

2:26

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Josie decides that she isn't going to start worrying about how long she's been on the train until 2:30. She had gotten on at 1:22 a.m. exactly, surprisingly punctual for The Rapid, and it should've only taken about 40 minutes to reach 79th Street. It's currently 2:24. But hey, sometimes trains are slow, or maybe there was some maintenance or something. To be honest she doesn't really know how trains are supposed to work, but maybe sometimes they just go slower to save gas, or something. There is no way she could've gotten on the wrong train, the Red Line started and ended at the airport. But no, she isn't freaking out because this is the way she comes home every day and she is going to make it back to her shitty apartment like she also does every day.

It hadn't even been that bad of a shift today. Working as a janitor at an airport wasn't really her favorite part of life, but no one had thrown up in her area of the terminal and the usual hyperactive children seemed quieter than normal. Now though, at the end of the day, everything was catching up. Her back hurt, her hands were chapped from the cleaning solution and her shitty bra was poking into her side, the wire starting to break free. She just wants this godforsaken train to get to her stop so she can go back to ignoring the cockroaches in her floorboards till her shift tomorrow.

As she sinks deeper into her seat, her eyes drift around the train car. The ads plastered to the walls are vibrant, almost sickeningly so, and contrast with the dingy gun-metal of her surroundings.

"Do You Feel Stuck?" A grimacing woman looms from an orange background, holding some kind of self help book in her hand.

"Do You Want To Meet New People?" A blindingly happy couple clutch at each other, their teeth like bone-white tombstones.

"Were You In A Train Related Accident? Call Johnson & Gray Law Firm Today!" A man in a poorly fitted suit gives Josie a violent thumbs up, as if wishing her a very happy train accident. Josie has never really cared for the ads in the train, but this late at night they seem menacing rather than simply annoying.

Has the train always been this empty?

She could've sworn there had been other people getting into the car with her. Late night fliers or employees like herself. But now, as she looks around, she's the only one here. The sudden realization of her loneliness sends a shiver up her already aching spine. But it isn't 2:30 yet, so she isn't worried. The train is just going slower than usual.

Looking out the window, Josie rests her head against the cold metal of the sill. Outside the landscape zips past, the moon glinting off snowy buildings, creating an almost ethereal effect on the otherwise dull view. The stars shine bright, little pinpricks in the sky that reflect off the dark waters of the lake. As the train moves it rattles her head and blurs her vision, but that's better than having to keep her neck up for however many more minutes she's going to be here.

Several minutes later, when she checks her phone again, it's still 2:24. It shouldn't be, logically, but glancing again at the cracked screen, Josie is faced with the undeniable truth. Either her admittedly old phone has finally broken, or it is still 2:24. It's not 2:30 yet, so Josie is still calm, is still completely in control. She quickly enters in her passcode and swipes to the settings. She knows she can change the time manually somewhere in there, and hopes that this is all it will take. The Date & Time tab sits quietly in the general settings where Josie goes to turn off the Set Automatically switch. Pressing on the little Cleveland she types in 2:25, but before she even gets to the end of the time her phone shuts off. Josie is left staring at the blackened screen, her own confused face grimacing back.

"Hey, Siri," she says, pressing the home button, "set an alarm for 2:25 a.m."

"2:25."

The voice comes out of nowhere, quiet and hissing, like steam from her mother's crockpot. Josie shoots up, phone still clutched in her white knuckled grip.

"Hello?" Her voice is shaky and uncertain in the rumbling air of the train car.

"2:25."

The voice sounds like it's behind her now, louder, more real. She isn't freaking out, she isn't, she isn't she isn't she is not freaking out. She can feel something behind her, she can feel a gaze on her back. The prickle of awareness drifts around the nape of her neck, raising the short hairs that have escaped her tight bun.

She doesn't want to turn around. That would make it real. She didn't think there was anyone on the train but now images flash through her head. Women like her, broken and abandoned, left to freeze in the backroads of the world. She doesn't have a lot of people to miss her and she

wonders if the person in the seat behind her can tell.

“2:25.”

Again, those same numbers repeated. Josie grasps sideways, towards her bag that rests on the seat next to her. She has no illusions that she’ll be able to get her pepper spray out from the pocket, but at least she’ll have something to hit an attacker with if push came to shove.

“2:25, 2:25, 2:25.”

And something brushes her shoulder. Josie whips around, swinging her bulky tote bag, heavy with her salvaged laptop, and hits nothing.

There’s no one there, just rows of grungy metro seats and a shadow. Or not quite a shadow, it’s too defined, too physical. Sitting behind the seat where her bag used to lie, it almost looks like a woman. Dark strands of shadow make long hair, and if Josie squints she can parse the shape of a nose, a rounded jaw, and gently sloping eyebrows. But that’s where any similarities end. Its eyes are dark, hollow and pupiless, its mouth is one long slit across its face, and its body is a formless thing, the shade that makes it up constantly shifting.

“Oh dear fucking lord,” Josie gasps, the hand holding her bag now pressed to her racing chest, “What the hell are you?”

“2:25,” the thing whispers, its slit-mouth gaping slightly as the words pass through its non-existent lips.

“Yeah, not very helpful.”

As she stares at the thing, and it stares back, her racing heart begins to slow. It isn’t moving, just undulating in place, and it didn’t react at all to her tote bag going right through its shadowy head. It just sits, and stares unblinkingly forward.

“So,” Josie says, trying to adopt a joking tone, “is this the moment you kill me, for like not being a virgin or something? Cause if that’s the case I could name some better reasons to do it. Virginity is such a dated concept anyways.”

“2:25,” it hisses back, still very unhelpful.

“Ok, so I’m going to take that as a no?”

At this point Josie is just lost. Her initial panic, first at the voice, then at the thing itself, has mostly faded, leaving behind just a sense of confusion. She is still on the train and it’s still 2:24 and she doesn’t know what to do about it.

“Ok!” She exclaims, standing up, “I’m going to figure out what the fuck is happening, you stay right there.”

The shadow doesn’t acknowledge her, just continues to exist quietly. Josie begins to back up slowly towards the door separating the front of her train car from the back of the next one. She doesn’t really want to turn her back to the thing, afraid that the moment she lets her guard down it’ll snap. So she faces it even as her back hits the cold metal and glass of the door.

“Ok,” she starts, addressing the shadow. “I’m going to turn around and look out the window, I need you not to attack me or like, to start whispering creepily or anything like that. Because this night is weird enough as is and I don’t feel like fending off a ghost attack.”

She gives the thing a thumbs up, as if it’ll respond any differently than it has before. It continues to stare, which she decides to take as a positive sign. With one last glance she turns around to the door.

Outside there is nothing.

No train car in front of them, no tracks on the ground, no snowy Cleveland streets. Just a void. Just shadow.

Josie isn’t going to freak out. She isn’t going to cry. She is not going to scream in frustration or anger or anything. Instead she is going to quietly sink to the ground and put her head between her knees. It seems about as productive as anything else she could do.

“2:25.”

The shadow had gotten up. It’s leaning its face against the pane of the window by the seat and seems to be looking out, almost longingly. Josie scrambles up from her crouched position and stumbles over to the window. The view is about the same as the one out of the door. Nothing familiar, just miles of inky blackness. Josie has never loved her home, Ohio isn’t a particularly interesting place and Cleveland is simply Cleveland. But at this moment, she would give anything to see the moon over Lake Erie.

Next to her sits the shadow, the two of them separated only by the rigid backs of the subway seats. The shade that makes up its lower body is formed like a pair of kneeling legs. Its face is pressed against the window and shadowy limbs reach up and seem to claw at the glass. The darkness of that face doesn’t seem to really make clear expressions but it looks frightened, almost desperate. To escape perhaps? Is this shadow stuck here as well?

“Please,” Josie begs it, “do you know what’s happening? Do you know why I am here? I’m just a fucking janitor, I don’t know what to do!”

“2:25”

“God fucking damnit, that isn’t helpful!”

She’s crying now, tears trailing down her cheeks, staring at the thing that’s probably trapped here with her. It doesn’t move from its position, pawing slowly at the window pane, and pressing its blank face against the glass. Josie tries to touch it, to shake it, to force it to notice her, but

her hand passes right through the shadowy form.

And then it's moving again, pushing itself off the window and stumbling, almost human-like, towards the doors on the other side of the train. It hits them hard, and tries to shove them open, wedging shadowy fingers into the cracks. It's useless, even if the door gets opened there's nothing out there now.

The thing has started sinking down, the impression of its forehead pressed to the door as it kneels on the ground. It still hasn't acknowledged her.

Then she blinks and it's gone. She swivels her head frantically, only to stop abruptly when her gaze lands on the shadow again. It's sitting in the seat behind her, staring straight ahead, as if it never moved in the first place.

"2:25," it hisses. "2:25."

"What the hell?"

"2:25."

"No, shut up. What the actual hell?"

"2:25, 2:25, 2:25."

It reaches out its hand to touch the back of the seat. Josie remembers a brush against her shoulder, a gaze on her neck. The thing has returned exactly to where it was when it first appeared. Like a song on repeat, like a never ending story. It strikes her suddenly that she may not be getting off this train. That the shadow before her had probably never gotten off of the train. That a lot of people have gotten onto the Red Line and have simply disappeared. Shadows forgotten in the a.m. hours, left behind by the bustle of the rest of the world.

At Josie's elementary school there had been a yearly assembly about danger and the police. She doesn't remember what the speaker looked like, but she remembers the humidity of a couple hundred kids shoved into the school gymnasium, can feel the cool polyurethane on her calves and the press of her light up sketchers against her leg.

"A lot of people disappear," the speaker had said, "but not a lot get found"

How many had disappeared here? How many had never been found? Her life feels like a ticking time bomb. The shadow, the woman, had started moving again, clawing at the windows. When she had existed was there a shadow acting out its final minutes, like a death march. Josie doesn't want to disappear, she doesn't want to become a shadow. She wants to save up enough money to go to college, or at least to afford a better apartment. She wants to have kids, she wants to grow old, she doesn't want to die on a train, with only a shadow to keep her company.

"Please," she says again, "isn't there anything I can do?"

"2:25."

The woman seems to respond to Josie, in a way. She may not be able to speak but maybe she can hear her, maybe they can figure something out.

"Is there a way out of this?" Josie asks, "Say 2:25 if there is and uh, don't do anything if there isn't." There is a moment of silence, where Josie can feel her final hopes crumbling, like a seaside cliff worn by the wind.

"2:25."

"Oh thank fuck, you really scared me for a second."

"2:25, 2:25."

And then the shadow is flinging herself up again, towards the door. It's tragic to watch, knowing that once upon a time this woman had desperately tried to free herself and had failed. But Josie won't be this woman. There is a way out of here and she will find it or, quite literally, die trying.

She takes a second to reach into her pocket for her phone. It's 2:24. She presses in her passcode and scrolls to her contacts. It didn't work earlier and it isn't going to work now, but Josie would feel like an idiot if she didn't at least try. Pressing on her mom's number she holds the phone up to her ears. Maybe if she closes her eyes it'll feel like a normal day, calling her mom in the early morning to let her know she got home safe. A drowsy greeting, a quiet goodbye. But the phone isn't even ringing. Looking at the screen again it's as if she never even turned it on. All she sees is her lockscreen photo and the white numbers 2:24. It wasn't going to work but the confirmation still hurts.

The shadow is beside her again, sitting in the seat. Josie takes a minute just to observe her. Her body is still mostly just a blob of void, but Josie can almost make out hands in her lap, crossed legs, slumped shoulders. Her dark hair grows long over her shoulders. She could be anyone. She might've been a traveler from the airport, just in Cleveland for a day. Maybe she even passed by Josie while she worked, two people who had nothing in common. Someone who just had somewhere to be, then was nowhere at all.

"You said that there's a way out of here, but what is it? How can I get off?" Josie says this, but doesn't expect a reply.

"2:25."

"Yeah you've said that a couple times."

"2:25."

Josie knows this is all she's going to get, she knows. But it's so frustrating, like trying to scratch an itch on your back, out of reach until you can get a friend to help. Sitting here begging a dead woman for help isn't doing anything, it's time to get to work.

She starts by checking the windows. The ones on these trains barely worked on good days, but she has to try. The first one rattles promisingly, but doesn't budge any further, the second one doesn't even move, but once she gets to the third, after a bit of a struggle, it cracks open.

"Yes!" She exclaims, "That's progress!"

But now looking outside she can see the void, previously a solid black, is roiling, pressing close to the window. A little tendril of midnight slips through the crack she made and brushes the back of her hand. Suddenly she hears a song a few seats in front of her.

"I've been ghosting," it plays quietly, "I've been ghosting along."

It's the alarm she set earlier. The time is 2:25.

It's 2:25 and Josie's body is disintegrating. She falls off the seat away from the window, her legs no longer able to hold her weight. Her shadowy hands grasp at her face, but pass through her skin.

"No, no, no, no no no nononono-." Her voice cuts off abruptly, leaving only a hissing noise behind.

"2:26," she croaks involuntarily, with words no longer hers. "2:26, 2:26, 2:26," her mind is fogging, filled with shadow and smoke.

"2:26, 2:26, 2:26."

The Red Line stops at E. 79th Street Station. No one gets off.