

The Courtship of a Disaffected Soul

He left his soul on the Number 3 train to Central Park.

It was the same train he'd been catching for thirteen years. The 8.10am from the Clark Street Subway. A rattling cage full of daily commuters in their starched collars and their pressed trousers and not a one of them anything more spectacular than drab.

He'd never really spared a thought for his soul. It had always seemed relatively safe. And then one day it just kind of...fell out of him.

Six months passed before he even noticed. If his mood was low that was just life. Biochemistry perhaps. The nadir of a downward trending year. Or was it three years? Before he knew it half a year had leaked away.

He looked in the mirror one morning as he brushed his teeth by rote. He cocked his head to one side in an effort to recognise the slack face with the once blue, now steely-grey eyes. He frowned at himself as he took the black neck tie and convoluted it upon itself just so. A Windsor knot and right on time. The digital clock on the oven read 7.53am. Or so he knew it would. Time to leave.

Instead, he stood there and observed his once familiar reflection. A millimetre of space appeared between his heel and the tiled bathroom floor as he leaned forward. The overhead fluorescent light flickered. Another millimetre of space. In the hallway, the sound of Miss Henderson's door as she emerged in her bathrobe for the daily paper. A confused silence at his absence. His nose was almost pressed against the mirror, the stranger's face pulling him forward. The back of his mind registered a tickling, warm sensation. Gratitude for the thought that at least Miss Henderson noticed him. Or at least the space where he ought to be. The front of his mind was filled with questions. Chief among them; are faces not supposed to be lit from within? With the warm and gentle light of hope and un-despair? Another one; what is wrong with you? And lastly; will the train wait for me?

It will not.

He turned away from himself and hurried, which was something he had not needed to do in a long time. It was uncomfortable. He questioned himself as the concrete and the bitumen and the minutes passed him by. What *was* wrong with him? He was still wrestling with the question at 8.24am on the Number 3. He was wedged between an accountant and a bank clerk, or so he

assumed. They stunk of other people's money, and desperation. He was wondering if they could smell it too, when he came upon the answer to his question...

He knew exactly what was wrong.

My soul is missing.

He knew his soul was missing because he spotted it, sitting alone at the end of the carriage, with a small circle of space around it. That was no surprise, because it was wearing a face that said, do not bother me. Maybe it hadn't had any coffee.

He knew it was his soul because it was wearing his clothes. His dark grey coat. His black trousers. The black, stub-toed shoes with the scuff on the left ankle where his feet sometimes rubbed together as he walked. It was wearing his Wednesday tie. The black one with the grey zig-zag pattern.

Wednesday...

He'd lost his soul on a Wednesday.

The rattling stopped. The train slowed. When the doors opened, he turned and got off the train. He watched his soul from the platform as it departed on the Number 3 train. It was 8.40am. He had to get to work.

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Eight days passed before he saw it again. It was ethereal in appearance, sitting in the same seat as before. Motes of dust passed through it, adrift in the stale, motionless air of the carriage. The outline of its coat was fuzzy, as though the atoms of his soul had been rearranged and were having trouble reforming.

Six days later he saw it again. Then eight days after that. Then six.

Before long he recognised the train when it arrived at the Clark Street Station. Gunmetal Grey, with the Sureños X3 gang tag on the third carriage. Twice a fortnight.

He wondered what route it travelled on the other days. Did his soul have a favourite, perhaps? Did it have preferences? Tastes? He could only assume yes, as it wore on its head a bowler hat. He'd never owned a bowler hat. He'd always wanted one, but he'd never had the courage. Didn't think he could pull it off...

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He sat on the dull, concrete edge of the fountain. Central Park orbited around him and he watched, his back to the water, as citizens came and went. Little black-clad golems with the indexed power of knowledge in their hands. Their attention unwavering as they narrowly avoided each other.

La danse macabre. He could almost hear the fiddle.

At 8.53am he stood and joined them. At 8.58am he was on the elevator. 800kg. 10 persons. He stood in a circle of sombre suits and pallid faces and wondered how many of them still had their souls.

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He watched his soul for six months and observed two things of note.

One. His soul never changed seats. It sat, calm and fuzzy on the last seat at the back of the fourth carriage, as though it were simply waiting for its stop.

And two. His soul appeared to have discernible emotional states.

Some days his soul would maintain a radius of empty space around it. On these days, even if the carriage was full, nobody would approach. Other times however, people would sit right on top of it. He wondered if these people were immune to whatever wards his soul might employ. Or was his soul simply possessed of...moods? Shifting temperaments? A silly notion he was prepared to disabuse himself of until he saw a young child take the seat one morning.

He had a feeling that most people had not even noticed the boy, for their attention was on his mother. A small, piqued, black-haired thing whose depression had made her beautiful. Her eyes were downcast and her allure spread out from her like a hanging scent waiting for a breeze.

Passengers cast sidelong glances at her, as though watching a sad scene encapsulated in a diorama. She did not notice them. To the men and women of the train she was unknowable. Nothing more than a story to be guessed at and they wondered and they guessed and they could not turn their eyes away.

The woman's son, sitting in the shade of her despondency might as well have been one of the passengers. He, also, sought to know her. Yearned for a look, a touch, to bask in her attention. And with a boldness born of familiarity he tugged at her shirt sleeve.

She made the appropriate noises. *Mhmm. Yes darling. Is that right? That sounds fun.* But while the words were right, the tone was wrong. Words uttered, but not imbued with purpose or attention and so they hung, useless, before dissipating into the air. Her son slumped down into his seat, defeated.

And then it happened.

A bowler hat appeared as his soul leaned to one side. It turned, and he could see its lips pursed gently as it...blew.

The boy wriggled his head and flapped his hand at the puff of air. He did it absentmindedly and then returned to practising his frown. A few seconds passed, before his hair flapped against his ear.

He turned sideways, his hand taking control of the rogue locks, and looked around. He of course saw nothing. By the time he gave up, the soul in the bowler hat had appeared on the other side of his head. It blew in the boy's ear.

He watched as his soul entertained itself. Before long, the child was giggling and squirming, where an adult would be worried and by now in another seat. The boy's mother looked down at her giggling son. He swallowed his mirth for a moment, the better to see which way her mood would tip.

A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth and she winked.

And then the train stopped and they got off. Everybody watched, their eyes passing over the child and watching his mother, no doubt wondering what it was like to *feel* things as keenly as she.

He watched his soul instead. As the child stood and skipped after his mother, the fuzzy, silhouette-like shape in the grey overcoat and the zig-zag tie sat up a little straighter and folded one leg over the other in apparent satisfaction.

It was pleased. He wondered what it was like to feel things as keenly as he.

It was 8.36am. Two stops to go.

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He sat at his desk by the window on the fourteenth floor. He logged in and assumed the position.

Automaton.

Perhaps a brass wheel began to turn. His back pressed straight and firm against his office chair and he imagined perhaps that deep within him a lever released from between a pair of teeth allowing another wheel to spin which in turn spun another. A pivot and a spring at full extension and his programmed body began to do what it always did between these far from hallowed hours.

Collating data. Filing reports.

It was 9.02am.

He was not invented for this task, but he had been tuned to it and it might as well have been at the hands of a master watchmaker.

10.05am. Time leaked away. Too slow for the satisfaction of those who worked here, until they thought back to six months ago and realised it had leaked away much too fast.

11.11am. Things felt fuzzy.

Lubrication. It tasted of bitter, overcooked beans and styrofoam and a sickly sweet strain ran through it like a cancer. The doctor had told him to cut back on his sugar.

And so it went. And so it goes. He marched slowly through the day, his only thoughts the passing of time and he forgot as always to take note of the smile of a colleague or the warm sun on his face as it shone through the window. Not once did he take in the view. He was a man with no soul for it had left him out of sheer boredom.

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He watched her from the corner of his eye. Her black hair matched the deep shadow of her sunken eyes.

She'd become a regular on the train. Every day for the last week. He looked around, but couldn't see her son. From time to time she would look up and favour somebody with a smile. But never him. It became a game he played to pass the time. Trying to catch her eye. He had a

smile prepared, though it felt uncomfortable, as though his teeth were the wrong size for his mouth.

He needn't have bothered. When it finally happened, she looked right through him. She looked for a long moment and it was as if he wasn't there. He felt his stomach sink as he looked at her eyes. They were black where they should be white.

She looked away and the spell broke. He felt nauseous. He looked around the carriage. Did nobody but him notice? He saw somebody flash her a smile.

He turned to look down the other end of the carriage and saw only darkness. Something was wrong. He was in a tunnel. A gunmetal grey tunnel. Rocketing towards the end of the week. A shadow loomed over him and he turned to look once more. His soul stood before him. Still and silent. The tunnel began to shake. Vibrating at first, but then shifting violently. The train was riding a fault line. Everybody was looking at him.

He snapped awake. The clock said 1.51am. His forehead was slick with perspiration. He'd fallen asleep with his socks on.

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It was Wednesday morning. He'd made a decision.

He sat and watched his soul from the other end of the carriage. If it saw him, it gave no indication. His stomach was fluttering a little in a way he almost recognised. The uncomfortable feeling of hope mixed with the fear of rejection. He'd asked a girl out for dinner once and felt like this.

More passengers got on the train and he stood. He made a non-committal noise of greeting to someone who made a non-specific grunt of acknowledgement in return. No gazes were exchanged. He muttered as he slid past somebody, his balance tipping slightly as the train began to move once more.

His stomach fluttered some more and he stepped between an insurance broker and an arts student, each of them wearing their uniforms with a complete lack of awareness. The train moved and he slid in and out of the crowd, approaching his goal like a tepid adolescent at his first school dance.

His breathing ebbed and flowed, see-sawing between excitement and terror. He rode the swell of his emotions, tensing each time he reached the crest of intention, trying to will himself forward. The train lurched and he bumped into someone who told him to watch it and he mumbled apologetically and stepped away and the movement was enough. It was momentum and he sat in a rush. Right on top of his soul. He held his breath for a moment.

Nobody looked at him. Nobody said a word. The fluorescent lights hummed and the railway ties passed beneath with a thunk-a-thunk and the world continued to ignore him with a collective shrug.

The train slowed. 8.39am.

He stood and waited at the door, afraid to look back.

8.40am. The doors opened onto the grey concrete and lacklustre tiles of the subway station. He stepped out among the suits.

At the foot of the escalator he paused and finally looked back. Only to see his soul departing on the Number 3 train.

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The weeks passed by in a rush. His work took no conscious thought, nor had it for a long time. Instead, his mind wandered like the indecisive needle of a broken compass, wavering back and forth between his disaffected soul and the woman.

She had become a semi-regular passenger on the train. Sometimes she rode with her son. Sometimes, she rode the train alone. A solitary rock in a sea of unwarranted gazes, their regard breaking against her time and again and never once remarked upon. He began to wonder if she resented it. She must.

And yet he continued to look. To flit in and out of the tight spaces between passengers, hoping to catch her gaze.

When he wasn't trying to catch her attention, he was trying to catch his own. He sat beside himself. He stood over himself. One morning he even tried saying hello. The insurance salesman sitting opposite frowned at him, before turning to the side and dipping his head even lower into his phone.

His soul never once acknowledged his presence. He began to wonder if he was wrong. Perhaps it was not his soul, but some lonely imprint he had left behind. A dim copy, like a piece of ink-stained carbon paper.

The woman on the other hand, would never be mistaken for a dim copy of anything.

When he was near her, his stomach fluttered. He forgot how deeply a man should breathe. Rather, he breathed shallow, as though caught in a moment of anticipation. Once, when leaving the train, she had stepped right by him and he felt the warm thrum of her own vibrant soul like a current trying to bridge them.

He knew instinctively that she was not what he was missing. But she *had* what he was missing.

* * *

Six Wednesdays passed before he saw the woman again.

She stood halfway down the carriage, right by the doors. Perhaps she planned a fast escape from all the sideways looks. He, as had become his habit, stood close by his soul. Hanging around and hoping to catch its attention. It ignored him like any other passenger would.

A disembodied voice addressed them all. Scheduled maintenance. Delays. No trains on the blue line until 11.00am...

The train flooded with refugees. Outsiders from the blue line. Regular passengers flowed away from the infiltrators as if they were a scourge or a threat or an unheralded change in routine. A shift in balance. An *imbalance*. And the newcomers sought succour from the cold of mid-winter and hustled inside without thought and the result?

He was washed away. Carried off in a high tide and he couldn't for the life of him remember how it was he'd managed to keep his head above water all these years. The smell of sweat and unwashed wool and cotton blends overwhelmed him and he cast his eyes back towards his soul. His only soul. The only soul he had ever had or ever would again. And for the first time he cared that his soul had left him. As the press of bodies carried him further from himself like a sea of despair, he felt a sense of longing. Of deep fear.

Apathy borne of sadness was replaced by sadness borne of apathy.

And she saw him.

Her eyes lifted as she moved down the carriage and their eyes met. She didn't look through him. She looked *at* him. He wondered what he'd felt that had drawn her eyes, as if he could ever have the power to interest another human by thought alone and he knew within an instant that it was a juvenile thought. The look was happenstance. Nothing more.

And yet...

A spark was lit. A current was felt and a moment was charged and in that moment he saw that her eyes were green. Not the kind of green that stopped time but the kind that warped it. With a heat that melted and reshaped until moments never ran quite the same again. And her skin was alabaster and fine china all at once, with a faint blue vein of life and love that ran through it, waiting to be mined. Her small hand gripped the overhead safety handle that he had always thought was beige but now saw was the colour of unbleached silk. And they saw each other and at 8.36am the train stopped and the doors opened and she smiled at him before turning and washing out onto the platform.

He knew that he would never see her again.

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He was used to being a man of inaction.

And so, on a Thursday morning at 9.15am, late for work, he was surprised to find himself in a basement store on the corner of 74th and Columbus, surrounded by hats.

The hat itself was grand. The moment he placed it on his head and looked in the store mirror his back straightened and his disposition improved, for only upright men wore bowlers. He had the hatter cut a length of green satin for a hatband and he took it home in a velveteen box.

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He took the hat home in its box and sat it on his bedside table, his sleep uneasy. The next morning he placed it on his head, a spring in his step and a ready wink in the holster for ole Miss Henderson.

The disembodied voice was back, carrying over the throng of passengers. Blue line cast offs and red line regulars vied for position on the platform and none of them spared him a glance. He adjusted his hat and wondered if he was doing it wrong.

He somehow found a seat among the press of passengers. They stood shoulder to shoulder, hand-holds optional as the train began to move for there was nowhere to fall.

He began to feel self-conscious. He looked at his feet. He felt the flush of colour creeping into his cheeks. A scandal of shoes filled his vision and the train rattled ever onwards, his life no different than it had been pre-hat. What had he expected would happen? A pair of shoes shuffled to the side as he contemplated the train floor and his life all at once. Another pair moved aside. And then another. The sea of bodies before him parted to either side and a shadow loomed over him.

He looked up and felt a smile creep across his face. His internal clock said 8.39am. He stood and took his soul by the hand.

At 8.40am he stepped out onto the platform, whole for the first time in a long time.

A gentleman glanced at him and smiled a half a smile. And so, he doffed his bowler hat and said, with a full smile entirely of his own making, "Good Morning".