

The Affair

by Robert Duffer

One: The Commute

She had to be somewhere. She was always in the first car, the first train car, and she always stood out. Lyle peered down the tracks to the herds huffing on the platform. The other women, bunched like birds on the yellow line, dared to poke out of scarves and collars to exchange unpleasantries about work and the weather. And the men bundled in their drab bulky long-coats, close but never touching, their big bushy heads and their woolen faces issuing steam, like upright buffaloes stomping their galoshed hooves. Where was his light in the gray, his snow queen in a sea of salt?

A horn sounded from downtown, the 6:13; would she meet her lover on a different car?

“Hey. Hey, Buddy. Hello?” Lyle’s sleeve was tugged. Then a man nudged him. It was Blue Tooth guy, who talked loud and sipped coffee louder. He pointed up. The gate was coming down.

“Oh,” Lyle said, stepping forward. Everyone had been a bit more vigilant, a bit more in your business, since last week, when a woman signed the cross and jumped in front of the express train three stations to the west. The three-hour delays upset everyone’s day. The officer assigned to this station to issue \$200 citations to any late-running gate breakers had yet to emerge from the station house. Not in this cold.

Lyle peered down to where the tracks tapered into a single

line, a blue yellow flame lighting the range of downtown. The outbound train pulled in on the far track and expelled a shambling of passengers, birds and buffaloes enfeebled by winter, then chuffed off.

Then he saw her, emerging from a salt-stained hybrid cross-over at the drop-off area on the other side of the tracks. So she didn't just appear; beautiful people came from somewhere, too. She wore a beanie cap, North Face, snow white. A short ponytail of orange hair stuck out, like the twisted end of a piece of hard candy. Lyle imagined unwrapping it, one tug and her ponytail, her hat, the belt on her wool jacket—all would be revealed, shiny and sweet, ready to be sucked.

She was smiling, now laughing, her pale cheeks flush with color. Set her Dunkin Donuts coffee on the roof. A Ford Escape. She seemed more like a Lexus, dissatisfied, one promotion away from an Audi.

She leaned inside the car, for what? Not a kiss, but it had to be. How she lingered. Lyle couldn't make out the driver due to the gray glare on the windshield. You don't kiss your brother goodbye, even your gay roommate; not like that. It all made sense now. No wonder they seemed so stupidly happy, her and her lover, kissing and holding hands on the train, leaning into each other and laughing on their walk into their building, holding hands over the river. She wasn't just in love; she was in love with someone who wasn't her husband.

"Hey Buddy." It was the short guy in the earmuffs. His black hair seemed frozen with brush marks, the earmuffs part of the ionic sculpture of his head.

"C'mon, give me an inch," the earmuffs said. Lyle stopped leaning forward. He resisted the impulse to nudge the earmuffs ever so slightly just to see how it messed him up.

She clipped up to the platform then stood, her arms crossed, facing the direction where the train would come, one leg out like a sundial creating a protective circle around her. Her profile was striking. Her jawline sharp and curved as a spade, banded together by mandible muscles that contrasted the more refined femininity of the rest of her features, the small pointy nose, the raised cheekbones, the clean aqua eyes. Her lineage was on display in her countenance: strong, proud, aristocratic. Well bred. Her handsome jaw would be something to rebel against in high school, blaming her parents in bitchy outbursts, a pronounced jawbone instead of pronounced breasts—I hate you! only to cling to it in college as a mark of distinction, and later, one that boardwalk caricaturists exaggerated and patient lovers kissed, an asset in romance as much as at work where she could be aggressive despite her beauty, her jaw busting through the glass ceiling.

The horn sounded, its cyclopean headlight roving the gray black dawn, its massive body spewing white fire from its sides. It still excited him, the approach of the train in all its might and momentum, how you could be transported someplace new, someplace different, some where not here.

She stomped her boots again, as if to hurry the train, and nuzzled into the scarf and collar of her long coat. Lyle bumped earmuff boy out of the way to queue up behind her. She wasn't as special now...she was an adulterer, a cuckold, an affairer. No. An Affairer. She was an Affairer.

As he followed her legs up the steps to the train, her black Gucci boots with the small gold buckle, a boot shaped to the calf with an improbable heel and an even more improbable cleanliness to them, an impulse struck Lyle: smack her ass. Not even smack, just wedge his hand hard and swift between her pinstriped thighs, give her a little pop, watch her flush. In high school you could

drive the wedge in a girl, wink, and she'd hate you to her friends even as she accepted your invite that night to make out wherever they used to makeout. But that was other guys, never Lyle, and never now.

He continued through the vestibule into the pee car with the bathroom. Not his car of choice but she was set on her routine. Mattie loved the fore care, too, begging to be held up to the front window so he could watch the city suck up the steel licorice rails.

Lyle ascended the stairs to the single seats on the second level, following her sno-cap beanie as it glided down the aisle to her seat, always third seat from the front, always placing her bag on the outside for her man.

He folded his newspaper in his lap, and watched her beyond the headline and down through the luggage rack. How had he not noticed the driver before? Or the wedding ring, which was now being dropped into her purse in the same motion that she took out her cosmetic bag.

The train started moving and she started fixing her face. Hat off, twisting her candy wrapper ponytail and smoothing her sunburst hair, then making taut the loose lines in the forehead, the subtle sags around the eyes. Then the eyebrows exaggerated with a point, the eyelids stretched and dabbed, the mascara faded lighter at the corners, the entire application an art of subterfuge.

The Affairess, that faker, clicked shut her compact and adjusted in her seat. The women three seats behind smirked at each other and rolled their eyes, the older one whispering something that caused her pregnant friend to laugh. Her affair was no secret, Lyle noticed. He thought they snickered at her guy because he was so ridiculous looking, but no, it was because they knew she was having an affair. They probably thought he was handsome. How could she do it? She laughed with the guy in the car, kissed him,

there was love there. How could she enjoy him and another? How could Lyle be loved like that, not to the world but to his wife, who very soon could be treating him with the same cold indifference as all of the other Hey Buddys in the world. “Hey buddy, we lost our house because of you.” “Hey buddy, you lied.” “Hey buddy, you failed at being a man.”

She was onto her last step, the vigorous and thorough rubbing of the hand lotion. Could smell it up here. Peach. Or vanilla? He had to find out what kind so he could buy a bottle for Shelly. Valentine’s Day, maybe.

“Good morning, passengers, it is the changing of the card,” the conductor said, striding in from the vestibule. He went to the front of the car and worked his way back, starting up top. He looked at Lyle, nodded, but did not punch his ticket. It had happened before, and Lyle figured he looked like any one else, and if you look like anyone else then you look like no one. No matter. Lyle would take a free ride. “February tickets, it is February, longest month of the year for Chicagoans.”

A woman, part of a group of four who faced two seats and rode together everyday, who passed around a thermos of coffee and a tin of biscotti, held the tray up to the conductor, who took one with a wink, and held it like a cigar. With this prop and his mustache, his conductor cap and his colloquialisms, he had become a Marx brother.

“After today January tickets will be railroad memorabilia, give em to your kids, give em to the trash, just don’t give em to me. February tickets, please.”

February did make her stir crazy. Where would Gary take her for their marriage maintenance weekend? He’d prefer his family’s cabin in the woods but she needed some sun. Maybe she could suggest an island, someplace warmer for sometime longer, find out

when Stephen's kids had spring break, then he could go with his family, she could go with Gary, then they could slip away in the hotel's fitness center or rendezvous on a grocery store run or a little morning sex walk on the beach.

Terrible thoughts. Thoughts of Stephen were her little pieces of chocolate. Too much and you'd get fat. But she'd be nearing his slice of suburban heaven soon, so she could have one little piece. There was the steeple over the canopy of elms, then the two block walk southwest to his house, the long porch with a rocker and a porch swing, the evergreen-colored shutters on the ash-colored siding—she hated that his house was cute, though it was not without room for improvement: that black shade in the uppermost window—which daughter lived up there, did he have a little goth running amuk? She could never ask, because he could never know that she had dragged her husband to her lover's neighborhood under the pretense of some famous hot dog joint. Gary had loved it, too, saying to strangers in line, "Wife's idea to come here and she hates hot dogs," and the human wieners responding, "That's love there." Then they drove around the neighborhood because it looked pretty and you never know, Gary, someday you may want to live more than five blocks away from your parents.

Can't believe she did that. To Gary and to Stephen. Stalking and deceiving in one trip of whimsy. It was the anticipation of seeing Stephen, of spending Thursdays with him, that caused this greed of affection in her. Her cravings. And it was this greed that'd ruin things, no matter her rules.

They'd meet again for a late lunch at the hotel—she'd lost three pounds having an affair for lunch—and tonight they'd meet up again because his daughter's swim season was over and she could say she'd crash at Margo's—too many Appletinis; Gary would never call Margo, who he referred to as the "drama drain." Maybe Ste-

phen would actually stay the night in the hotel, and he could go shopping with her tomorrow morning for a casual Friday outfit.

She made a heart-shaped lip line on her coffee lid, took a sip. Her hands were shaking. She sat on her thumbs, an old affectation she adopted in college to measure herself. As a coed she could fit her hand between the edge of the workshop chair and the outside of her thigh, legs crossed. Over the course of a semester, she watched some girls' asses pancake over the seat, a growing flapjack of thigh batter. Now, she could only stack her hands vertically between the wall on her left and the seam in the seat on her right. God, she was so disgusting.

The conductor clipped her ticket, whispered a good morning. He winked. Or did he? Hard to tell behind his glasses, under his mustachioed eyebrows. Winking why, because of Stephen? Was it an act of complicity, or as a form of greeting, or as a flirt? She turned to the window.

The train was slowing up to the sea of strangers. She looked for his Uncle Sam hat. A daughter bought it for Christmas, red and white like Waldo, with a blue puffy ball. He was tall and terribly handsome—she could pick him out from a mile away even without the hat. The bell began to ring, vibrating heavily through the floorboard. She had to act cool, resist the urge to knock on the window and wave. She moved her bag to her lap.

“Excuse me.”

Lyle sat down in the place her bag vacated. Her eyes were like icicles. She smelled like her coffee, cinnamon, hazelnut, muffiny. Maybe this was a bad idea.

“No, this seat is taken.”

“Oh,” Lyle said, fidgeting with his empty attaché and peering out the window. “I thought he didn’t come on for another stop.”

She dropped her coffee. It hit off the instep of her Gucci and

spurted onto Lyle's pants. He picked it up and handed it to her, a trickle of mild sticky coffee on his thumb and forefinger. The lid had stayed on. Her eyebrows were raised, the muscles in her jaw clenched and menacing.

"This seat is taken. Move, please."

"It's a public seat. As public as your adultery."

Where did this guy get off? Where did he get on? Not here. The train had just stopped. Why was he sweating? Where was Stephen? How long had he been watching her? "Move. Now. Please. Why are you doing this?"

"Why are you?"

They were speaking in a whisper. She was shifting her things. "So you're not going to move?"

"I just want to know why."

"It's none of your fucking business, why."

"What about the guy that dropped you off?"

"Everything OK, babe?"

Stephen stood over them, blocking the aisle to prevent anyone from going past.

"Babe," Lyle scoffed. She nodded her head back, darting her eyes to the pee-car part of the train. Other passengers had noticed, looking up dumb and detached from their devices. He was doing this for them, for the public good.

"So you're not going to move?"

Lyle said nothing. Hunching over, she grabbed her bag and slammed it into Lyle's lap, bursting the coffee cup. She kned him in the thigh, and stepping over him elbowed him in the face twice, "Get out of my fucking way," as she scaled over him, "fucking asshole," down the aisle. Stephen followed.

A pool of hazelnut muffiny warmth soaked his crotch. He dropped what remained of the cup to the ground. No job fair to-

day, no rounds today. He picked up his attaché and put it over the wet spot of his lap. The bell rung and the train started to move. It got quiet, even though Lyle could feel his ears pulsing.

“You,” Lyle heard, “You, hey buddy, let’s go.”

The conductor grabbed Lyle’s shoulder. He was shorter than he looked from above, the hat must’ve added a few inches. He did not look like a Marx brother. Maybe he should’ve given him his ticket. “Off my train. Next stop. Move.”

Lyle did not argue. His shoes squeaked as he walked down the aisle.