

The Bridge

by Kaye Blum

The morning mist is deceiving. It belongs to the nearby mountains, but today it spills into the valley of red roofed houses, throwing a blanket of brittle white over the carefully manicured lawns. At the edge of the stealthily spreading suburbs, the eastern rail network reaches the end of the line. On the platform, the mist does not hinder the hundreds of commuters, huddled tightly together, awaiting their daily express train to their daily duties.

Today Anna wears lime green. She is one of these commuters on the crowded platform. She stands out against the sea of slick dark suits, the uniform of the city worker. She has headphones in her ears, they are attached to a portable music unit which tucks into her bag. Her eyes are closed and she hums away to the music until the crowd starts to push towards the 7.15 city-bound train. She opens her eyes and shuffles along with the force of the crowd as they board the carriage, then pushes her way through to a seat at the end, making sure she is next to a window.

She looks around the carriage as the train gently trembles in rhythm with the tracks. To Anna, the other passengers seem homogenised. She sees an army of suited men with briefcases, their faces half obscured behind the large newspapers they try to read. The other women are also dressed in suits, neatly groomed with tight hair buns, their eyes glued to a romance novel or magazine. No-one dares to speak or make eye contact. Anna's head is full of music; a blissful distraction. She turns her head and gazes out the window.

The landscape outside slowly melts from a green blur of suburban backyards, parks, a golf course, to inner urban decay. When the train passes under the bridge, Anna looks for the grey concrete wall covered in colourful graffiti. But today, in a square of concrete painted white, she sees a single word has been written in huge black

letters, in a classic serif font like Courier or American Typewriter or maybe it's Times New Roman. It says WORK. She stretches her head around to glimpse it for a few seconds more but the speed of the train steals her chance of a longer view. She turns back around and loses herself in her music.

Today Anna wears fuchsia pink. The 7.05 train has been cancelled so the platform is even more crowded than yesterday. But everyone still looks the same. The 7.15 arrives and the crowd surges forward as commuters compete for a seat on the train. Anna jostles with them, squeezing in just in time as the electric doors struggle to a close. Today Anna does not have her preferred seat near the window at the rear of the carriage. She is crushed against the doors. She tries to move her head but her face is pressed firmly against the glass. At least she can still watch the world go by. But the amplified bass-line of the music escapes her headphones and is audible to passengers next to her. They do not look too pleased. Anna closes her eyes.

Anna opens her eyes to a blur of green as the train speeds past a golf course. A white ball flies towards the train, towards Anna. Her eyes open wide with fear and she manages to free a hand and holds it up to shield her face, just before the ball makes impact. Instead of shattering glass, yolk and albumen splatter across the windows of the carriage doors. Her fear subsides and she smiles with relief. She begins to laugh at the children's prank. The other commuters peer over their papers, casting condescending looks her way. She stops laughing and resumes her gaze out the window.

The train approaches the bridge with the graffiti. Anna sees that another boldly painted word has been added to WORK. CONSUME.

Today Anna wears electric blue. Today there are no delays and the platform has resumed the usual crowd of commuters. The train arrives and Anna pushes her way to the edge of the platform. She is determined to claim her favourite seat at the rear of the carriage,

next to the window. The train departs and the same scenery of suburbia sliding into dense concrete urbanity blurs past her. Today Anna looks more attentively out of the window. She curiously anticipates the passing of the bridge to see if another word has been added to the graffiti patch. It has. She sees WORK. CONSUME. DIE. She turns her head away from the window. She looks around the carriage. The other commuters wear blank expressions. They have seen nothing. They continue reading their papers. Anna slouches back in her seat, rests her head against the window and closes her eyes.

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Today, Anna is not wearing lime green, fuchsia pink, electric blue. Anna is not there.

