

THE VEILSIDE EXPRESS

BY EMMA STERLING

EVALIE boarded the train as the first inky dregs of midnight cascaded over the hills, hefting a sticker-smothered suitcase behind her.

Mist strangled the station outside. Through the train's smudged windows, she watched fog entwine itself between the benches and billow over the edges of the platform. Once the train's organs thrummed to life, the haze began to drift backwards. Gravity shoved her, sending her shuffling for balance, and her lungs hitched as distance consumed the station.

Dizzily, she stumbled forward. A long fleur-de-lis carpet led her down the aisle, where rows of burgundy-upholstered seats observed her from all angles. The quiet cadence of jazz music mingled with the train's chugging. Trunks and valises occupied several of the shelves above the seats, but Evalie

traipsed on for nearly a minute before any passengers appeared.

"You look awfully young to ride alone," crowed a dusty voice.

Evalie stopped to see an elderly woman studying her from one of the seats, clutching a pocketbook in her wizened hands. More faces slowly emerged from the rows ahead; in perfect sync, heads peeked out from between the rows to bare dozens of staring eyes.

"Um... I didn't know there was an age limit."

"Unfortunately, there isn't," the woman mused. Her gaze wandered to Evalie's suitcase. "You'll want to stow that. A long journey awaits you. Hopefully it is a pleasant one."

"Thanks. Same to you."

Evalie walked on, bowing her head to avoid the ogling of the other passengers. Their eyes followed her down the aisle

and burrowed into her skin like maggots.

A vacant row waited near the back. She hoisted her luggage into the corresponding shelf, willing her trembling muscles to steady. The faint funk of mildew puffed up from the cushion when she sank down—a sensory remnant of many years and many passengers. Evalie turned to the window, where tides of fog ebbed and flowed past the glass. Keys jingled in the distance.

“Welcome to the Veilside Express. Toll, please.”

Evalie jolted from her reverie and glanced up at the figure looming in the aisle. A double-breasted black jacket covered the stranger’s waistcoat and blouse, and a conductor’s hat perched atop her sleek bun. Beside her keyring, a pocketwatch etched with a scarlet rose hung from the belt loop of her slacks. The badge at her lapel identified her as Karen. Dark, shrewd eyes glinted through her wire pince-nez, fixing Evalie to the seat like a pinned butterfly.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I—”

“You do,” Karen replied in a stable alto, tapping one black pump. “Check.”

Hesitantly, Evalie reached into the pocket of her faded jeans, then flinched away from the cold twinge of metal against her fingertips. She withdrew her hand to find it cupping a bronze token. ‘Veilside Express’ curled in delicate script around the star-shaped hole in the center.

“Voila,” said Karen. She reached for the token, her crimson nails glinting. Before she could collect it, however, Evalie’s fist snapped shut in sudden panic.

“Wait. I swear I don’t know how I got this, but... I think I’m on the wrong train.”

“This is the only train headed this direction.”

Evalie sighed shakily, trying to regain her paling

composure. “Which direction?”

“Don’t worry.” Karen flashed a gentle smile—the kind reserved for apologies and funerals. “If you have a token, then you’re in the right place.”

“But I... I don’t know where I am.”

“We’re approaching our next station shortly. Please remain seated and try to stay calm. In time, I promise the Express will take you where you need to go.” Karen took advantage of Evalie’s loosening fingers to slide the token out of her hand and slip it into her own breast pocket. With one last nod of encouragement, she brushed past Evalie and strode out of view down the aisle.

Evalie wiped her clammy palms against her thighs. What began as a gnawing pit in her stomach had imploded into a quasar, dragging everything else inward. Her stiff posture collapsed into a slouch, and her arms crossed over her chest as if a straitjacket replaced the sweatshirt she had boarded in.

Her eyes wandered to the window, searching every scratch and streak for hidden meaning. Her surroundings sharpened and crescendoed but offered no answers.

Finally, the train ground to a halt. The door at the end of the car skidded open, and several passengers rose and shuffled into the aisle. Among them, Evalie spotted the old woman she’d spoken with striding towards the door with empty hands and a sudden youthful energy.

“Ma’am,” Evalie called unsteadily, “I think you forgot your pocketbook.”

The woman stopped to face her with a thin-lipped smile. “Yes, it’s gone. Fortunately, I no longer need it. Safe travels, dear.”

Evalie watched, toying with the drawstrings of her sweatshirt, as the woman turned and resumed her path to the door. A billowing, foggy abyss awaited each passenger who filed out. The old woman exited last, her silhouette dwindling into

the gloom like a lost spirit.

The train hesitated for only a moment before jolting awake once more and closing its doors. Accelerating in seconds, it dove further into the haze with renewed speed.

“We now approach the tunnel,” Karen’s voice crackled over the speaker.

As if resurrected, Evalie’s surroundings flurried into motion. Whispers fluttered about in a swelling buzz of excited voices. Passengers swarmed to the edges of the car. They converged at the windows, squinting and craning their necks and pressing their palms to the cold glass. Evalie frowned and glanced out her own window. Rows of aged bricks blurred past in place of fog, soon giving way to darkness. Her reflection gawked at her from the windowpane, illuminated only by the warm lamplight from inside the train.

The cabin’s pressure shifted in the close embrace of the tunnel. Only a faint pop against her eardrums clued her in.

Crispened by the adjustment, the passengers’ murmurs merged with the train’s urgent clanking. Anticipation snaked its fingers around Evalie’s heart and wrung out every drop of blood. A hush seized the waiting group.

The bricks fell away.

A vast black sky swallowed the train whole, yawning on beyond every window—so infinite that it bypassed her eyes and echoed straight into her soul. Millions of tiny glimmers clamored to emerge from the inkwell darkness. Their starlight washed over her from somewhere past reach, past clarity, and even past comprehension.

The train’s pace suddenly smoothed. Evalie peered down to see each wheel gradually lifting from the track, spinning endlessly in the open expanse. A great groan rose and diminished as the train stabilized. It soared until starry skies surrounded the car in all directions. Sublime wonder melted every trace of tension from Evalie’s muscles. Fog encroached on the borders of her peripheral vision; a brief pang of alarm struck

before she realized it was only the condensation of her breath.

Voices gradually broke through her trance to filter into her ears. Giggles and sobs flowed into one fluid sound. Tender whispers joined with venomous shouts. The stars sang their dreams and fears and joys and sorrows in a timeless chorus. She brought her trembling fingertips to the glass and felt it vibrate to the same frequency that thrummed through her veins.

“Do you understand now?”

She turned to face Karen, who stood patiently in the aisle. Melancholy rippled through Evalie when she lost sight of the stars.

“I think so,” she replied.

“Simply step off at any station when you’re ready,” Karen continued. “Most passengers choose to wait until their baggage has been resolved, but there is no time limit. The Express can accommodate you for as long as you wish.”

“Has anyone ever stayed forever?”

“It’s impossible to tell. Countless passengers have come and gone since the beginning, but several still remain from times long past.” Stars played over the surface of Karen’s glasses, whizzing by in a blur of golden lights. “It’s just that we haven’t reached forever yet. Until then, your guess is as good as mine.”

Evalie focused on the carpet at her feet, then the aisle. Most of the other passengers had settled back into their seats, gazing out the windows in content tranquility.

“I still had things to do,” said Evalie.

Karen nodded. “Baggage. Hardly anyone boards without it. Some stow it away and others rest it on their laps. Eventually, they all realize that it no longer weighs as heavily on them.”

“But how?”

“I would say time heals most wounds, but I’ve been told

that's a cliché." Her coal-black eyes twinkled. "Forgive me. I haven't left this train since before it was a train."

"What came before the train?"

"Believe it or not, a beautiful horse-drawn carriage," said Karen. "And even before that, a rowboat. Maybe in a few years, it'll be a jet or a warp-speed spaceship or a teleportation device. The Express has always been here and always will be, in one form or another."

Evalie tugged at a loose thread on her sleeve. "I haven't seen it until now."

"Well, that's not quite true. Haven't you ever stepped outside in the evening? Glanced up at the sky, just to see what stares back at you? Convinced yourself a shooting star threw you a wink from all the way out there?" She paused, lips settling into a pensive smile. "You saw it all along. You just didn't know what you were looking at yet."

Karen's eyes drifted to the window. Evalie followed her gaze. She let her hands fall to her sides, steady at last.

A new deluge of information flooded her heart with every beat. She imagined unlatching each chamber like a suitcase compartment and drawing out its contents. Rage flowed from her veins in abundance, as if eager to escape the cramped confines of her body. She extracted reluctance from her psyche with slightly more difficulty. Relief concealed itself behind the others, but failed to mask its true face.

Last of all, she recognized the shadowy form of regret. It twinged like an exposed nerve when she approached it—a tumor clinging to her ribs and dulling her pulse.

"So..." Evalie forced out her remaining words as tears prickled behind her eyes. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Eons." The conductor laughed to herself, straightening her pince-nez on the bridge of her nose. "The name on my badge isn't exactly right, but most recent passengers

understand it. They almost had it a long time ago... somewhere in Greece, I believe. I admit it's been so long that I've forgotten my true name."

"I'm sorry."

Evalie closed her eyes, letting the train's hum swirl around her. She breathed in the faint scent of cedar and felt her lungs hitch.

"Do you think anyone will miss me?" she blurted before she could check the impulse.

"Why, certainly," said Karen. "It's difficult not to be missed. Loved ones. Those you once saw every day, even if you never spoke with them. The air around you, the atoms that once shifted to accommodate your presence. They all mourn."

Evalie's eyes peeked open. "The atoms mourn?"

"Of course. Haven't you ever felt it—a stillness, a

heaviness, like an electrical charge shifting against your skin? Like the world is keeping a secret from you?"

"I guess so."

"Then how could you ever doubt that you will be missed?"

Evalie fidgeted in her seat.

"I don't mean to embarrass you," Karen went on. "It's just that many others have sat where you are now, believing nobody will notice their absence."

Outside the window, the stars faded into bricks once more. The car jolted, rattling Evalie in her seat. Metal rasped against metal. The tracks, ever reliable, reappeared.

"That's touchdown," said Karen, readjusting her hat. "Unfortunately, I'm needed elsewhere. We could be welcoming some new arrivals shortly."

“Thank you.”

“Of course. That’s why I’m here.”

Karen turned to tread back down the aisle. Her golden pocketwatch chain swung beside her hip, catching the light in short glints. Evalie absorbed the watch’s sound for the first time—a staccato ticking that slowly faded into the background along with the conductor.

Fog rushed past the windows as it had when she first boarded. Evalie tore herself away before it could entrance her again. Instead, she pulled herself to stand, resisting the drag of gravity, and stretched her stiff limbs. She hadn’t noticed the numbness in her toes and fingertips until blood rushed back into each extremity.

Her eyes meandered to the spot above her seat.

In place of the bulky suitcase she’d lugged on alongside her, a smaller duffel bag waited on the shelf. She surveyed the

scuffed canvas, the cracked leather handles, and the familiar collaged constellation of stickers plastered across its surface.

The train uttered a single whistle, parting the fog with the first echoes of hope.