

# Stationary

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HE'D DIVED UNDER the train. I'd seen him do it.

We had been stuck between stations for forty-five minutes while they cleaned his body off the tracks. He was far behind us by the time the train had stopped.

He and I had gotten on at the same station, on the same carriage. I'd seen him wander up towards the door that linked our compartment to the one in front—that I had pissed out of late one night—when he stopped to talk to a girl sitting by herself in one of the double seats at the other end. It had only been for a moment but, turning away, he'd opened the door, let it slap shut behind him, and dived below.

There were gasps and cries from those who saw it, and strange, quizzical looks from those who felt his body sliced between the wheels and the rails beneath. Who would've thought that flesh and bone would ever cause the slightest disturbance under all that metal?

The driver must have felt it too, or maybe trains have detection sensors or something below, for the train immediately reduced its speed and came to a stop halfway between North Melbourne and Southern Cross. After about five minutes—in which the carriage was completely abuzz with chatter—the voice of the driver came over the loudspeaker, his speech stilted, sounding as though he were reading from cue-cards.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we've come to a stop in our regular schedule because an individual has been killed on the tracks. His remains are currently and respectfully being removed. Until this has happened, we will not be departing. I apologise for any inconvenience.'

It was a few minutes until the chatter started up again. While we waited,

I happened to be focusing on the girl up the other end, and remembered that she had been the last person to speak to him. She seemed distressed and, while the rest of the commuters had no problem turning to the person next to them with a thought or for an opinion, she was all alone, with no one to talk to. I wanted desperately to walk all the way up there and sit down next to her. This will was not a sense of altruism moving me. I did not want to comfort her, but to ask her what the dead man had said.

At first I thought that he had probably asked her for spare change, but the way in which she seemed to be sitting, her back completely straight and her head tilted downward, deep in thought, suggested to me that whatever he had said to her had had quite an effect. Had it been a plea for help more useful than just a few extra dollars? Or was it something more cryptic? Did he know that they would be the last words he would ever speak and intentionally made them resonant or meaningful or enigmatic? I wanted to know.

A woman behind me spoke to a man next to her, in a low tone, 'I'm gonna be *so* late. I don't know why we have to wait, the body's behind us already.'

I wondered why she'd needed to ask that question at all, as the answer was apparent from the driver's heartfelt speech: it was the respectful thing to do. Though he was behind us, his blood was still beneath us, clinging to and smeared on the wheels and along the tracks. And we could wait.

The train sat there for another half hour, and I couldn't take my eyes off her. She was lost in thought, and I got to know her expression very well. If it weren't for the circumstances, I'd have been attracted to her. Okay, so now I can say that regardless of the circumstances, I *was* attracted to her. She had a roundish face, with big, dark, bulbous eyes, and her lips curved down into a natural frown. Her hair hung straight on the sides of her face to just below her chin, framing it almost perfectly, and she wore a black hat high up on top of her head. She'd look up every so often, but she never saw me.

The train finally started up, and a collective sigh of relief—which I have come to resent—spread through the carriage. It stopped at Southern Cross and most of the people got off. I had expected her to get off as well, but she didn't. As the doors closed and the train started towards Flinders Street, I had made up my mind that I would ask her what the dead man had said to her. I didn't know exactly how I would phrase it, or how

tactful it would be, but I had to know.

She didn't stand up until the train had come to a complete stop. She slid the heavy doors open and stepped out onto the platform. Rather than taking the escalators up to the station, she walked down the steps that lead under Flinders to Degraeves Street. I followed.

She walked briskly, her heels clapping the tiles and echoing in the underground. Near the ticket machines she stopped, fumbling with her bag. I decided that this was my chance. I raced after her and, as I stopped behind her at the ticket machine, reached out and tapped her shoulder. She turned slowly, as though expecting someone she knew. She quickly looked me up and down.

'Yeah?'

'Hi. I was on the train with you just then. D'you remember me?'

'No.'

'Oh, well, are you okay?'

'Just a little shaken. Why?'

'Well, I saw that he spoke to you.'

'Who?'

'The man. The man that jumped.'

'Oh. Yeah, he spoke to me.'

'This is going to seem really weird, but would you tell me what he said?'

'Why?'

'Because it's important.'

'Why?' she said again, but this time with an amount of interest, as though I had information that she may find of use.

'Because . . . well, because I want to know.'

She sighed, resigned. 'He asked me for a smoke.'

Something inside me sank. 'Oh. Well, thanks.' I turned to walk back up to the platform, but her voice rang out in the empty tunnel.

'I had one left.'

I turned around. 'What?'

'I had one cigarette left, but I didn't give it to him.' She trembled, her natural frown growing downward.

I walked up close to her, touching her shoulders, feeling as though it was the right thing to do. She felt it too, for she eased, as though my gentle touch was not only steadying her but holding her upright. 'It's okay. I'm sure it wouldn't have made a difference either way.'