

THE SUBWAY MAP IN THE BATHROOM

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It was 9PM on Christmas Eve and you arrived at Tae's apartment with a six-pack of Guinness, a phone charger, and a pair of fleece-lined pajamas. Her studio was a third-story walk-up, located halfway between a billiards bar and a twenty-four-hour bodega on the Lower East Side. From the outside, it had the kind of dense granite façade that could almost require a doorman, but inside, the stairs creaked, and the peeling paint on the banister had gathered in a pool of pastel green on the landing.

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"Hope you don't mind, but I got bored waiting," Tae said, motioning to the bottle of scotch on the counter when you opened the door. She was wearing a pair of checker-print shorts and a loose-fitting sweater that, you noted, only reached her mid-thigh. Her long hair was knotted in a bun, and she fixed you with a look that suggested neither excitement nor displeasure at your presence. "Glasses are in the cabinet. Knock yourself out."

You were twenty-two, six months into living in New York, and still reeling from Raquel's decision to call things off. Tae was a friend of a friend. You'd seen each other on a handful of occasions and got along fine, but had it not been for Christmas, and the unhappy fact that you were both alone, you'd hardly have had any reason to see her then.

"Thanks," you said as you stepped inside, setting down your bag and shoes by the door. Her apartment was small in a way that required an intention about her belongings that long predated Marie Kondo. The front door opened directly into the kitchen.

Her fridge, upon a quick scan of its contents, lacked even enough to make an omelet.

“I’m not much of a cook,” Tae said. You considered giving each glass bottle its own place on the shelf but decided against it. Tae grew up in a suburb of Minneapolis and moved to Manhattan, like you, shortly after college. When you first met, you asked why she’d chosen New York.

“I was tired of constantly fielding questions from people who’d never met an Asian person before. It was like having to represent all Asian people, everywhere, all the time,” she told you, at a birthday dinner for a mutual friend at Fontana’s that fall, back when it was still open. “This may sound really fucking idealistic, but I just thought I’d find more people here like me.”

It sounded so much like a dozen other “Why New York?” stories you’d heard, even then, that you could practically fill in the rest of the details yourself: daughter of Korean immigrants, only Asian American in her high school class, full scholarship to college. Your own story wasn’t that different, having grown up the only son of a Puerto Rican mother in Cincinnati, but the reason why you came to New York was far more naïve, and you were thankful in that moment that Tae didn’t think to ask.

“I only applied for jobs here, and when I got one, I bought a one-way ticket and never looked back,” Tae said. The lights at Fontana’s dimmed in anticipation of the post-dinner crowd. Raquel never had time for your social engagements, even before the split, so it was just you and Tae, crowded at the end of a long table. Tae propped both her elbows up and looked lazily at the ceiling. She didn’t seem self-conscious about not wearing any make-up, but you noticed her features right away: the way her eyes skimmed the menu, the camber of her lips. There was a terse directness to the way she spoke. Having spent so long being questioned, she didn’t seem to care what other people thought of her.

“I wanted to stop pretending to be someone I wasn’t,” she said, staring straight into your eyes. She stretched her arm out across the table and took your hand in hers. “I just wanted to *be*.”

“Sorry the trains took forever,” you said, as you closed the fridge and opened a beer.

“It’s a holiday for Christ’s sake. It’s a miracle they run at all.”

The truth was that you’d taken the subway the wrong way to get there, having neglected to consult the map in your pocket, overconfident as you were. Inside Tae’s studio, it was remarkably warm despite the weather. You took off your coat and placed it in Tae’s outstretched arms, who slumped it, along with her sweater, over the lip of the couch.

“Shall I give you the grand tour?”

Past the kitchen was a small bathroom. In front of you, a black leather couch and a coffee table. And directly to your left, Tae’s bedroom. She propped the door open, and you poked your head into the unlit room. In the dark, you could make out the outline of a wardrobe, an unmade bed, an old window screen she repurposed to hold jewelry. It wasn’t untoward, but the whole time you felt like you were looking at something you shouldn’t see.

Tae took a seat on the sofa in the living room and propped her legs up on a chair. As she slid down, her shirt rode up to reveal a band of tawny skin just above the waist. She didn’t offer you a seat and you didn’t want to appear impatient, so you sat down, gingerly, like submerging into hot water.

“What shall we watch?” she asked, as she placed a laptop on the coffee table and took a sip of Guinness. You decided on a James Bond movie she’d already seen.

“Like I need an excuse to watch Daniel Craig.” She smiled, and you noticed for the first time that one of her teeth was chipped. You suspected it might be a point of embarrassment, the same reason she used to introduce herself as Tyra and not Tae when she was younger, so you said nothing. You shifted your weight on the couch but still arranged yourself next to her like two pieces on a chess board, adjoining squares incapable of touch.

When you called her the previous week, it was unseasonably warm, so you were at Bryant Park with your phone out and no gloves. You were doing the thing you always did when you got bad news: walk. Inside the park, there were dozens of holiday shops selling scented candles, knit scarves, picture frames, New

York kitsch. The ice rink was lit up, and couples were bracing against each other and laughing, skating around the outer ring near the wall.

You forgot when you had even exchanged numbers with Tae, so when she picked up the phone, you were both a little surprised. You skipped the small talk and told her that you and Raquel had broken up. You said that your plan to spend the holidays with her family in Westchester had fallen through, and that it was too late now to buy a ticket to Cincinnati. It all came out much calmer than you expected, like you were narrating the plot to a story. You didn't really know why you were telling her any of this. Your lips were moving but it felt like you were watching yourself talking into the phone from somewhere else.

Tae had never met Raquel, and there weren't many people you knew in the city to begin with. You could almost picture her, trying to figure out how to respond. The last time you had seen her at Fontana's, Tae was wearing a white blouse with the collar undone, a braid of hair wrapped across her neck. You remembered the way her hand slid over yours at the restaurant. All at once, you asked her what she was doing for Christmas. For a moment, the receiver was cold.

"Bring a change of clothes," she said, finally. "You can spend the night."

By the time you were close enough to touch, James Bond was tied to a wooden chair in the middle of a large, empty room. He had escaped from a train chase only to be captured by a group of men and brought to an abandoned warehouse. As he was being held inside, you felt yourself sinking into the leather plush of the couch, forgetting for a minute what it was you were doing there. Tae was on her second beer, and you traded in yours for a glass of scotch. There was a part of you that was anxious, worried for Bond's fate, even though after so many movies you could predict the ending before it happened.

When Tae sat up abruptly on the couch and craned her neck toward you, you thought *this is it*: the moment she was going to kiss you. You had been preparing yourself for this, even though

you'd been sitting in near silence for a half-hour and still hadn't made contact with any part of her. You turned toward her instinctively, like a flower facing the sun, steadying your arm against the back of the couch.

"I should tell you that my apartment is like a college dorm room," Tae said, as matter-of-factly as reciting a grocery list. "The walls may as well be made of cardboard."

Your own apartment was a two-bedroom attic you shared with three other guys in Harlem, like boarders. It was the only place you could afford on a teaching salary when you moved to New York in June. Raquel was the one who sent you the Craigslist listing, never mind that you were too embarrassed to ever let her come over. You figured you would be spending most of your time at Raquel's anyway, so you didn't really think much of it. Raquel was studying art history at NYU and her one bedroom in Chelsea had a kitchen island and hardwood floors, a queen-sized bed with a headboard, a fridge full of organic produce.

The villain in the Bond movie suddenly shouted something, and you tilted your head to try and make out the words.

"My neighbors are in their seventies," Tae continued. "Catholic couple. Really lovely." Her perfume was just faint enough to notice, a cross between honeysuckle and whiskey. She smiled, and you realized that it was meant more for their peace of mind than her own.

"But it can make situations like these uncomfortable." She motioned to her bedroom and then again to the couch where you both were still sitting. "So we're just going to have sex out here."

Even now, you're not sure whether you'd feigned surprise or were genuinely caught unaware. You were still wearing your bewilderment plainly on your face, and Tae seized on it immediately.

"Well, honestly, what did you expect?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips. "You really didn't think we were going to fuck?"

You lamented, for a moment, the days before college, when just going over to a girl's house was an accomplishment. Your mom would kill you if she ever caught you with a girl at home, so you had to make up some excuse—that track practice ran late or

that you had to meet for a group project—and at best you could do it once a month, so she didn't start to get suspicious. She still doubted you, of course, so occasionally you had to give her Carlos Rao's number, who could do a fantastic impression of your coach, but that was only during your senior year when you really started to get desperate.

The girls you went for in high school lived in ranch houses in the suburbs and drove their dads' SUVs to school. They liked to ask you questions, like whether or not you knew how to salsa and how to pronounce words for them in Spanish. You liked them because they wore jeans that clung to their hips and had parents who always seemed to work late.

You spent hours with them, plying all your wit and charm to look enticing, hoping it might lead somewhere. And then, there were times when you were actually alone with a girl, your mind racing the whole time. You asked yourself the question *are we going to do something?* with such monotony you could have sworn you were keeping time. If you were lucky, you might make out on the couch until you heard the sound of a car pulling into the drive, and then start in on grammar drills like you were one of her tutors.

You weren't prudish about sex, despite having grown up Catholic and for a long time believed you'd save it for marriage. At Case, half the girls never considered sleeping with you because you were brown, and the other half came on so strong you could have sworn you were Mario Lopez. But you always felt like you had to be more complicit than you were. Most of your friends didn't think twice about sleeping with a girl they'd just met. But you knew early on that you were too meek to be a lady-killer. More often than not, you had to act the part, like a tough guy in a spy flick. Something always held you back.

Tae was shuffling around the living room, converting the leather couch into a single horizontal slab. With the movie off, you could hear Christmas music pouring in clearly from the bodega downstairs, the melodies of Nat King Cole and Doris Day in the dimly lit room.

You used to watch holiday movies with your mom on Christmas Eve in Cincinnati, *Rudolph* and *Charlie Brown* and *The Year Without Santa Clause* on primetime network marathons. During winter breaks in college, the two of you would eat empanadas on plastic trays, on the lumpy green futon in the living room with the space heater wedged between you. The TV antenna was busted, so sometimes the shows would come in fuzzy or in black and white or with the sound turned off. It hardly mattered how many times you'd seen them, it felt like you could watch those movies forever.

"What does it matter if we don't have a tree," your mom used to say, "or that the kids in the movies always have two parents?" She'd sometimes say it in English, too, for emphasis. "I know that you're going to figure it out," she said. "With a wife and kids, what it means to be a family."

Tae finished adjusting the sofa bed and lay down sideways on it, her head propped up on a pillow. She stared at you with a look that suggested both poise and impatience, and you thought about having sex the same way you did when you lost your virginity: to prove in some stupid, insignificant way that you were wanted.

You first met Raquel in an English seminar the fall of your senior year. After class, you talked about Sandra Cisneros and Junot Diaz, and how you wished that there were more Hispanic writers in the mainstream. Before you met her, you didn't think there was such a thing as a bookish Latina: her in the horn-rimmed glasses, *Bel Canto* tucked under her arm. But at the same time, she could pull off a crop top and leggings, sing along to every verse of Selena. One minute she was talking power to the people and the next about the best wine pairings with cheese. She made it look so effortless, having a foot in each world.

That's when you knew. You chased her for months, didn't give up even when she told you she had a boyfriend back home in New York who could bench-press you in his sleep. You took her out for meals after class, bought flowers for her when she came back from fall break. You slipped messages under her door—just a few

words at first—that gradually ballooned into letters, hot and fast as confessions.

She was different than any girl you'd ever known. She made you her grandma's pollo guisado recipe in the tiny kitchen in her dorm room. She could speak like you did, in two tongues, like your own secret language on campus. The first time you made love, she pressed her hips into you and arched her back, bracing her arms against your shoulders. You wanted to say something—how invincible you felt in that moment—but her eyes were closed and her body tensed as her limbs softly eased into yours.

On weekends, the two of you used to drive out to watch movies in Cedar Park. It was four hours from Cincinnati but felt exactly like the white neighborhoods you sometimes drove past in high school with their terraces and fountains, paved carriageways lined with geraniums. Raquel loved going, said it reminded her of Westchester, and it always surprised you a little bit, to know that someone like her could feel at home in a place like that.

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You let yourself dream for the first time about settling down in New York with her, of living in a brownstone with a front yard and a wrought-iron fence. You'd never been to New York, but at the Regal in Cedar Park they sometimes showed old movies like *When Harry Met Sally* or *You've Got Mail*. You agonized over how the streets looked, wanted to know them intimately, like New York was a place you belonged. You thought about how these perfect strangers, in spite of all the chaos and spectacle of the city, had managed to fall in love, and how one day you would go to New York with Raquel and fall in love too.

"I don't really like kissing," Tae said, as you touched your lips to hers. "You'd be surprised how many people have no idea what they're doing." She had a calm kind of detachment, like she knew what she wanted but had little riding on the outcome. She reached her hands down the length of your torso and undid the buckle on your belt. You conceded, and only when you closed your eyes again did you realize that you were still thinking about Raquel.

Tae pulled her shirt over her head and climbed on top of you. She was wearing a black bra with a clasp at the front and was

holding you through the thin layer of your boxers. You reached for her too, starting with her waist, along the softness of her stomach, and settled on the smooth recess just beneath her chest. You touched her body guardedly, in measured steps, as if navigating a new city.

“Do you have a condom?” she asked, as you slid your hand inside the ridge of her bra. You made a mental note of the items in your bag by the door and shook your head. You wondered for a moment how your kids might look if Tae were pregnant with your child.

“Sometimes I don’t even know why I try,” Tae sighed, twisting herself off you and wrangling up her bra straps. “My friends keep telling me not to bother with hopeless men.”

You decided to overlook this slight, in the same way you chose to ignore comments about your accent, or the way cops seemed to single you out for routine stops in your neighborhood in Cincinnati after dark. Your mind went blank, and all you could hear was the sound of “Silver Bells” filling the silence in the room.

“The bodega should sell them,” you suddenly said out loud.

Lying on your back, you mapped out the proposed journey in your head. Putting on your jacket and walking the three flights downstairs. The cold air stinging your face, the lights of Stuyvesant Town just visible in the distance. Slipping through the clear plastic curtains of the bodega, you scanned the aisles: the area behind the counter with cigarettes, toiletries, and lottery tickets, a fridge full of popsicles by the front. You glanced over the packages, craning your neck so as not to appear anxious. When you set the condoms on the counter, the man ringing you up laughed so hard you swore you picked up a box of Tampons by mistake.

“Fues rápido, vato,” he said, shooting you a wide grin. “What, was she just up there naked like that, waiting for you?”

When you buzzed in and walked back upstairs, you set the package at the foot of the sofa. You took off your shirt and lay down on the couch, but something felt different. The sheets were cold. Growing up they would stick to your body in the summer, your mattress covered in sweat. There were days when you savored the heat, feeling it hot on your face, the closest thing to

a lover. Out of the corner of your eye, you saw the laptop on the coffee table. You thought about James Bond, trapped somewhere in that warehouse, and suddenly worried if he'd ever make it out.

"What's wrong?" Tae asked, with a mix of concern and frustration, and you knew you couldn't tell her the things that would probably make you less of a man in her eyes.

You were staring hard at your reflection in the bathroom mirror. You looked at the thin scar along your right eye, the shiny blackness of your still-thick hair, the flush of red in your cheeks. Those parts were all yours, and yet nothing felt quite right, like you were standing in a fun house. The floor was fitted with white-and-black checkered tiles. The hand towel matched the gray of the rug. You saw a rubber stopper in the sink drain and pulled it up until it emptied, just to make sure it still worked.

For a long time, you thought about leaving, about not saying a word to Tae, and just taking off. You wanted to walk as far away as you could, to disappear completely. You were just about ready to go when something caught your eye. Covering the shower was a vinyl curtain with a map of the subway. The island of Manhattan was blown up in the center, but you could still make out the other boroughs—the inlet of Staten Island, the conjoined twins of Queens and Brooklyn, the bulbous crown of the Bronx—each with its crisscross of colored subway lines leading into and away from the city.

You put a hand to the dog-eared map you used to carry around everywhere you went. It was only native New Yorkers, you were told, who could understand the conductors when they announced service changes over the intercom. When you used to watch those movies about New York, you hadn't considered how moving there could change a person. You pored over the curtain like a relic, tracing with your finger your route from Harlem to Essex Street. The vinyl was smooth, embodying the antithesis of an actual train's path, swooping gracefully, unerringly, from one stop to the next.

As you wound your finger down the map, you stopped at Union Square, where you used to transfer to the L to go across

town. How many nights did you make that trip, taking the train to 8th Avenue, and then walking the six blocks to Raquel's apartment? When you arrived in New York, it was the middle of the summer, when the whole city seemed to shift outdoors. There was something so novel about it—businessmen walking out of work at 3PM, elevated subway cars strewn with beach chairs and sand pails—that you couldn't let yourself think about how distant you and Raquel had grown.

Every time you saw her, it was about how exciting the city was. It was why you put up with everything—the crowded trains, the long commute—like no sacrifice was too great. You were captivated by the fantasy of New York, and yet, at the same time, blinded from the reality: that you were not part of the life Raquel saw for herself in it. For months, you ignored the signs. You should have known when she didn't want you to move in with her that she was trying to hedge her bets. The whole time you lived in New York, you had none of your belongings at her place: not a scrap of clothing, not a toothbrush.

But it still didn't feel real to you yet. You thought about Raquel coming back from Westchester after Christmas and you taking the train to meet her in Chelsea, just like before. You feared whether everything in her neighborhood—the dry cleaners, the Farmer's Market, the Barnes & Noble—would suddenly become off-limits to you, how you'd hardly be able to go there without thinking of her. Or worse, that without Raquel, you wouldn't belong in the city at all.

With your finger still on Union Square, you followed the path to Tae's house, continuing down the Lexington Avenue line and stopping at Bleeker Street. You thought about making the journey in reverse, following your finger up to Union Square and going past it, riding the train all the way back to Harlem, holding the city with your hands.

By the time you got out, Tae was lying down on her mattress, facing the window. Her bedroom looked different than you remembered it from earlier: the dresser teak and Victorian, a desk in the corner decorated with seashells, the window screen with

jewelry suddenly absent. It was like New York in a way, constantly taking you by surprise. How long did you have to be somewhere before you stopped feeling like a complete stranger to a place?

Tae wasn't asleep yet. Her blankets rose and fell irregularly with each breath. You drew back the covers and lay down beside her, your chest facing the ceiling. For a moment, you doubted whether you should be there, but Tae slouched toward you with her back, and you edged close to her, forming a seal against your chest.

"I've thought about this for a while," you said, partly because it was true, and partly because you didn't want her to feel any worse. She turned around to face you.

"It's a reminder for me," she said. "New York has a way of disappointing you." She was looking at you, but her eyes seemed to sail past yours to the door behind. "Every day is this series of bad dates and missed stops and delays. But it's where I live, and sooner or later, you learn to live with it." You thought about why Tae first came to the city and whether she found what she was after.

"You know, you never did tell me why you moved here," she said, loudly enough that you couldn't pretend to be asleep. "So what's your reason?" The ceiling fan whirred overhead. More than once you'd caught yourself talking about New York in the same exasperated breath as a lover who never called you back. You thought about the small disappointments, the tiny failures that made up every day, and wondered why you endured them too.

"I wanted to fall in love," you said, still staring at the wall in front of you.

You were both silent for a time, and your gaze shifted to the window by the side of the bed. Outside, the moon was bright against the night sky, and you could see smokestacks of the generator overshadowing the horizon. On Christmas Eve when you were a kid, you used to will yourself to stay awake at night by counting the stars from outside your bedroom window. Even long after you knew better, there was still a part of you that wanted to believe: the full stockings, the presents gathered around the sofa. Christmas day, by comparison, always came as a letdown. You

didn't want to fall asleep because you liked the anticipation, the infinite possibilities of what might be.

Tae turned away from you then, and, instinctively, you stretched out your arms, nesting one under Tae's neck and the other around her torso. How sad, you thought, that yours was the best company she'd managed to find and yet, in the months and years that followed, there would probably be worse: men who smoked and drank, who gambled and picked fights.

That was the night you should have left. Not just Tae's apartment, but the city. But you didn't. For years after, you shared other beds. Lumpy pull-outs, tall headboards made of brass, four-posters like the ones you thought only existed in movies. You outlasted subprime mortgages and Zuccotti Park and a hurricane that would have flooded Tae's apartment building had she not already left herself. And through it all, the trace of an arm, a wisp of hair, an errant touch. Strangers you met one night and never saw again, women whose lives left an imprint on your skin. Learning what it was to love and still feeling nothing.

You were still lying next to Tae when she fell asleep. For a long time, though, you couldn't. You tried to count stars, but the light outside was too bright. You thought, instead, about how you would call Raquel on the way to the subway in the morning, the Christmas message you would leave on her voicemail. You wrapped your arms around Tae and closed your eyes. Lying on your back, a body curved at your side, tracing the room with your breath. Maybe you didn't know any better then. Maybe you still don't.