

The Platform Guard

Where help comes from unexpected places.

It was a miserable day; the wind lashed the unyielding rain towards her face, stinging her cheeks. She tugged hard at the seam of her hood, trying to shield her eyes from the driving rain. She had suffered through a restless night; she'd cried herself to sleep. Sleeping through her morning alarm, she needed to leave the house in a hurry. She grabbed a cereal bar and dressed quickly. She didn't have time to check the weather forecast this morning. As she hurried to the bus stop, she cursed to herself loudly. The blue and white colored bus was quickly ascending the hill far in the distance; it was now gone. She resigned herself to being late. Her boss would be livid.

Her attendance had been spotty of late and she knew this would result in a lecture, possibly worse. She'd have to take the train if she were to make up the time. The train was a luxury she could ill afford. She needed to get out of the rain; the dampness had started to seep through her light overcoat. She cursed again; she wasn't dressed appropriately for this weather. She decided to run. Running along the deserted street she reached the covered walkway, which sloped down towards the ticket office. She knew her timing was tight. She ran to the office, hastily retrieving her credit card from deep within her purse. She approached the ticket counter in a breathless state. She gasped for air and managed to blurt out instructions to the ticket issuer. "Single ride, all the way, on the 16A train please." She pushed her credit card under the glass screen and the issuer typed furiously into his terminal.

He leaned forward into his microphone; the speaker embedded within the glass divide crackled into life. "We've had a delay on this train. It's due in two minutes, but it won't arrive for another fifteen minutes. This'll give you plenty of time to get down to the waiting room. We'll announce its arrival for you on platform six." She nodded gratefully as the issuer pushed her ticket, invoice stub and credit card, under the glass divide. She signed the invoice stub and pushed it back to the issuer. She turned, and catching her breath, calmly walked towards the stairs leading to the waiting room on platform six.

Accounting for a fifteen-minute delay, she would still make it to the office on time, avoiding an unpleasant discussion with her boss. The rain bounced off the tin canopy covering the stairs. The noise reminded her of a drum beat, steady and true. She tucked her credit card safely into her purse and carefully placed the ticket deep within her overcoat pocket. She walked towards the dry waiting room. The train station was a small local station, built in Victorian times. Today it served a handful of commuters, but the rail traffic through this platform was exceptionally light. For most commuters the bus was cheaper and ran on a more frequent basis. With her alternate transportation arranged, her thoughts turned to last night.

Tears began to drip down her rain soaked face. The rain provided a convenient veil to disguise her obvious distress. In Victorian days, the waiting rooms were segregated. The Men's waiting room allowed you to smoke; the Women's waiting room was scented, and located between these rooms was the Family waiting room. Each room had a dedicated entrance, adorned with the appropriate signage. The heritage people had insisted that the station remained true to its original roots and the signs remained. Due to the lack of passengers and the changing times, only the Women's waiting room remained open to the public. It was situated next to the stairs and provided the nearest shelter from the constant rain. She approached the heavy wooden door and pushed the weathered brass handle. The door swung inwards, making a loud creaking noise, as it swung on its hinges. She stepped inside and sheltered from the rain. She closed the door, leaving the cold, wet, wind, behind her. Inside, it was a larger than she had expected.

The waiting room was oblong in shape, with richly stained wood, providing warm accents. It looked old but still in great condition. Alas, public spaces were not decorated this way anymore. The walls were painted hunter green and were covered in old, framed pictures. They showed steam trains, leather luggage and people in smart uniforms. Some of the guards wore pillbox hats; they sported uniforms from a bygone age. Around the edge of the room ran a bench, made from polished wood. It was still in great condition and she could tell the bench was original. The wood was worn, showing its signs of age and service. The room smelled of lemon and she was finally alone. She placed her bag on the bench and sat quietly. She held her head within her hands and began to weep openly.

It seemed these days that nothing was going right for her. She thought Craig was the one, her Mr. Right. They'd been dating for two years and it was getting better. She felt comfortable with him, in all situations. She trusted him and he respected her. They'd vacationed together and their closeness was growing. He was sensitive but not a wimp. He was slim and worked out. He was employed by a large bank and seemed to be upwardly mobile. He came from a good family and was intelligent. She really liked him and didn't want to pressure him too much. She wanted to move in with him but refused to raise this subject. Her girlfriends had warned her against pushing a guy into this decision. She knew he would make up his own mind, when he felt the time was right. Craig had a great appreciation of style. He wore nice shoes and always dressed for the occasion. He looked great in a suit and he could pull off a jeans and sweater ensemble. He always looked good. He was the one.

She'd made him his favorite dinner that night; pasta with julienne vegetables, edamame beans and a spicy arrabiata sauce. The dinner was pleasant enough and she was half expecting him to stay the night. When he showed up without his gym bag, which would normally contain a change of clothes, she felt disappointed. She had candles, wine and ice cream for dessert. Craig had spent the last two weeks away on training and she'd missed him terribly. A few late night phone calls, full of empty words, were not enough to satisfy her. Tonight was going to be special; she wanted to show him how much she'd missed him. After a tiring few weeks she reluctantly understood that he needed an early night. Craig skipped dessert and excused himself,

citing an early meeting that he needed to prepare for. In his haste to get away, he'd inadvertently left his cell phone on the dining table. She noticed it when she started to clear away the remnants of dinner. She placed the phone on the counter and began to load the dishes into the dishwasher. She carefully folded the lace tablecloth and finally relaxed, stretching out on her favorite chair.

An unfamiliar buzzing noise invaded her apartment. She raised her head and pointed her nose in the direction of the sound. She quickly recognized the vibration of his phone, which jumped along the counter top. It would be Craig, calling his cell phone to see if he'd left it in her apartment. She leapt from her chair and bounded over to the phone, looking forward to hearing his tired voice again. The phone had illuminated into life, proudly displaying a text message. She read the message and blinked rapidly, as if her blinking would make the message fade away. What followed was a stream of text messages, which continued to paint the picture.

Jenny was Craig's ex-girlfriend, but she'd moved to Tokyo on a three-year business assignment. Craig had broken off their relationship before she'd moved, and insisted that he'd not kept in touch. Jenny's excitement was palpable. She described how much she'd enjoyed his company over the last two weeks. He'd lied. The texts got progressively worse, as she teased him and cited intimate details of their time together. She was looking forward to seeing him again. She went out of her way to mention that she'd bought that "thing" they'd been talking about. Her mind raced, until she stopped herself.

Her blood boiled. This was not a random text, inadvertently sent to the wrong phone. She knew who Jenny was. Jenny had named Craig specifically within the text prompts. What should she do? Should she ignore this and wait to see what Craig says? How could she, she had his phone? Craig's phone was locked, so she couldn't respond to Jenny. It would be obvious to Craig that she'd seen these texts. The shrill cry of her apartment doorbell had interrupted her feverish thought process. In a trance, she'd opened the door and was instantly shocked back to reality.

"Hey love, I think I forgot my phone. Sorry to disturb you again, but I'll really need this tomorrow." She couldn't look at him. She averted her eyes and motioned for him to enter. He casually walked into the apartment, unaware of what lay ahead. She slammed the door closed; which caused him to spin around sharply. He flashed a look of surprise. She stood before him, staring wildly into his eyes. Her posture was erect, aggressive and stern. She thrust out an arm. His cell phone was placed carefully upon the palm of her upturned hand. The phone was carefully positioned where he could see a string of text messages. Attached to each text was a thumb-nail-sized picture of a smiling redhead. Below the picture, in bold white letters, was the label, "Jenny."

Craig snatched the phone from her hand. He stared at the messages and in a fit of rage, moved towards the door. She yelled at him in a primal voice that surprised her. "Where are you going?"

"I won't be back," he said, grabbing the door handle.

“So that’s it?” she screamed, asking for an explanation.

“That’s it,” he said, slamming the door.

Craig had gone and she knew he wasn’t coming back. Her last words had been, “That’s it?” and in her heart she knew – that was it – for that relationship. She was on her own again; she hated being on her own. She’d invested two years, what a waste. The feeling welled up again and it swept over her like a familiar wave. It started deep in the pit of her stomach, rose through her chest, and seemed to stream from her eyes, causing her nose to run. She sniffled, making an echo within the waiting room.

It was at that moment that she seemed to recoil in horror. A slight movement caught her eye and she realized that she might not be alone. A small thin door, disguised as a wood panel, had opened a crack. It bled a shard of light streaming across the tiled ceramic floor. The door swung open, revealing a small pantry. Her gaze fell upon a man's shoe; it was made of polished black leather and was slightly scuffed around the sole. She raised her eyes and saw a man wearing an old fashioned uniform. It was dark blue with a fitted jacket decorated with large gold colored buttons. His jacket had an unusual cuff design and sported epaulettes. He caught her gaze and smiled in a welcoming way.

"I'm sorry Miss, but you sounded like you needed one of these." He stepped out into the waiting room and handed her a paper tissue.

"That's very kind," she said, dabbing the tears away.

"I don't get many criers. Usually when a woman cries like that, it involves her Mother or a man. Am I right?"

She would normally tell him to mind his own business, but he looked kind and genuine. "Yes. Man trouble."

The shrill sound of a screaming kettle distracted him. "Excuse me for a second." He shuffled back into his small closet sized room and fumbled around busily. He soon emerged holding two steaming China cups. The smell of lemon tea permeated the empty waiting room. "When I'm upset, I always like to drink some lemon tea. It helps with the breathing," he whispered, handing her a steaming hot cup.

"Thanks, but I don't think I'll have time," she waved her hand at the platform, suggesting her train would be here imminently.

"It won't be here for a while, you have plenty of time." He pushed the cup closer to her and she could smell the lemon. She was cold, damp and upset. A strong cup of warm lemon tea actually sounded quite nice. She tucked the tissue into her left sleeve, at her wrist. She pushed it into the

cuff of her sweater. With both hands free, she took the China cup being offered. She wrapped her hands around the cup, absorbing the warmth into her cold palms.

She watched him tilt the cup and take the first sip. "Who are you?" she inquired.

"How rude of me. I'm Sykes, the station Master." Sykes smiled again. He had the most genuine smile. She felt very comfortable and safe.

"I'm Anne," she said, extending her hand.

Sykes shook her hand, "Nice to meet you Anne. Why would a beautiful young woman like you be crying over a man?"

"He cheated on me, after two years, he cheated on me." Anne couldn't help it. Hearing the words was like pushing a knife into the pit of her stomach. She burst into tears again. Sykes looked like he would be in his late forties. He had short graying hair and a little extra weight around his midriff. He sat next to her on the bench, clasping his cup of hot tea.

"I get to hear a lot of conversations in this waiting room and over time, you learn a few things about life. I think it was Scott Alexander who once said, all good is hard. All evil is easy. Dying, losing, cheating and mediocrity is easy. Stay away from easy."

"Thanks," Anne smiled. Nothing in my life, right now, is easy."

"Then you must be a really good person. Which also means that he didn't deserve you." He paused and sipped his tea. Anne did the same, mirroring his actions. "Cheating is despicable, but it's not worth ruining your life. You might not feel like this right now, but you have everything to live for."

Anne rested her empty cup on the bench beside her; she turned to face the Sykes. "He's a loser and you're right, he doesn't deserve me."

"That's the spirit." Sykes sipped patiently.

"You're totally right. He's the one at fault, so why am I the one crying? They deserve each other; I'll find somebody better, someone just right for me." Anne was starting to believe her own words, starting to feel better. Most men today are pigs, they don't have the class of your generation."

"I would not send a poor girl into the world, ignorant of the snares that beset her path; nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power or the will to watch and guard herself."

"Your quoting Anne Bronte to me, I know that one."

"And why am I quoting Anne Bronte to you?"

"Because I need to be strong. I need to have self respect and above all, I need to like myself." Sykes nodded at the end of each statement, to reassure her.

"No man is worth your self respect. You're strong, I can feel it." Sykes rested his cup on the bench and flashed that reassuring smile.

Anne was enjoying Syke's company, she would hate for the train to come now and cut this conversation short. "Are you married Sykes?"

"I'm too old for you dear," he said with a devilish grin.

Anne flushed with embarrassment, "No, I meant. No. I didn't mean it like that, I"

"Relax, I'm just teasing you." He laughed in a deep warming way.

"I was going to ask you about love? I'm afraid my heart may have grown cold."

"A loving heart is the beginning of all knowledge. Remember, a very small degree of hope, is sufficient to water the seed of love."

"I fear it will be a while before I heal enough to offer any man any affection." Anne dropped her chin with this stark realization.

"CS Lewis said that affection is responsible for nine-tenths of whatever solid and durable happiness there is in our lives."

Anne raised her chin and stared at the well-meaning station guard. He looked dated and redundant in his tired old uniform. He held a sparkle in his eye and it was clear he had a purpose. He was not going to let Anne leave his waiting room upset. For that she would be grateful and gracious.

"Thanks for talking with me today." Anne managed a smile.

"It's my pleasure, not many people have the time to stop and talk with me these days. Everyone is in such a hurry, or they have their faces pressed into a news paper or an electronic device."

She felt sorry for the guy. He was stuck in an unexciting job, trapped in a time warp, and made to dress like a guard from another century. Some uniforms suck, but people need to earn a living, so they wear them. "I thought I loved him, but clearly I was wrong," she lamented.

Sykes stood and cleared the two empty cups. He walked towards his closet canteen. "You thought you were in love? Clearly you had not fallen in love yet; perhaps you just stepped in it. The tea is on me, my treat." He smiled and started to fuss with the contents of the closet.

The platform door opened and a short, uninvited gust, of cold air billowed into the waiting room,

redirecting Anne's gaze. A man dressed in jeans and a large black coat shook the raindrops from his waterproofed anorak. "Miss, your train's on its way. You should wait on the platform now."

"Oh Okay." Anne grabbed her purse and pushed the strap over her shoulder.

The man seemed impatient, "Let's go, I don't want you to miss your train and I need to lockup this room now."

Anne raised her hand, "I just need to say goodbye to the guard first." She walked towards the closet door but it had closed while she was talking to the man. She reached for a handle to open the door but quickly realized the wall panel was a solid piece of wood. "Is there a door here somewhere?"

"Years ago the door was used to serve tea, but not anymore, why?"

"I wanted to say goodbye to the guard." Anne looked puzzled and stood motionless.

"I'm the guard; have been for the last five years. Now let's go before the train arrives."

Anne didn't move. I just spoke with the guard, he wore a fancy blue uniform."

"Sorry Miss, we haven't worn uniforms for the last twenty five years."

Anne scanned the waiting room walls. One of the black and white photographs had a man wearing the same uniform. She pushed her face closer to the framed glass. She instantly recognized Sykes, standing next to passengers. On the bottom of the faded photograph was a hand scribbled note. "The first Eastbound train, 1910."

"This is the man I was talking to," she said, pointing to Sykes.

"There are a lot of pictures in here. Perhaps you nodded off. I think you were dreaming. Lots of people miss their trains because they were sleeping in here. Now let's go, I still need to lockup." He motioned to the door and she started to exit.

"His name was Sykes and we drank tea." Anne stared at the guard in disbelief. "It wasn't a dream."

"Sykes? There are stories about a guard named Sykes, but not pleasant ones. Last time now, leave please."

Anne walked towards the door and the cold onrushing air. She stopped in the doorway, close to the guard. "What happened to Sykes?"

"Story goes that he threw himself under an oncoming train." The guard flicked his head. His motion suggested that she leave instantly. They both exited and the guard turned to lock the heavy door with a solid brass key. He turned to find Anne uncomfortably close to him.

"Why did he take his own life?"

"Look Miss, it was a long time ago and I'm just spouting the folklore of the guardhouse. Who knows if it's true." The guard was becoming impatient.

The lights of the train could be seen approaching. She would have to embark soon. "Please tell me. Why did he take his own life?"

"The story I was told was that he was heartbroken. He'd married his childhood sweetheart. One day he didn't feel so good. He left work early and found his wife cheating on him with her lover. He went back to work immediately, he knew the 4.15pm train would be due. That's when he took his own life. He couldn't live with the fact that his wife was a cheater."

Anne froze, unaware that the guard was pushing her towards the train. The train had arrived and the doors were now open. She seemed to board the train in a dumb haze. Had she been dreaming? Perhaps she did fall asleep. It was possible; she'd been awake most of the night.

Anne boarded the train and sat in an enclosed carriage. It was an old carriage, designed with cabins that seated four. She slid the door open and entered the first cabin. A large woman sat near the window and nodded her greeting, in a courteous manner. Anne was still in shock; she nodded and took the chair near the door. The woman returned her attention to her paperback book. Anne stared blindly into the cabin wall in front of her. All manner of thoughts were racing through her mind. The only rationale explanation was that she'd read about this event before and it was in her subconscious mind. That would explain the name, Sykes. The old, faded waiting room pictures, must have registered with her subconscious mind. She manufactured the guard, wearing his blue uniform, from the images portrayed within the room.

She was tired, upset and easily influenced. She'd fallen asleep and created her own soothing character, like the lead in her own private play. Satisfied with her rational explanation, she leaned back into the high padded seat to begin her commute to work. Six stations and she'll be there, on time, and not in trouble. Anne raised her hands to her face and pushed the windswept strands of black hair, back behind her ears. As she moved her hands she stopped, frozen in her current state.

She raised her left wrist to within a few inches from her eyes. Her pupils widened in incredulity as she stared at the crumpled paper tissue, still tucked into the cuff of her sweater, peeking out from the arm of her coat.

The End

A Short Story by Phil Armstrong.

This short story is a unique piece of work featuring fictional characters brought to life by Phil Armstrong.

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