

Trains

The first time I saw her was a Saturday morning. It was near the front door of the fourth car on the Chuo Line, leaving Musashi-Koganei at 7:52. Every day, six days a week, I took this very train and stood at the exact same door. She was a fellow commuter. It had been three years since I started taking this route, but this was the first time I had ever seen her.

Tokyo is like that. Millions of people take thousands of trains every day to the inner city—packed in awkward positions, quietly shifting to move a stranger’s elbow from pressing on the spine, not even bothering to hold on to anything because there would be no space to trip or fall. The train companies have tried to alleviate this temporary madness by running as many trains as they can, often within two minutes of each other. But the sheer volume of commuters never cedes. You can take the exact same train at the exact same time and stand at the exact same door for decades and never see or notice another person who also boards the exact same train, at the exact same door one or two stations after you. It was a mystery people would contemplate in a groggy stupor going home at the end of the day, but would always forget a split second later.

It made sense, in a way, that I would see her on a Saturday because the trains were always less full. Private schools would still hold classes, and some corporations required attendance, but the public school commuters and less ambitious salary men would stay home. Japan was groaning with the tension between the call for less stress and the need for a studious economic return from mediocrity. Those of us on the Saturday morning train must have smugly known that we were a part of the old-guard elite. Or perhaps we were part of the oppressed middle-class drones. I never knew.

But she was no drone. Nor was she smug. I knew this without a second look.

That day, I had the luck of squeezing into a spot facing the row of seats where I could hold onto a strap and look out the window. As I listened to Nirvana's "Come as You Are" on my Walkman, I stared out onto the landscape of the city. The sky was a thick grey that matched the heaviness of the June air. It had not rained yet this morning, but the humidity made the train smell slightly musty, and every object seemed to be encased in a fine film of sweat and water. I brushed a piece of lint off the left cuff of my navy blue uniform and felt a gaze upon me.

I don't know how I knew. I'm not one of those people who has over-sized senses; who dreams about things before they happen, knows which piece of paper will yield a good fortune when visiting a shrine, or experiences *kanashibari*—where you cannot move while sitting or lying down due to the strong will of ghostly spirits. I didn't even have a good sense of direction. This time, however, I felt that prickling on the back of my neck, that certain smell or taste of anticipation.

I was afraid to look up because it could have been some *oyaji* staring with a lecherous grin, perhaps pleasuring himself through his pocket. It might have been someone that I knew from before, someone who had reason to dislike me, waiting for me to look so that they could glare. Or maybe it was just an innocent bystander, looking at me and my long nose and deep-set eyes, trying to tell whether or not I was foreign or just a different kind of Japanese.

None of these prospects seemed particularly appealing. So I did what any sensible Tokyo commuter would do to avoid conflict—I pretended to fall asleep. It was a commuter's special skill, the ability to slumber while standing. I would sleep this way in

earnest several times a week. It wasn't very restful. At most, I could catch three or four minutes of sleep between stations, and squint my eyes to shift and let other passengers on and off the train.

The train came to a roaring stop and the doors opened. We were at Nakano. The car groaned and rocked as more people boarded. The music on the platform sounded and a young man spoke very clearly over the loudspeaker, "The doors are closing. Please mind your safety!" As the doors shut and I heard two high school girls whispering about last night's television dramas, I thought I felt the gaze lift. I opened my eyes and every-so-slowly looked up.

I was wrong. The gaze was still upon me. But it was neither the stare of a pervert nor an antagonist. Perhaps there was a tinge of curiosity in the look, but I could tell that she cared very little whether or not I was Japanese. In fact, I think that she cared very little about where I came from, what I knew or what I planned to do with my life. She seemed to already know all that she wanted about me. The only thing that she didn't know was how.

She was sitting in the corner seat on the end of the row. I was standing at the other. There were six people seated between us, but at that moment, they did not exist. She was not particularly striking or pretty in any conventional sense. Her hair was neither long nor short. She was neither thin nor heavy. Her face was not long or round or boxy. At first glance, she was altogether ordinary and even boring. But what held my stare was that glint in her purple-brown-black eyes. Her eyes seemed cold—almost chilling; yet they radiated warmth, as if they themselves made light. Once my eyes were fixed on hers, I could not look away, even if I wanted to. Like astronomers of old, peering up at a solar

eclipse, it was like staring at a phenomenon that would make you blind. I should have been looking at her through a pinhole to protect my retinas from burning.

Yet, more than her stare, she exuded a mist, a vapor. Despite the must and sweat in the air, through it all I could smell her. She was a mix of bergamot, incense smoke, tar and rain. The scent was at once painfully familiar and exhilaratingly new, like what you smell when you walk down an open-air market and you twitch your head in recognition. You know you have encountered this scent before and you can't wait to find the source so you can purchase it to eat or drink. But as much as you seek it, the cacophony of the vendors and the rustling of shopping bags and mothers herding children distract and mislead you. All you can remember is the smell and the pursuit, and you never forget it again. Now I knew this scent came from her. It enveloped me and melted the glaze of city dirt on my skin.

Without breaking my stare, I turned off my Walkman and gripped the triangular strap handle harder with my right hand. She watched me do this. We both rocked and swayed in rhythm to the train jolts. After what seemed like a while, I began to feel a tingle at the back of my throat well up into my mouth and push on the back of my teeth. The taste of adrenaline was bitter in my mouth. I could feel my pulse thumping belligerently in the palm of my hand as it gripped tighter and tighter. And ever so slowly, I could feel a well of blood seep from inside the skin of my neck, up to the top of my ears, through my temples and onto my cheeks. She barely moved. Yet as I watched, I saw the skin of her lips part so gently. At first the skin adhered together and then in a split second, the lips parted to leave an opening the size of a rice grain. When I saw that, I

swallowed hard and felt my breath grow shallow. When she saw me swallow, she moved her lips again to moisten and raised her shoulders slowly in a sigh.

I must have been looking at her like this for six minutes—the time it takes to travel from Nakano to Shinjuku.

We didn't notice when the train began to slow to a stop. But as the doors opened, my fellow passengers pushed me and we broke our gaze. I knew I could not resist the flow of the commuters, so I released my strap to let others pass. I lost sight of her and before I knew it, the doors had closed and a graying man wearing a tan trench coat and brown penny loafers had taken her seat. I hopelessly looked out the window and saw that she was looking at me from the platform, leaning against the steel scaffolding. Next to her shoulder read: Shinjuku. I met my eyes with hers as she watched the train leave. She passed from view.

It was 1994. The bubble had burst. And I had just fallen in love with a stranger on a train.

That evening as I boarded the train home, I undid my top shirt button, threw my jacket over my arm and closed my eyes to see hers. I was leaning in the prime corner between the door and the seats. Bleary-eyed salary men and chatty teenagers stood looking up at the map above the doors, counting the stops until their own. It was a force of habit. We all knew how many stops took us from work to home. But we watched the map in anticipation anyway. Everyone who managed to grab a seat was asleep or pretending to be. The man seated beside me kept nodding his head in slumber: down, down, up; down, down, down, up. His neck would be sore tonight.

As the train pulled into Musashi-Koganei, I peered out the window toward the neon-lit restaurants and convenience stores.

Although there was no need for me to commute, I still boarded the train the next morning at 09:55. Sunday travelers are a totally different crowd: young children wearing hats with their parents; old women taking day trips; high school students munching on pocky in their everyday clothes; hikers, mountain-bound, laughing and talking shyly with their knee socks, backpacks and walking sticks. Today the trains would be loud and full with folks taking advantage of the first sunny day in ten. This was the time when Tokyo would stretch its legs in a frenzy. They needed to find leisure or else wait another week to enjoy themselves.

I decided not to go into the city, but I headed west instead. I had no plans of where I would go or what I would do. Her eyes were still burned on the movie screen of my brain. As much as I tried to deny it, I knew that I was actually on the train that morning to find her. I knew that she boarded the train before me, so she must live to the west. The question was how far?

It was an unrealistic proposition. It was hard enough to find someone who took the same train as you at the same door in the same car everyday. Finding one person who may or may not be on a train or at a train station, with the only clue being that she lived west of Musashi-Koganei was folly. But what else could I do? My night was filled with dreams of her and my coffee looked at me with the blackness of her pupils. Nothing could happen until I saw her once again. I could not taste or smell anything but the bergamot-tinged fragrance I had inhaled the day before.

Standing by the same doorway, I took out my Walkman, started listening to Ozaki Yutaka's "Oh My Little Girl," and peered through the window as we whirled by train crossings. Bicycle-riding mothers toting toddlers were standing patiently as we passed. A local barkeep was hosing down his front step and briskly scrubbing. She was out there somewhere.

I nabbed a corner seat at Kokubunji and leaned back sleepily. The car wall was telling me that I needed to drink canned coffee while the ceiling told me that I needed to learn English through Berlitz. All the ads in the train could have told me anything, but the only one I might have heeded would be the one that could seek the girl with the currant-black eyes. Perhaps some type of gadget that would run a cornea search based on the image etched indelibly in my brain. Or yet another that could analyze the particles of her still trapped in my nose—finding a genetic match with the actual person herself. This was the land of gadgets, would it be too much to ask for such desperately needed functions?

As the train pulled out of Kunitachi, the landscape began to change. The mountains to the west were almost visible through the sun-lit mist of that morning. I caught a glimpse of the long row of old cherry trees flanking the promenade to the station. The leaves and branches were now dark green, but I imagined them three months ago, dripping with the pink blooms of early spring. Poets of old would wax about the three stages of the *sakura*. Men and women died over its beauty. But now they seemed trite and unexciting. Everything seemed boring.

I lazily looked up at the map of train lines in Tokyo. This rainbow-covered image was the base of the entire economy. Anyone doing anything here would need to know how the orange line lead from the west to the green circle that branched off into the dark

blue, red, dark green and yellow lines in the rest of Tokyo. Even celebrities needed to know this map. They could drive to their destinations, but the trains were faster. I had seen several celebrities consulting maps in stations through my years in Tokyo. On these trains, drunken unemployed men who were fallout from failed economic policy sat next to the young, polished executives who replaced them—each consulting and confirming how the map lead them to their respective paths. It mesmerized me every time I saw it. This map was pure exponential possibility.

Today, however, those exponential possibilities were the obstacle of my task. Yet, as I stared at the map, the constants began to dawn on me. I suddenly realized that she could not have boarded the train after Tachikawa and found a seat. It would have been too crowded. Save for the small number of children attending schools in Western Tokyo, hardly anyone leaves the train until it hits Shinjuku. She could not therefore transfer from any of the lines connecting at Nishi-Kokubunji, Kokubunji, or even Tachikawa itself. That meant that she must have boarded west of Tachikawa. But three different branches of the Chuo Line bound for Tokyo meet at Tachikawa. Which branch was she on? Ome? Takao? Musashi-Itsukaichi?

Just then I realized the train was leaving Tachikawa Station, and I did not even know to where my train was bound. I panicked. Here I found my first clue, and now I might be going to the wrong place. How could I decipher where her train came from? I paused and looked at the small vegetable farms and tiny rice paddies beginning to crop up beyond the window. I looked down at my bag and surveyed its contents: A bottle of green tea, my walkman, three cassette tapes, pocket tissue, a handkerchief, an English copy of *Written on the Body*, my commuter train ticket and my wallet. I picked up my

wallet and began rifling through it. Inside one of the billfolds, I found a battered piece of paper folded in fours. I opened it up. It was a train schedule for the Chuo Line. Its original purpose was to show when the last train westbound train left Shinjuku. Now it served another purpose: it was a map leading to her.

I looked down at the tiny numbers and scanned my eyes across the grid. Takao bound? I flipped the paper over. Tokyo bound. I sifted through all the arrivals and departure times and finally found the train arriving at Musashi-Koganei at 07:52. Its station of origin was Toyota.

This meant two things. First, it meant that like me, she only took the Chuo Line into the city. She did not have to transfer. Second, she had only two possible stations to board: Toyota or Hino. As I realized that the train came to a stop at Hino Station. I collected my things and ran toward the door to look for her.

But she was nowhere to be found. Fourteen hours later, as I took the 0:44 final train from Toyota toward Tokyo, I realized that it had all been worth it. I now had learned every nook and cranny of both Hino and Toyota stations. Nothing could erase them from my mind. I knew where the vending machines on each platform were, what items were sold at the concession stands, and where the restrooms were in case she could not wait until she got home. I knew where she would need to stand to board at the fourth car, second door every morning. Imagining her on the dawn-lit platform everyday patiently waiting for the same train—my train—gave me a deep sense of calm. Now, at least I knew something about her.

The trains going toward Tokyo at this time of night were rarely crowded. All the crowds were headed in the opposite direction, leaving the nightlife of the inner city to

slumber one restless night before setting out to work early the next morning. I sat down immediately. Everyone on the train with me was sitting, lazily drifting off to sleep, murmuring amongst couples and staring out the windows watching the city grow more and more dense. Two empty soda cans were rolling around and dancing with each other on the floor of the car. I pressed play on my Walkman to listen to Fujii Fumiya's "TRUE LOVE."

As we left Kokubunji, I fantasized about what would happen the next morning. What would I wear? Would I be able to find her in the Monday morning crowds? I closed my eyes again to remember the rice-sized opening of her lips and felt a tingling sensation start just below my navel and ripple out toward the tips of my body, like the waves on a pond when a stone breaks the surface of the water. The train jerked forward and then began to slow. I opened my eyes and realized that we were coming to a stop mid-way between Kokubunji and Musashi-Koganei. A tired, over-worked conductor mumbled into the speaker system, "Please excuse the delay, we are awaiting the signal to change due to a small glitch at Higashi-Koganei. We should take no longer than thirty seconds."

Just then, the opposite-bound train began passing us, but started to slow down. I stared hazily out at the train as the blurry crowds came into focus. The cars came to a stop and the sleepy, irritated faces of suburban-bound revelers paused before me. It was then that I felt it again. That gaze. Suddenly the smell of bergamot and incense became real and pungent in my nose. I hurriedly stood up and walked across the car toward the windows of the other train. I walked to one end of my car and turned around, never breaking my stare out the window. My eyes combed through every face I saw. Finally, at the very last door of the train facing mine, I caught sight of her watching me.

I could feel my face melting. For the first time in a long while, and certainly for the first time that day, my lips broke into a subtle but unmistakable smile. She smiled shyly back. She was leaning against the door window, her hands in front holding a small bag. Just then, my train began to move. In response, she tilted her head and slowly closed her eyes as she nodded in an abridged bow. Instinctively, I bowed back as her window disappeared. I turned around to find my things and noticed many eyes on me. I was too happy to blush in embarrassment. As my train arrived at Musashi-Koganei, I knew that I would not sleep that night.

Stepping onto the train that next morning, I had a plan in my mind. I wore my highest heeled shoes that day to help me see over the crowd. I would find a spot near the seats, hoping she had found one that morning. If she were not there, I would very slowly make my way down the car. This was a harder feat than it sounded. When a train is packed to the hilt with irritable people, moving around can be the biggest challenge of all. But I had several advantages. I was small, but relatively strong. I had sharp elbows that I only used when absolutely necessary. Finally, I had the will to move, and exactly twenty-one minutes to find her.

As I was shunted further into the car, I purposefully waded through my fellow commuters. Flanked by two tall college-students I could hardly see anything. But I nudged my foot toward the seats and began to faintly wiggle my body past the college students, beyond three raincoat clad salary-men, two female secretaries, a possible nurse, and five uniform-clad girls—all from different high schools yet wearing the same shoes and socks. I had moved a yard. I peered through the shoulders of another set of salary men and saw that she had been watching me from her seat at the other end of the row. No

one else would have noticed, but I could tell she was smiling to herself. I could also tell that she liked to watch me work for her.

I could feel the blood welling up from my neck. This time, however, I could also feel the blood coursing through my torso and moving violently in a criss-cross from my waist to my thighs. I could feel a faint rumbling growl growing at the back of my throat. As the train left Mitaka, I stubbornly trudged behind the line of men hovering in front of the row of seats. Many people glared at me, or clucked their tongues as I stepped on their feet or kicked their shins. Finally, I stood at the end of the row, rudely pushed my way between two girls and stood in front of her.

She did not speak, and neither did I. Instead I looked again into her eyes that had somehow been protecting me. I had been breathing heavily, I could not tell whether it was because of my Olympic feat of wading through a capacity commuter car or because I was overwhelmed with my proximity to her. Her shoulders were moving slightly, too, and I could tell that her breath had been shallow for some time. I grabbed at a bar above my head to brace myself. I then felt a shoe push up against mine. She looked down at my knees and I felt both her feet pull on my right shoe. I held my breath and clumsily stumbled towards her as the train bucked and slowed down. I suddenly felt my right knee touch the inside of her right knee.

I could no longer hear anything save for the faint ringing in the distance and the massive pounding in my ears. My entire mind was just then living in my right knee. It began to burn desperately and send an uncontrollable shock through my body. My lower back began to shake and my legs were seized with a sensation of numbness, except for the right knee that seemed to be able to feel every change in temperature, humidity, and

density of the air. At that moment, my knee could have sensed an earthquake coming tomorrow or the next crash of the stock market. My left foot twitched in sympathy and I began to taste the familiar bitterness of adrenaline in my mouth. I could not look at her like this, so instead I looked up toward the luggage rack in front of me and closed my eyes. "This is not fair!" I told myself.

Shinjuku came sooner than I had thought. I had planned on talking to her, grabbing her and following her to wherever she went that day. But as the car began to empty and she stood up in front of me, knee still locked with mine, my brain and body faltered and I stepped away. She motioned for me to take her seat and I obliged as if there were no other option. As she stepped away, she paused to look up at me. Again, she nodded her head in a bow. I nodded back. I do not remember the rest of the day.

The next morning, I had no plan as I boarded. My head did not seem to be working right. The analytical, deductive logician that managed to decipher where she had come from and how to find her the two days before seemed to have gone on sabbatical. Now, I was left with the mush of intense impulses that pushed through my limbs and moved my feet onto the train. When my shoes hit the linoleum floor of the 07:52 train that day, I did not stop to think or strategize. I only looked around listlessly and peered above the heads of two junior high school girls toward the full row of seats. It must have registered in my mind that she was not there, but I was so slowed by my daze that I could not think beyond the vacuous pain sucking at my chest.

But then, I felt a tug. At first, I thought it might be a pervert, trying to cop a feel. It was a common occurrence. I had grown used to shooting threatening glares at *oyaji* and sometimes young professionals in suits. But the tug was at my neck. A hand had grabbed

hold of my bag. I turned around and saw a fat man with suspenders and a tall woman with too much makeup. The hand was coming from between them. It was still pulling.

I stumbled through the fat man and the pancake-faced woman. There, in the prime corner between the door and the seats, she stood watching. She had been waiting for me here so I would not have to find her. The door opened at Higashi-Koganei and she pulled my bag quickly to make sure I would not be whisked away with the boarding crowd. I was right next to her. She still grasped my bag as she looked up toward me. Again, we said nothing. Our faces were inches apart. As the train wheels beat out the “*dodesu-kaden*” rhythm of the groaning tracks the other passengers pushed me even closer to her. Even as she slowly let go of my bag, I could feel her knee against the side of my calf, and the sharp bone from her hip pushing through her slacks, through my bag, through my slacks, my underwear, and onto my hips. I could not face her head-on for fear of kissing her outright.

I saw her close her eyes. I closed mine, too. We feigned the usual Tokyo commuter ennui—the politeness of strangers forced to touch in close quarters. We were quite still standing next to each other. But every time the train would jolt forward, or a new batch of commuters would push themselves onto the train and therefore my body into hers, I could hear the catching of her breath and feel that now familiar ringing in my ears. Once, just before Kichijoji, the train bumped so violently that my chest fell very suddenly and forcefully into hers. In the split second I was leaning into her, I heard her inhale deeply and smell the back of my neck. I opened my eyes and I let out the smallest whimper of a sound. As she heard it, she shut her eyes even tighter and her throat went flush. By the time the doors closed after Nakano, the train was so full that we had been

pressed fully up against each other, and I could feel every curve of her chest and belly rolling gently against mine. I resisted the urge to reach out and pull her even closer-if that was possible. We both let the syncopation of the rocking train acquaint the surfaces of our bodies with each other.

As the train slowed down for Shinjuku, I began to feel a sense of loss only to be replaced by a sense of purpose. Today, I would follow her, I thought. But when the train stopped, she pushed herself into me. As I moved to follow, she gently pushed my arm back with one hand as if to tell me to stay. With her other hand, she pushed a card into my front pocket. I stood watching her. She did not turn around but walked quickly up the flight of stairs on the platform.

I took the card out of my pocket. I thought it would be a business card, but it was not. It had a hole in it to accommodate a metal ring, like the flashcards school children would use to memorize Kanji, historical facts, and English vocabulary words. Was she a student? I turned the card over. The handwriting was small and legible, yet somewhat messy, like it had been written in a hurry. It said in both English and Japanese: "Today. Leaving Shinjuku at 19:21. Chuo Special Rapid Express bound for Takao. Fourth Car, front door." I held the card up to my face. It smelled like her.

That evening, I boarded the 18:56 train at Tokyo. I knew I would get to Shinjuku early, but I did not want to miss her. The 19:21 Special Rapid Express was waiting on the platform in Shinjuku. I decided to wait on board. Every few minutes I would peer out the door to look for her. The train started to fill. People began to cue up on the platform in order to pile in at the last minute. It was 19:20. I looked for her. She was not there. The loudspeaker began to play music signaling thirty seconds before the train would leave. I

panicked. Should I wait on the platform? But she said this train. An older man's voice came over the loud speaker saying, "Chuo Special Rapid Express bound for Takao. The doors are closing, please mind your safety!" The doors began to close but then they opened again and then they finally closed. As the train began moving, the conductor announced, "Dearest customers, thank you for using the Chuo Line. As a safety announcement, we would like to remind you to please refrain from running into the train at last minute." Where was she?

I peered out the window, thinking I might see her on the platform. But she was not there. I bit my lip in shame. What had I been thinking? Had I taken the wrong train? I pressed my head against the glass and felt the wind knocking the pane against my forehead. I felt the other commuters groaning and gritting their teeth. I sighed.

I heard a pant behind me and before I could turn around, I felt a cool hand grab my own. I knew it was her. I squeezed the hand savagely and pulled it toward me as I turned around. She was bowing her head slightly, holding one hand in front of her, looking at me in apology. She opened her mouth to speak, but I shook my head. I did not want the first words I hear from her lips to be ones of remorse. I smiled slightly and she nodded her head. We were still holding hands. Hers had grown warm, even hot, in mine. I had rolled up my sleeves and felt her bare arm on mine. I sighed again, but in relief. We peered out the window together and never let go.

As the train passed through Musashi-Koganei without stopping twenty minutes later, I smiled happily at my own station, whizzing by in a blur. The car began to empty and some seats were free, but neither of us moved toward them. We only shifted to the side when the doors would open and another passenger would slide past us toward their

home. As we left Tachikawa and the conductor announced Hino station, I looked at her again and raised my eyebrows. She shook her head and I nodded. So she lives at Toyota, I thought. The forty-one minutes it took us to get to Toyota were filled with anticipation. Of what, I do not know.

As the train slowed to a stop, she tugged on my hand and we stepped off the train onto the platform. The air was heavy with moisture, but there was a faint wind bringing the scent of nearby ponds and fields. We walked slowly toward the stairs as other commuters passed us by, some even turning around to glimpse our clasped hands. I smirked. We walked up the steps and paused at the automated ticket adjustment machine. I pushed my commuter pass into the slot and the machine asked for 210 yen. Before I could reach for my wallet, she plunked a 500 yen coin in the coin slot. I grabbed the ticket and she grabbed the change. We went past the ticket booth and down the steps outside.

The sky was a dark purple. We swung our hands as we walked into the streets below. A bicycle passed us on the left and its rider looked over his shoulder. We were passing an empty schoolyard on the right. I looked over at her and I saw her nape peeking out from beneath her ponytail. I heaved a giant sigh. She stopped to turn and look at me.

“I guess you’re going to have to change your commuter ticket,” she said in Japanese.

“I guess so,” I replied and paused to look at my shoes.

“But. I don’t even know your name,” I said in English.

She laughed out loud and I heard her voice echo through the street in the lamplight. Her voice was thick and strong. She leaned into me and I openly smelled her bergamot skin. Her mouth was so close, I could feel the moisture of her breath on my ear.

“First things first,” she whispered. She pushed her face into my neck and left a sweet, soft kiss.