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London Tube Scene

Blagovesta Momchedjikova

She sits up
straight
in her
perfect
black
business
attire—
plain black
high heel
shoes,
a neat,
knee high
black
skirt,
a crispy
white
blouse,
a black
blazer
carefully
folded and
placed over
her left arm,
a black
purse
tucked
under
the right.
Like a
cold blond
statue
she resists
the mix of
immigrants,
tourists,
& other
misfits
slouching
carelessly
around
in random
tank tops,

T-shirts,
sweat pants,
shorts,
their hair
in uncontrollable,
unidentifiable
styles
unlike her
picture
perfect
bob.
As the
westbound
DLR snakes
lazily
above ground
to its next
destination,
her
manicured
right hand
reaches
toward
her right eye—
tap, tap, tap
she taps
a tear
away—
and then toward
the left,
tap, tap, tap.
She is
crying
and she is
trying
to stop
her black
eyeliner
and black
mascara
from
streaming
down
her pretty
pale face.
Tap, tap, tap,
she goes again,

her index finger
diligently
wrapped in
a white
wipe
wiping
the slate
under her
now red
eyes
clean.
Did she
lose a
loved
one?
Did she
lose her
job?
Now that
the London
sun shines
on her
through
the train
windows,
she seems
to have gained
back
her
business
composure.
Or maybe
not.
As the train
rolls out
of the next
station,
her tears
continue
to do
what tears
know what
to do
best—
roll down.
Tap, tap, tap.
Did her

boyfriend
cheat
on her?
Did her
best friend
die?
Did she
lose
a pet?
By now
two young
guys—
the casual
moustache
on each—
standing
some
six feet
away,
swaying as
they hold onto
the hand rail,
have caught
onto her
pain
and decide
to entertain
her.
“Don’t be
sad,
Miss!”
they shyly
half-say
half-yell
in a heavy
East
Asian
accent
across
the moving
train car,
and laugh
uneasily,
mostly,
at their own
bravery—
they have

just
broken
the unspoken
indifference
among
passengers
on the tube.
The sad Miss
does not seem
to either
hear or care.
Tap, tap, tap.
The rest
of us
shoot
angry
glances
at the
violators
of this
impromptu
display
of private
pain
in public.
What did
you just
do?—we
want to
scold
them.
You think
she cries
here by
chance?
You silly
young
fools!
You
think she
cannot cry
in the
privacy
of her
home?
(Did she
lose her

home?)
She cries
here
because
it is
safer
to cry
in the company
of strangers.
She needs
us here—
witnesses
of her struggle
to keep
her pristine
public
persona
intact—
and it is
because
of our
stare
that she
will
never
break down,
not here!
She will
endure.
In exchange,
she simply
allows
us
to wonder
about her.
For as
long as
she taps
her tears
away,
we can
imagine
what gave
her the pain,
what made
her so sad,
who she

happens to
love,
who happens
to love
her;
We can
imagine
where she
comes from,
where she
goes next,
what she
wears
at home
(any loose
straps,
stains,
jeans
with tears?),
what her
favorite
food is!
And this
is our
silent
but strong
pact
with her,
here, on
this public
stage of the
train, on
this warm
day in June:
we help
keep her
unstained
public
persona
intact;
she helps
keep our
disheveled
private
personas
in awe.
And so,

gracious
greenhorns,
we must
remain
strange
to her
and each
other,
at all
times.

About the author

Blagovesta Momchedjikova teaches writing at New York University. She holds a PhD in Performance Studies as well as a deep interest in the scale models of cities. She is the guest editor of *Urban Feel*, a special edition of *Streetnotes*, and of *Captured by the City*, a collection of essays on urban culture, forthcoming from Cambridge Scholars Publishing.