**The Solitary Passenger**

Phillip Sterling

As usual, the train slowed as it approached the casual curve of elevated track that would carry the Orange Line passengers going in the opposite direction northeast along the lake shore and out of the city proper—all the way to the end of the line and the station with a charming, if somewhat pretentious name, and its charming platform, from which the man in the camel coat had embarked twenty-three minutes before. From the station, a short walk through cobbled lanes—mere alleys by any other measure—and past the elegance of manicured rose trees and the remodeled carriage houses of a century before would present the reader at the elegant door of the man’s current residence, an empty inheritance, from which he’d departed some time earlier.

But when the train lurched to a complete stop—as it seldom did along that stretch of track, a stretch between two somewhat disreputable stations—the man in the camel coat looked up from the book he’d been reading and out the hazy, dirt-streaked window, if only to remark the proximity of his journey’s delay. What he saw was startling. So much so that the man knew immediately that if ever the chance to articulate the sight was called for, he would more than likely remain speechless. At most, he would be able to summon the moment as ‘nothing less than a vision.’

After all, what does anyone know of coincidence?

A woman in a pale nightdress stood on the abbreviated balcony of a fourth-floor apartment directly opposite of the window through which the man gazed. The elevation of the tracks had leveled them; their eyes met. They shared their separate worries intimately. To the man in the train the wrought-iron balcony looked flimsy, unsafe. And the woman’s nightdress itself was a flimsy affair, of a color that may once have been white but now seemed slightly gray, as if subjected to repeated washings with clothes of a dark hue, perhaps denim. It was standard fare, otherwise—more cotton than silk, more opaque than transparent—though the man on the train, the man in the camel coat, who had looked up out of curiosity and not out of affectation (resigned as he was to the predictability of a routine commute)—this man could easily imagine that the woman was not dressed at all but instead stood daringly nude, fully exposed in the sun that now burnished the brick and glass of the sand-colored tenement building opposite, and equal in height to the train. Her left hand rested on the ironwork; her right held something—a cigarette, perhaps, or cup of coffee—that the man on the train could not make out.

The balcony was the second one from the end on the fourth floor of a building that stood at the corner of two streets the man did not recognize; nor could he make out the street signs; nor was he familiar with this neighborhood at all, a neighborhood which he passed through blindly and solemnly at about the same time twice a week. He noted only the name of the bank on the cross street, catty-corner to the building with the woman on the balcony, and the time displayed on the bank’s marquee. It was ten o’clock.

The man in the camel coat squinted his eyes, blinked them. He’d been reading closely, and so distances were blurred; it was possible that the woman was not even there, not what he had actually seen. But when he pressed tears into his eyes with his thumb and forefinger and refocused his gaze, the woman came into view clearly, and she was in fact lovely, and what blurred instead at the periphery of his vision was not a woman standing as if on an Italianate, ivy-hugged balcony of a romantic notion but the words of a poem, something he had read years before, about a woman in a nightgown at ten a.m. and a man passing and smiling . . . Was it a poem by Wallace Stevens? By William Carlos Williams? He couldn’t recall, though he knew the poet was driving a car, not on a train, and dried leaves blew into the street, which the car’s tires ran over…It was all he could recall. And the fragmentation of his poor recollection caused his eyes to haze and cloud and present the sight before him in the manner of a speck floating on his eyeball.

It was at that moment that the train lurched, jerked its sorry length forward, and then gained momentum, and that the woman on the abbreviated fourth floor balcony—who was endangering herself, by standing there—may or may not have raised her left hand from the ironwork and beckoned to the man in the camel coat before she disappeared from his view, before the poetry of her was drowned out by the impudent clacks of the train’s hard wheels. But the man in the camel coat took it as a sign nonetheless, and he raised his hand to the filthy window of the train in reply. That gesture, and the fact that he could not recall the poem in its entirety, could not be sure about the author, unsettled him to such a degree that he disembarked at the next station—*how so unlike him!*—and found his way back to the bank at 10:23 a.m. and then to the building across the street and the apartments on the fourth floor whose balconies faced the tracks of the El and he knocked on the door of the second one from the south end, the most likely one.

The door opened. Beyond was a room a man would enter as if entering a great loneliness, and from which he would depart in the same manner.