

Perspectives



Published in *Perspectives* in 2009 by Future Leaders (www.futureleaders.com.au)

The Station

Madeleine Bendixen

One morning, in the pale early winter, a man enters the train station. He moves in a strange pattern — all hands and knees and torso — as if he has been fashioned from bits of crude material, lumped together in an awkward design. His body is compelling. It glides and gyrates in obscene directions with such ferocious resistance from his bones it is surprising he should function at all. And yet he walks. From one end of the station to the other, he crosses surely, although not without effort, to the farthest bench.

The great and urgent purpose that bears this form across the station seems to emanate from what he holds in his giant hands. Several thin sheets of paper — letters, or documents — are carried between calloused fingertips, held delicately, as one would hold gossamer.

The stranger is old, and of foreign appearance. Few others are gathered on the platform at this early hour, but nevertheless, all turn to stare at him, this man with the fiendish walk. Although they cannot be certain, for they have not heard him speak, each decides to himself that the stranger is undeniably Russian. *It's the line of his face*, they reason. *It could only be a Slavic face.*

Having arrived at the bench, the man lowers himself and is seated. Stillness hardens into his hulk, and by some trick of the light he sets, as stone sets. He appears suddenly cast in granite, some obscure mass of rock left moored in the station.

And the trains begin to arrive.

The people who move in and out of these trains- bound away, ever elsewhere — intend to pass through the station swiftly, unnoticed. It signals in the way they carry their transitory bodies; the urgency to be both fleeting and anonymous. And yet, on this day, they do not succeed. On this day a stump has settled in the flow at the station.

For some ineffable, but essential reason, the stranger's presence causes the people to flounder as they pass his bench. He affects them. Troubles them. They continue to pass him by, but none can do so objectively. And they become frightened, by this man whose mystery stagnates and spreads among those at the station.

He has disturbed the peace. And yet, he has done nothing but sit and yearn, in solitude, for something known only to him (and, perhaps, those wispy pages in his lap). The people bristle: *What is this man? Artist? Angel? Why has he come here to disturb us?* As they make their way onward, home, they think him some foul omen; that it will be doom he brings upon them.

Late in the night, when the stationmaster closes his booth and departs for house and family, the light bulbs switch over to their dimmed vigil glow. There will be no more trains tonight. The man rises and departs also, into the night, although no-one is left to watch him lumber off, in the same cumbersome manner as he came.

Morning rises in the station. The worst has not come, as the doom — wary expected — every object is intact, unthreatening. But for the man. He has appeared again at the station, and crosses the platform, belaboured by his unwieldy body. Once again, he is seated with his precious secret documents in his lap. For whom, or what, does he wait? He looks outwards over the railway tracks, through grey eyes that are slick like lenses, and just as shallow. There is little left inside him, if his eyes are any indication. Everything flows out from these eyes — echoes, memories — in long ribbons that trail to the ground; but they are voiceless things, and will never be deciphered.

The trains begin to arrive.

When they sense his presence again, the commuters tense and shift among themselves. They apprehend with dread their passage through the station: the once unremarkable journey now blighted by this imposter who demands their pity. He enrages them, menaces them with his hopeless loneliness. They go on their ways, as before, but they continue to be oppressed by his longing.

He returns the next day, and the next. But no train is his train. He is met by no-one, and no-one collects him. With the stranger's every return, the people grow more despairing. Day after day, in ominous increments, the station appears to change, turning dense and hostile. Heat rises from the concrete, mingles with sultry agitation, and the air becomes thick and languid.

Then, they begin to break. A man rages, kicks over a steel bin. A woman becomes hysterical. Seconds later, a child starts to wail. And all of a sudden, the movement stops, and the station comes to a standstill. All are as still as the man on the bench.

Finally, his sorrow has paralysed them.

Shocked, the people stare. Each knows that something forbidden has occurred, for in this blinding moment they are together, in union, stopped. No longer transient, and no longer unnoticed, each person sees others about them, and is seen themselves, in all nakedness. Not one of them can flee this moment. Some shift, others sway, all turn to look into nearby faces. At their centre is the stranger, who looks out through his wet, grey eyes, watchful, waiting.

Trains continue to arrive, and more people file out of carriages. But they too are halted in their paths. More and more amass. More and more are mesmerised.

After countless minutes a siren is heard, and the crowd turns towards the sound- someone has panicked and called the police from a mobile phone. But the people are neither relieved nor disturbed. They simply watch as two policemen make their way through the crowd, crossing the platform towards the bench, approaching the stranger.

WAIT

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All eyes turn to the stationmaster, who has emerged from his booth, and broken the silence. He gestures towards the tracks, where another train is emptying its passengers on to the crowded platform.

A woman steps from the train.

The stranger has risen, and is standing, shaking terribly, with his papers grasped in a trembling fist. She moves fluidly towards him, with the lightness and rapture of a dancer's motion. Her luminescent body meets his wretched, broken one; and she bears him — miraculously, beautifully — through the crowd, across the station, and away.

In one final phenomenon, the crowd breathes a single, simultaneous sigh. At the station, pale in the early winter, the thought lingers, is sustained, for a moment. And then, all moves on.



Madeleine Bendixen wrote this in 2008 when she was in Year 12 at Brisbane Girls Grammar School in Queensland.