just like it had been all night. And just like the string had somehow been burning into his chest for the past three weeks, even though he kept it in a small drawer in the nightstand next to his bed. Three weeks. More replays triggered. Sitting in Central Park, watching the softball games. *Jonah we have to talk*. Why did she have to start it with a cliché?

It only took her twenty minutes. That meant that she had practiced it. She had probably made a goddamn bullet point list of all the things to bring up. *You've always been more serious about this relationship than I have.* Bullshit. *We are both graduating soon.* Please. *New phase of my life.* Just shut up. *Don't want to hurt you down the line.* Silence. It had been a warm, sunny day with just the slightest breeze. Amazing weather really. Kids were laughing, dogs were barking, runners were running, and Jonah had been staring numbly ahead at the softball games, thinking about all the responses that he wanted to say, but his lips were frozen. And now the train was screeching forwards, the car was rattling down the tracks, and Jonah was staring numbly ahead at the seats across from him.

A disturbance to his left snapped him out of his reverie. The couple was standing up. Their stop must be next. The train slowed and the intercom informed everyone that they had reached 28<sup>th</sup> and the happy couple walked out of the doors, leaving the lonely, numb Jonah alone with the lonely, crumpled businessman. The train creaked forward.

They say that when you die, your life flashes before your eyes. Well maybe when a relationship dies, it too, tends to replay itself. But it doesn't just last for a moment. Memories of their time together had been plaguing Jonah for three weeks now, except the memories were wrong. He thought back to their first date at that one all-you-can-eat, all-you-can-drink sushi place. It had been November 2<sup>nd</sup>, just two days after hooking up for the first time at the Halloween party. Jonah could never decide if waiting to text a girl was pointless and shallow, or a reasonable method of ensuring balance for the start of a relationship, so he usually cut the difference.

Most of the memory was spot on: the perfectly isolated booth where they got seated, the conversation that lasted for hours, the small waitress who said *you two so cute* every time she came around to bring out the sushi, and how they both smiled and laughed to each other every time that happened. They had planned on going to a bar after the meal, but had talked for so long that they both deemed it appropriately late enough to go straight back to Jonah's place. It was one of his perfect memories. But now when he thought about it, it was tainted; her eyes were all wrong. They just weren't hers. They weren't those dark orbs that captivated him from the first time he met her.

His memory spooled back even further to before the first date and before the Halloween party. It was a few weeks into his junior year at the informational mass meeting of the Washington Square News. Jonah had hoped to find something meaningful to him in NYU's student publication and he ended up finding Caro. What a twist. She had been sitting next to him at the meeting. *Wow, seems like a lot*, Jonah had mused absentmindedly after hearing the paper's president describe the application process. *I think I'll be ok*. The confidence of the soft voice next to him had surprised him; he remembered that well. And then he had turned to look. He fell into her eyes that day and had been falling since. Dark hazel with amazingly large pupils, soft creases to each side that immediately convinced Jonah that her somewhat conceited tone was well intentioned. He knew this was what he remembered, but now, picturing it, he only saw the gaze he had seen tonight. No warmth, no crinkles, only vacuity and maybe even pity.

The train halted a little more abruptly than usual and Jonah, lost in thought, found himself tipped precariously to right, wondering if he had more to drink than he thought. The crumpled man with the paper had to adjust his footing, and Jonah felt relieved; it must have just been a sleepy conductor. Could probably use a coffee. 42<sup>nd</sup> street, Grand Central. Six more stops.

The doors opened and a young woman walked in. She quickly crossed the train and sat down across from Jonah, glancing up for just a second and then down at the phone in her hand. Blue eyes. Jonah watched her click forward through several songs before deciding on one and returning her phone to her purse. She sighed and closed her eyes. Must have found the right song for the moment. Jonah always liked to guess the songs that the people around him on trains were listening to, especially when he predicted strange pairing. Maybe the buff, tattooed construction worker he had seen this morning actually had Taylor Swift coursing through his headphones, and the older woman next to him had been blasting Kendrick Lamar.

The girl across from him still had her eyes closed as the train began to move again. She was wearing a red and blue flannel, a denim vest, and a Mets beanie. How many girls looked that damn cute in a beanie? Her dark hair spilled out of the hat and fell in thick waves over her shoulders. Jonah liked hair. She shifted in her seat and opened her eyes and Jonah glanced downwards. Out of his peripherals he saw her rummage through

her purse and remove a small notebook. She moved her hand to her right pocket held it there for a moment. Instinctively, Jonah matched the motion, once again reaching into his pocket and touching the string.

He grimaced and pulled the yellow strand out of his pocket. Not like anyone on the train knows its significance. Holding the yarn in his lap, Jonah closed his eyes and sighed deeply, dropping back into a sad trance. October 24<sup>th</sup>. A week before the fateful Halloween party. A boring day of team building activities for the Washington Square News took a turn near the end. They had been sitting in a circle, everyone reaching forward to hold onto the same long piece of yellow yarn. The string connected all of the paper's staff to each other, but more importantly for Jonah, it connected him to Caroline, who had been seated next to him. After the string had been cut into individual, bracelet-sized pieces came the quiet request that Jonah had hoped to hear. *Help me tie mine?* Her voice was as soft as it always was but he remembered how her word rang with such clarity in his ears.

He had tied her string so carefully, staring intently at her wrist to avoid distraction in the eyes that had infatuated him for weeks. And then without saying anything, she had grabbed his string and hand and gently looped the yellow twine around his wrist. He remembered how his blood had been on fire and he was so worried she would feel his pulse and know. But then she had finished the knot, slid her hand down to his, and gave it the slightest squeeze before dropping it. Jonah remembered sitting numbly next to her after that, smiling like an idiot, reveling in the idea that his crush might not be unrequited.

Jonah opened his eyes and clenched the string hard in his right hand, heart pounding just as it had been a year ago. His fist felt like it was overflowing with the significance he had infused into the goddamn thing. The string that had fallen off a few weeks after Caro had tied it on. The string that he had kept in his drawer, just waiting for the right moment to re-present it when the time was right. The string he had brought to the bar tonight with a mix of optimism, recklessness, and naivety. He had always hoped that she had also seen the significance of the string. Hoped that when hers had fallen off she had also held on to it. Wrong. Not even close.

Jonah risked a glance up at the girl across from him. She was writing something in her journal and had a pained expression on her face. Jonah wondered what had led to

her being on this subway at this exact moment. Maybe they were meant for each other. Maybe this was fate. Maybe she was writing about him in her journal just as he was thinking about her. Jonah always wondered if the people on the subway studied him as much as he studied them. The train slowed and the lonely businessman shifted slightly closer to the exit, reminding Jonah of his presence. When the train came to a full stop and the doors opened, the man quickly walked out. It was just Jonah and the girl now. 77<sup>th</sup> street. Only two more stops now. Maybe she was headed toward 96<sup>th</sup> as well.

Jonah thought about what to say. *My girlfriend of a year and a half broke up with me, then invited me to a bar three weeks later to tell me she was seeing someone else haha. And I had this stupid piece of string in my pocket (he would hold it up) thinking I could give it to her to win her back. Haha what a night am I right.*

Hearing those words in his head made it so much more real. Caro's seeing someone else. Three weeks and she's seeing someone else. Three weeks. That means it probably started before the end. He tried to steer his mind away from the thought but it was too late, he was fixated.

And then he realized. The man in the dark blue blazer. It was him. Jonah had seen him before, walking out of Caro's building, brushing by just as Jonah was walking in. And he was there tonight, lurking. Jonah had noticed the man even before he found Caro in the corner of the bar. Noticed the eyes that tracked him from the man in the jeans, white button down, and dark blue blazer. And Jonah realized that the man must have been standing there, just behind him, listening to his conversation with Caroline, waiting.

The world was pressing in on Jonah from all sides. His head was swimming in a mix of alcohol and awareness, sinking and sinking into a dark ocean of despair. He shivered. A deep breath. Two. He calmed and closed his eyes.

Jonah revised what he would say to girl sitting in the seats across from him on the subway. *My ex-girlfriend accidentally introduced me to the guy who replaced me tonight haha isn't that crazy.* The girl would laugh and they would keep talking, then they would get off at the same stop and head back to Jonah's place to discuss life and love and everything else that mattered. Not much else. He would forget about the Halloween eyes, the hollow Halloween eyes, and he would burn the yellow string then forget about that too.

He opened his eyes just as the train slowed and only now did Jonah notice that the girl had put her journal away and was sitting on the edge of her seat. He knew what was going to happen. Just before the doors opened, she uncurled herself from the seat, sighed, and walked across the train. She was right next to Jonah now and he could smell her deodorant. It might have been the same one that Caro had used. Jonah opened his mouth but his lips were frozen. He heard the sound of the doors open and glanced up at her. She glanced down at him, smiled warmly, and then she was gone, leaving Jonah alone and blinking in the empty subway train under the cold city.

Jonah closed his eyes and felt his stomach twist. One stop too early. He felt defeated and tired and the train lurched forward once more. But why did she smile? Who smiles in this fucking city? There must have been a connection. Loneliness. He opened his eyes and looked across the train. There. A pen was sitting across from him, just where the girl had been. He crossed the train and picked it up, sitting down in her still-warm seat to examine it. He let the yellow string drop to the floor of the train. The pen was beautiful. The body was a milky, swirly white pattern on top of a dark mahogany. Three bands of blue decorated the top, middle, and bottom. The blue was swirled with the same milky white pattern as the main segment. The tip, handle, and top of the pen were shiny chrome. It was much heavier than he had expected. The train was slowing.

He glanced down at the yellow string on the floor. Not mine anymore. Let someone else see it there and wonder what its story is. The doors opened. Jonah stepped out of the subway car and the doors closed behind him. He watched the train slide away, put the pen into his right pocket, and walked up into the cool New York air.