

VERSION 2

You sit down and begin to read the story. It starts with a fairly unique and provocative line that is meant to both disorient you and stir your interest. As you move on to the third sentence, you begin to realize that this obvious trick has somehow worked. That is a good start. The narration is told from the first person as I begin to describe my surroundings. So, let's see who I am. So far, it appears that I am the main character. Some would consider it a bold opening that is intended to place you, the spectator, in my immediate position. However, it would appear that the author has cast me as a male. So, I suppose that that will only work for roughly 50% of the audience. And, from a quick assessment of what I would call my secondary defining traits (though your hierarchy may be different) it looks that I am white, of some rough non-defined early middle-age, and probably middle class, judging by my dress. So, that probably will limit your ability to immediately empathize with me. But, we really should move on as there is a story to be told and your time is likely limited.

So, let's see where I am. A quick look around reveals to me (and I suppose to you) that I am sitting on a train. The seats are more luxurious than the standard commuter train, full of thick sturdy fabrics of browns and accents of blue. The car is fairly full of a wide range of people. Some families, some business people, some couples of varying ages. Some read books or talk with their companions, if they have companions. There are children staring out the window at the rhythmic flow of fields punctuated with beats of trees and telephone poles. From all of this, I would say that it appears that I am on some long-distance train ride. A journey, of sorts. That certainly sounds exciting.

So, what kind of story do you think I am in? I would think that there should be something popping up soon to let me know that overall genre or general tone. I suspect that you already have a good idea of where this is supposed to be going as you picked it out. I would assume that you at least read a blurb or a review or something that indicated that this would be the sort of thing that you enjoy based on your own preferences. But, don't tell me. That would spoil the surprise for me. And, isn't part of your enjoyment based on watching me get startled by the things that you already predicted?

As, I look around, I notice a woman walking in my general direction between the rows of distracted travelers. There is something. It draws me. No, it captivates me. She's rather tall with dark hair and appears to be close to my own age, if not slightly younger. Outside of a natural sense of beauty, I would not say that there was anything particularly unique about her. Her outfit hints at a sense of style, but appears to be chosen for comfort if not function. So, perhaps it is the way she moves with determination or the internal focus on her face, unaware of the other passengers and even of my own staring. But, as I can not quite put my finger on what it is that has pulled my vision like a magnet, I will simply have to leave the rest of her appearance to your own imagination.

She walks about halfway down the length of the train car and turns to slide into her seat. From my seat in the back, I try to see if she is sitting with someone, but the backs of the chairs are too large and block my view.

I decide to focus back on my own story. There is a brown folder on my lap. After further examination of my surroundings, I believe I can assume that it came from the shoulder bag that is leaning up against my

feet. I open the folder and begin to flip through the pages. The first one is a letter from Ellen Hemmings, Editor in Chief. I quickly surmise that she is my employer. It would seem that I am a journalist and that I am on an assignment. I flip through the rest of the pages and it all becomes clear. I have been sent to a small town in the Northwest to interview a somewhat famously reclusive film director named Gregory Bulloc.

But, where is that brunette?

I shift in my seat, trying to get a better angle to see around the seat backs that block my view of her. There is a man sitting across from her, but he appears lost in his newspaper. And, I can not tell if there are any occupants in the adjacent seats.

The train will be reaching my station soon. If I am to do anything, I am running out of time.

Either out of panic or bravery, I decide that get up and begin walking down the aisle of the moving train. The floor of the train sways beneath my feet as I struggle to keep my balance. I must be graceful. As I move slowly towards her section of the train, a thick looking man in rumpled work clothes is revealed in the seat next to the man with the newspaper. The odds of my gambit decrease. I continue on, hoping that there may still be an empty seat next to her.

This walk is taking forever.

I can begin to see her crossed legs cutting out from behind the arms of the seat. Sharply tailored pants that swing out into a subtle bell just above her ankle and stylishly restrained by still apparently fashionable short black heels.

And I hit the threshold. She is looking down at her tablet, skimming through some news report. Her dark hair obscures her face. But I can see the sharp angle of her jaw and her wide lips with a hint of a smile as she reads through whatever story is in front of her.

I move up, trying to focus on my balance as the train floor continues to bounce underneath me.

I pause briefly next to her. My motion stirs her and she looks up at me. Blankly. I feint a non-challant smile. She remains gazing at me emptily for a moment and turns her attention to better things.

And then I notice the elderly woman sitting beside her staring out the window at the passing trees.

I hide my failure as best as I can. There is no turning back now. And, unfortunately, there are no empty seats in front of me. So, I can only try to save some dignity and continue forward. I reach the end of the car and stand before the exit door, pretending that I am preparing for the next stop. With much discomfort, I realize that there is at least ten more minutes before we reach the destination and I have no choice but to stand there and pretend that this was my intention all along.

What a terrible start to this story. I don't like this at all.

Let's go back and try again.

I shift in my seat, trying to get a better angle to see around the seat backs that block my view of her. There is a man sitting across from her, but he appears lost in his newspaper. And, I can not tell if there are any occupants in the adjacent seats.

The train will be reaching my station soon. If I am to do anything, I am running out of time.

Either out of panic or bravery, I decide that get up and begin walking down the aisle of the moving train. I calmly pack up the Bulloc folder and slip it into my shoulder bag. I stand up smoothly and proceed up to her section.

As I approach, I can see that the seat next to the man with the newspaper is empty. Things are already improved.

I can begin to see her crossed legs cutting out from behind the arms of the seat. Sharply tailored pants that swing out into a subtle bell just above her ankle and stylishly restrained by still apparently fashionable short black heels.

And I hit the threshold. She is looking down at her tablet, skimming through some news report. Her dark hair obscures her face. But I can see the sharp angle of her jaw and her wide lips with a hint of a smile as she reads through whatever story is in front of her.

My motion stirs her and she looks up at me and smiles. I notice the vacant seat next to her and smile back.

“Would you mind?” I ask, motioning to the seat next to her with my chin.

“No, of course,” she responds and begins to collect her things and move into the seat next to her, allowing me to sit in the aisle seat. It’s a very courteous gesture.

In my periphery, I notice the man with the paper look up, but I keep my attention on her.

“Thank you so much,” I say as I swing into the now vacant seat.

There is a brief period of silence where I pull out my folder and pretend to review the notes for my assignment. But, really, I am glancing at her out of the side of my eyes as she has returned her attention back to her tablet. Try as I might, I can’t quite make out what she is reading.

Once I feel like a suitable amount of time has passed, I make an awkward interruption. She responds. Then there is a slightly more fluid transition into a conversation. Details aren’t really important here. Admittedly, I can tell that this isn’t going particularly smoothly. But it is going. And that’s what matters.

After a bit of small chatter about what she is reading, I begin to tell her about my curious return to the home of my childhood.

She says that she has lived there since graduating college. She mentions that she works in a restaurant near the train station. I don’t recognize the name and assume that it must be a new establishment.

But overall the banter moves smoothly and there are laughs and flips of the hair that are supposed to be one of those telltale signs and I am quite pleased with the way things are progressing.

In what may be a blatant attempt to impress her, I stumble into telling her about my writing assignment. At the mention of Bulloc's name, I notice out the corner of my eye that the man sitting across from us is no longer reading his newspaper. Oh, he is pretending to. But it's been several minutes since he turned a page. And his eyes are not moving in the typical left-right lines but instead are staying on a single spot on the paper. Very odd, don't you think?

But, this doesn't seem important now. I have a conversation to focus on.

The train is pulling into the station now. And, I can feel that moment of decision pressing against me. I try to turn the conversation to an acceptable closing. But, we seem to have digressed into something about some recent environmental legislature that has passed and how it's going to affect the mating patterns of local finches or something like that. How did we end up here? And, more importantly, how do I transition to getting a phone number or an email address? The announcer's voice bellows out the next stop. Our final point. The inevitable end of this conversation. My heart begins to race. I think my palms may even be sweating a bit. But she's still going on about these orioles or finches or migrant workers or whatever. Migrant workers? How did that come up?

The train has stopped.

"Oh," she says. "I guess were here." And she begins to pack up her stuff.

I'm lost. I try to nonchalantly put away my own things as my mind runs through stratagems and segues.

"Well," she says, "I'll be working at the restaurant until 9PM. If you want to grab dinner later tonight, why don't you swing by the restaurant." And with that, she bounces out of the train.

I'm not sure how that happened. But it did. And I am now quite pleased. So much so, that I almost forget to leave the train myself.