

SHORT STORY

# Train Out of Time

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As the legendary *Transsibirskaya* sets out on the mammoth path of its eastward rails, the bland block of architecture that is the *Yaroslavsky* terminal slides sideways out of sight. With a pedantic ire at the thought that this will be my last memory of Moscow before I enter the white wastes of Russia's eastern reaches, I ask myself if fleeing my half-finished studies and a town in dire need of social opportunities was worth all the hours and savings I put into this trip without a goal. If the journey is its own reward, as they like to say, I simply didn't earn that one. In spite of my indecisive feelings towards my knee-jerk venture, I feel at home. Perhaps I have been in the country for too long, but I blame this attitude less on an appropriative nativity claim than my aesthetic neuroticism.

My eyes are closed as the train picks up speed, and I imagine a transformation of the terminal, some surreal shift into Saint Basil's. The typical straight walls of alabaster plaster and the sharp golden crowns twist and turn into the more artistic Cathedral in the expanse of the Red Square, sprinkled and speckled in all possible hues, dominated by crimson, and the towers topped by those nine onion-shaped ice cream scoops of white and colored stripes. Then I open my eyes, and I let that escapist picture empower me from the back of my head, to lend me strength for my long journey that I wish to heaven will take me to a new world.

While the Slavic spirit that attended me during my solitary stay in the European sliver of the country is fading from my sentimental memories, the rolling grass of bleak brown replaces them with a feeling of transition, the notion of a preliminary place between planes. Encircled by the translucent mirage of a mountain range in the far distance behind the fields, glimmering in blue and teal, the phantom titans phase in and out, just barely hiding the reality beyond my understanding. I should look away, away from the depression I fled in search for something worth doing, since nostalgia for a place without purpose would render my stray wandering in the past weeks just as meaningless. It feels so much longer...

"Care to spare a spot for a random drifter? Or a Muscovite brother, if that suits you?"

Thankful for the distraction, I crane my neck to face the visitor. I intend to tell him no, of course, as I like to think that only my paranoid caution has kept me safe from the horror stories told often about globetrotters and backpackers. This fellow's face, however, sports a soft hint of a friendly soul... No, not "friendly". That's not on the spot. Rather, he looks...

...solemn...

Yes, that's it. Solemn. Whether due to the barely ragged and rugged jacket and jeans, the slightly scruffy visage without danger or the agreeable glint in the grey of his cool eyes, my natural alarm deactivates for once, leaving behind my weakness for those in need. Logically speaking, the six seats — three opposite three — can accommodate at least one more. And

so I nod, dry yet firm, signaling the man to enter.

“Oh, thank you!” he says grimly, all but sulking like a child, as he throws his backpack — larger than mine, and audibly heavy — on the opposite row of seats, at the door side. Shown a consideration to my privacy that I did not quite expect under these circumstances, the last vestiges of my distrust depart.

“You know...” The man sighs as he takes off his shiny shoes. “People are cold lately, adequate to the time and place...” He chuckles at his own obscure joke as he crosses his fortunately clean-looking, sock-covered feet on the seat across, stretching his legs with gusto. “But I’m glad to have stumbled across a warmer soul in late summer.”

As he folds his arms in some preparation that is mirrored in his softly glowing regard, I wonder how to react now.

“So, care to share?”

I frown. “I shared, didn’t I?”

Another chuckle. As the light laughter deflates, the face shifts from mellow innocence to some sort of melancholy intelligence. The change still brings not a trace of unease with it, though I wonder whether this is the same person I let into this presently silent compartment.

“If my perception doesn’t deceive me — and I assume from experience that it does not — I joined a brooding soul,” he says, then seems to notice my surprise at his sudden eloquence. “But I will not pressure you. I have my own share of secrets. Feel free to engage in an exchange when you are ready.”

While awfully involved in a stranger’s private affairs at first, the man takes a step back and minds his own business, staring and smiling into space, not even seeming to register me. My own mind returns to the sliding sheets of scenery beyond the polished glass to my side. And only after a few minutes do I realize that my mouth is moving, that words are getting out, that I’m talking about the twists and turns of my being — from the boring to the curious stuff, from my bland bourgeois upbringing to my existential crisis during college that catapulted me into an eastward search for sense in cultures and customs, a quest for solutions to my riddles.

“It’s not just a cliché to equate ignorance with bliss,” I interrupt my telling for a more emotional rather than factual memory. “At one point, a person can learn *too much*, you know? It was sneaking into my mind gradually, taking possession of my soul step by step.”

“Poetic,” the listener murmurs, smiling between amusement and awe.

“I’m serious. They teach you theory and questions, fill your brain with raw curiosity, until you’re left a shell replete with questions and yearning for answers. So I left for a search. I’m done with questions. Instead of wasting any more time with ‘hows’, I’ll focus on ‘thats’.”

“Then I assume that you are unlikely to feel the sense of awe innate in such a search.”

I am baffled for a moment. If this is above my paygrade, I should have stayed at home. Of course, I need to fire a smart answer:

“If I see every face of the cube, not just random squares, I’ll understand enough about the cosmos so that I never have to feel awe. That’s my goal: enlightenment. Cheesy? Maybe. Fulfilling? Absolutely.”

“But the world is a sphere.” The reply comes dry and direct, like a prepared response.

“Infinite sides means no end to the search.”

Again, speechlessness overcomes me, yet even as I fail to hide it, I am not mocked. The man has grown utterly thoughtful concerning my hidden humble self.

“But I can see as much as my faculties allow.” My response is weak, but I am content. “The still approachably familiar Russia was just meant to be my access to another continent, but I liked it so much that I remained for too long. Then, reminding myself of my actual aims, I broke out of my shell again... just when we met.”

And so I continue with the facts of my journey. Throughout the entirety of my account, the man listens and nods, as if in expectant knowing. When I finish, he smiles in satisfaction, as if my story somehow gave him happiness.

“So,” I say, throwing my arms up. “Now you know basically everything about me.”

“Indeed,” the man with the shifted persons responds with an oddly haughty charm. “And now you want me to return the favor, right?”

“Would be fair. If you don’t leave in *Nizhny*, that is, we have time.”

“We passed *Nizhny*, comrade.”

“What?!” I gasp and glare out the window, expecting nothing but the shy cold of a Russian September plain of nature. Instead, I witness the impossible truth behind the claim: The grassland, now scarcer and grayer, is now accompanied by what can only be the Volga, flowing like fluid glass. Yet this no longer feels like Russia.

“We are now about to enter the beauty of Kazakhstan,” the voice behind me explains, mixing confidence with consideration. I turn to my company, barely finding my breath.

“How... long was I talking?”

“A decent while.” The man shrugs. “This train is far faster than they say, you know.”

“But the Transsib doesn’t even skirt Kazakhstan.”

Though I barely see it, it still strikes the eye: His consideration fuses with contempt, some strain between his brows that makes me wonder just what the hell is going on.

“You still believe we’re in the Transsib?” His words make me wish to jump out, yet his face doesn’t fail to calm me. “Didn’t you feel strange when the train departed Moscow?”

“Yeah, some sort of elation, detachment, like—” A confused medley of feelings strikes, and I shake my head. “Wait, hold on. Who are you, man?”

“Me?” Affront and surprise. “Why, I’m the Conductor.” He thumbs at the cabin door. “The train is self-sufficient enough in this age of automation, but it still needs a caretaker; safety reasons, you understand. My main occupation is chitchatting with the passengers.”

An air of holistic honesty shines in him, and I feel helplessly hasty to trust his words, even though I have many questions to pose. I want to ask why he looks like a cross between an attorney who had seen more successful days and a tramp with a good sense of self-care. My more sincere side whispers a desire to know the man’s identity, but a different voice counters that it doesn’t really matter. The Conductor is just a man, as my senses let me know. This individual here is a frivolous eccentric, indeed, but nothing more than a man, after all. Well, all I have left is to quench my thirst for the most immediate source of curiosity:

“Where is this train heading for, then?”

“Oh, everywhere!” he responds with boisterous gusto, waving with his hands over some imaginary world between his eyes and mine. “And the real fun of it is the randomness; the route is never the same twice in a row, you know?” The Conductor stretches himself with lavish passion, ignoring my baffled stare. “I have a feeling it will take a break in China next, but my inner radar gets a tad indistinct after that.”

“But... the tracks,” I mutter, struggling to find words. “And the plan, the time, the...”

“A timeless train,” the Conductor says, more serene than ever. “That’s all this is.”

All of a sudden, my wish to peer into the black box and grasp its preternatural ways fades away in the rush of wind behind the surreal locomotive on its otherworldly railroads. The train could stop on the moon next, and I would not look thrice. Again, I just accept the strange.

“What can I call you?” I ask, yet not out of curiosity, but a fulfilment of familiarity.

“Fyodor,” the Conductor says, calm and cool. “Just call me Fyodor.”

“Well, Fyodor, I guess you owe me a story now.”

His smirk of utmost respect is his answer. What follows is a flow of memories, existential narratives of ambiguities and polarizations: times of intelligence and wisdom, times of playfulness and foolishness; times of grand abundance, times of squalid poverty; times of facing something like death, times of knowing something like life; times of strength, times of weakness; times of light, times of dark. I wonder how much of being can fit into the spirit of but one mortal man, but it is again the strange that makes everything so convincing.

My distracted perception makes only a nebulous note of the porcelain samovar with the Russian Caravan that at one point suddenly stands between the excited talker and me. When the table was folded out to make space for the steaming kettle is likewise beyond me, although I blame the fine scent, which most likely enamored my senses beyond function.

And as the best of tales go, this tale reaches an end which feels to have come too soon. By the end, I feel like comprehending the cosmos itself.

“And that’s all there is,” Fyodor finishes, as if having told me about the weather.

“Quite literally, indeed,” I laugh, convinced that nothing will ever amaze me anymore, I think at this brief moment of silence. I can’t pinpoint what exactly seems so astonishing about Fyodor’s prosaic tale, but it’s more like a feeling. My dazed mind finds a semblance of stability when I see Fyodor glance at a watch that I didn’t notice before on his left wrist.

“It’s time,” Fyodor murmurs, barely audible, failing to suppress a satisfied smile.

“Time for what?” I ask. Fyodor eyes me as if I just denied the roundness of the globe.

“Why, time for everything, of course,” he shrugs, his serene satisfaction never fading. “The train is fueled by time, and needs to charge first by crossing some space. Now it’s full.”

“The... tank?”

Fyodor raises his hands, his palms pre-emptively silencing any words that might follow from my mouth.

“Don’t try to make sense of everything,” he tells me, before nodding out the window. “Just take a look or two at the fine scenery beyond this clean glass and enjoy the show.”

The window pushes and concurrently pulls my eyes, struggling with itself, it seems, like a schizophrenic force that can’t quite decide what to do with my attention. Then the latter succeeds on its own, and I finally see where we’ve been heading for God knows how long.

If the levity of my surroundings was somehow too subtle a hint concerning this reality, the humongous blocks of grey and brown and an added multitude of muted colors do the job,

together with horses and carriages trotting and shuffling through the wide cobblestone streets. Men and women wander about in gloomy dazes, near-indistinguishable from one another in their thick overcoats and obscure headdresses.

“Where are we?” I hear myself speak to the glass. “This feels like... nowhere.”

“Saint Petersburg,” his voice by my shoulder responds. “But not the Saint Petersburg you could ever see in your time.” With his hand, he gives me a candid clap on my upper arm. “This is where my route ends, my friend.”

My legs straighten in a blink, forcing me to my feet, to eye level with the Conductor. His gaze is solemn yet secure, a sad kind of serene.

“What do you mean, Fyodor? You said you are in charge here.”

“I also said that this train is self-sufficient, and also timeless.”

“You did,” I say, and I almost cannot bring myself to ask questions now, yet I have to.

“What’s your point?”

“The next time a soul gets lost in the *Transsibirskaya*, chances are that they will cross paths with me. Then I might listen and tell again, for stories are the coals that fuel our lives — and the rails are less space than time, the days and nights, the minutes and moments that we spend forming our memories for the coming present. And so I am in past and future at once. However, as trains one day break down, so will I tire from this passionate mission of mine.”

“And what then?” I am too caught up to wonder, too absorbed to doubt this reality. “What about this train?”

“It shall keep running as long as there are travelers willing to fuel it with memories. But now, as they say, I must go.”

No valediction, no final exchange, nothing of sentimental semantics passes between me and the person I feel like having known my entire life — for I had heard the totality of his. The moment Fyodor walks out, the surreal scene on the other side of the glass becomes hazy, muddy, misty, growing indistinct and vanishing in a nebulous nirvana.

And I am alone in my compartment again.

But my solemn solitude lasts not for long.

People come and go. I visit the others in equal measure. The sharing is bountiful, exuberant and rich. I remember no faces, but everything else about the lives behind them. Then, after a time that has taken a break on this locomotive, I settle in my compartment again, fatigued and leaden-eyed, throwing a glance outside again, curious what I would see this time. What I

see surprises me little, for my journey's end — just like that of the Conductor Fyodor — has only been a matter of time: my humble hometown, though void of the fall of leaves in autumn, and also of the wildness of colors pertinent to the season. It's not yet September at this time.

Few things that happen afterwards stamp any kind of impression upon my memory, for the grand spectacle lies behind me, in that train out of time. One day, I might cross paths with other passengers through time. And then we will weave together the grandest of tales.