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CZECH DOGS DON'T SAY HELLO

STEPHANIE YATES

A millennium from now, the things archaeologists are going to find from our era, the things they're going to excavate and look on as some marvel of our time, Drina says, are our subway systems. The way we found the Terra Cotta warriors, she continues, all in their tight, organized rows, abandoned there to stand guard forever in the vast catacombs of Xian, buried beneath centuries of dirt and rubble and time, that's how they'll find the remains of our subways. That's what we'll be known for.

My sandal dangles precariously from my right foot, decorated with uneven tan lines. I stare at it. I make wishes - though there is no one to grant them - silently, to myself: That Drina would stop talking. That our stop would come faster and that we could leave these stifling, plastic and metal surroundings. That something I hated less would be the great novelty of our time. I never used to hate subways, until this strange great intrusion of them and the Czech Republic came into my life.

Drina is speaking, ignoring whatever expression I wear. I imagine it is something impatient and tiredly scowling.

These massive tunnels, these weird sort-of railroads running beneath us, they'll be buried just like those idle warriors, gutted and abandoned, the trains left motionless forever, eaten away, only skeletons of them remaining.

Her eyes have a sharply dreamy quality to them, and she isn't looking at me, but instead watching her reflection in the vast windows. You can't actually see anything out them—only yourself reflected back (Drina does not mind this), and everyone else seems somehow blurred. There's no good reason for them. But if they weren't here, if you had nothing but the slate gray walls of the subway car around you, it would be stifling, it would be claustrophobic, it would feel like nothing so much as being imprisoned, cut off and alone. So there are windows, and they are comforting, even if they're only pretend.

I stop watching my sandal when her steady, unwavering left hand moves to rest against my thigh. She is smiling slightly, fondly, but it's almost

a smirk—I don't look, but I know this. My gaze instantly moves to her purple fingernails, the polish chipped and flaking, catching at the fabric of my ripped jeans and for just a split second I forget and am contented by this imperfection.

Someone will make a fortune on this discovery. Someone will make more than whatever engineering genius has the idea for a massive underground transit system in the first place. She is looking over at me when she says this. I let the back of my hand brush up against hers as I sigh and slump back, closing my eyes.

If I keep them open there is nowhere else to look.

Drina's hand shifts, relaxes, closer now, and mine is suddenly tangled, unintentionally, in the curled ends of her long hair so dark it's nearly black.

No one actually has black hair, not naturally anyway. What we think is black is really just darker and darker shades of brown. I read this somewhere, but I've never mentioned it, never infringed on what is her forte. Drina's looks that way though, ebony against her skin, glossy, curled the way I only wish mine ever would be, rich and thick and beautiful. She's never dyed her hair, never straightened it, never abused it the way I do, and it hangs, healthy and gorgeous, to her lower back. Stark contrast against my uneven, almost but not quite shoulder-length stripped, dry, orangey blonde.

I never wanted blonde hair. It just happened. Somewhere between an almost-black wine red and the intended light auburn, it just stayed blonde, and not even a pretty blonde, but waxy at the top and golden-orange at the tips, a splotchy mottle between the two extremes.

Why don't you just leave it that way? Drina asked at the time, after two bottles of peroxide. You've never done that before.

I lift my hand and drag it from my neck up through sweat-sticky, clumpy hair. It feels gritty, greasy, and it stays sticking out at odd angles, blonde and misleading. I do not fix it.

I had listened, because Drina had spoken.

54 The still-dangling sandal falls from its perch with a soft thud and I now stare instead at my uneven, unpainted toenails, but I make no effort to replace it.

My hand tightens in the hair at the nape of my neck just for an instant, an auspicious attempt at controlling my impulse to give in and lean against her. Instead I sink down, feel the hard seatback notch against my skull, stare at the ridged ceiling of the small subway car.

Drina was as accidental as my hair. She just happened one day and has been ever since, as naturally as anything. She was one thing and then imperceptibly she was another, just happened, just shifted, just like that. Behind my eyelids, I glower at the ceiling, at the stifling pleasure Drina finds in this place, at the self-indulgent way she expects me to share it.

My hand is distracted immediately, the instant I drop it from my neck, in drifting back to the almost-ebony of her hair.

It's somewhere between the Spanish r and the g in the word mirage, she's saying this morning.

Drina, the linguist. Drina, the do-it-yourself scholar.

Drina, trying to explain the hasek to me, the stupid, perfect little dipping curve above the single steady stroke of a lower case r on every other sign in Prague. She read it on the internet, is all.

It's somewhere between Ottawa and Detroit, I say tersely, and I don't even congratulate myself on being clever. Drina chooses to ignore this and I wonder to myself if it was lost on her. She deems it important that I know it's supposedly one of the hardest sounds in any language to actually get right, and I wonder if she knows I don't care.

I want to be anywhere but on this train, and I want to go drown myself in something that isn't her vast knowledge of fricatives and sibilants and things that don't matter and never matter. Maybe the beer that's cheap here, the beer she won't drink even through it's good beer, not like that you get back home. The beer that she always passes up for dark red wine, the color my hair was before this.

I tell myself it's stupid to think her only reason for this is to be contrary.

I only defend myself in this passive-aggressive way, this witty banter of malcontent. To me, this is just an accent I can't pronounce or a hockey player who should have retired. I'm not sure what it is to her. Sometimes it's even endearing.

I wonder idly if she knows she's talking to herself, to empty air, to the uncomprehending ears of dozens of Czech students, mothers, children, businessmen, crammed together on this subway.

If she does, she doesn't let on.

I bury myself in watching this couple across the subway car from us, looking at each other as if nothing else around them is real, as if they're the only ones there, smiling and kissing, drawing closer to each other, sharing one seat when there are plenty available. She, twining an arm around his neck, laughing as her dyed red hair veils them and he, gripping her waist to keep her on his lap as the subway jerks to a halt again. Absorbed in each other. In being anonymous and in mattering to no one. Separate from everyone around them. It is how Drina wishes we were. I am envious at the same time as I pity them.

Ferrocarril, Drina says in response to my silence. Like that kind of Spanish word, I mean. And—

She cuts herself off. I assume my dour mood has seeped into my expression and she realizes it much too late.

Before Prague, in the world we're used to where everyone cares and everyone wants to know everything, we have never been so alone. So far from home, it hangs in front of us like the elephant in the room, in the subway car.

I don't look at Drina because I don't want to know if she's seen them, because I know she won't understand. I keep my eyes on this girl, her boyfriend, inventing a ridiculously improbable life for them in my head wherein she never has to listen to him rant about silly, unimportant things, wherein everything is perfect and they're always happy and everyone around them looks at them and can see it. I tell myself this is possible. I know it is not.

Drina tells me it means railroad, softly, as she tugs my arm and I stand, gripping one of the harsh, red rails to steady myself. Even her touch makes me bristle just then, but I follow her anyway.

She tells me now, this morning, after we've been here a week, full of complexity, distance, and the lack thereof, we should ride this until the end of the line. Ride it to the end of the line, to some stop with three haseks in the name. Instead of answering, I stare out the pretend window. It is not comforting at all. We sit in silence through three or four stops and my fingers avoid her hair.

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The fight this escalates into is about something even dumber than linguistic jargon or goaltenders, something that only matters because it's just one more thing, and I storm off the subway mid-sentence and leave her behind. Wordlessly, she lets me go, and I do not look back because if I did, I wouldn't be able to leave. I wonder what her expression is, as she watches me disappear into the crowd of people bustling through the station.

Hours after this silent tantrum, I sit eating cherries like popcorn from a plastic Tesco bag on an intimidatingly large patch of grass down by the Vltava River, fuming and pretending like I'm fine. The expanse of water stretches out before me as far as I can see to either side, dotted with ferries, little rented paddleboats, what look like canoes. I turn my head sideways to spit a pit into the lush grass, feeling the ghosts of Drina's fingers drift through my damaged hair. I know it is really just the Kampa breeze, and I keep pretending.

I drop a cherry. It falls, rolls, to rest near my foot, gleaming and vibrant against the new, still-glowing white of the strap of the sandal.

A littler terrier bounds past, leashless like all the dogs here. It is utterly disinterested in me and even more so in the abandoned cherry, still nesting forlornly near the sandal, but I look up habitually to follow its path. Seconds later, it skitters to a stop, nails clacking on the narrow sidewalk at the feet of the couple I recognize from the subway the other day, the girl with her brilliant hair tied up now, drawn back from a thin, pretty face with dark eyes, sitting on the bench with her legs across her lover's lap, laughing as she drops a hand to the terrier's wet, inquisitive nose.

I roll the cherry between my fingers before I eat it, regardless of where it has been. I have done worse. She has done worse.

I watch them, wrapped up in themselves, her face a mirror of his, and it hits me then and I stand, dropping a last cherry pit which is instantly buried in the grass at my feet.

I leave the bag behind, not yet empty, where it will remain untouched unless a foreigner's pet stumbles on it.

I don't expect to see her when I find my way back to Malostranská, almost as if what I did expect was that she would just stay on the subway, just ride it back and forth and I'd have to play roulette with the trains, the cars. I wouldn't have been surprised if she had. But she's leaning against a heavy pillar, crouched near the ground and resting, sitting, on the wide rail that surrounds it.

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Drina alone, a striking figure in black and white and red against the cool beige backdrop, the sharp greens behind it, this is familiar. I pause to take in the sight for a long moment that I expect to end much sooner than it does. My sandals make light clinking noises on the tiles beneath them when I finally start forward again; me

returning to her. This is familiar, too. But Drina so vulnerable is new and unexpected and I step closer than I meant to before I even realize it, but I don't regret it.

I settle down next to her, stretching my legs out in front of me in the exact impolite way that means everyone near has to walk around me if they want to get closer to the train. Ignoring a trail of Czech obscenities or what might have been Czech obscenities, at least - the first interest a Czech person has taken in me at all, which seems highly appropriate just now - I lift a hand to a dark curl, trailing it through.

She, Drina, turns, looks at me, leans in, a hand sliding through my hair and the whisper of lashes against my cheekbone, the barest of breath and she says, What I hear is that Hasek's all washed up these days, as I curl into her and she wraps her arms around my thin shoulders.

She is right.

I twist to look up, my head in her lap, and I do not see in her what I saw in the girl and her boyfriend because I do not expect to. And the wind blows her hair forward, drags it across my upturned face as the train we should take home but that we will take instead until the line ends pulls away into the darkness of a tunnel that will someday be its tomb.