

DANIEL KENT

Stanton Junction

But get down to it — and you fall into a whole metaphysics of colours à la Monticelli, a mess from which it's damned awkward to escape with credit. And that makes you absent-minded, like a sleep-walker.

Vincent Van Gogh, writing to Theo van Gogh. Arles, on or about Thursday, 28 June 1888.

On the last leg of the Montreal to Toronto service, most passengers sleep as the Via Express rattles into the evening. Will watches from the conductor's compartment as the dark lines of hills and valleys fade into a patchwork of shadows. In the distance, the windows of a satellite suburb blink to life and a few pale stars press themselves against the indigo sky. In the failing light, Will's figure flashes back at him, blanched against the window.

The train's horn sounds as they approach a tunnel, the long groan pulling him back to work. As he walks the aisle, fluorescent lights reflect off his plastic peak cap and polished shoes. He makes precise movements, tapping one foot against the leg of each row of seats, clipping tickets halfway through their right side, marking down each occupied seat on his notepad. He speaks with a practiced softness to ease the sleepers into consciousness, announcing himself rhythmically, his requests falling among the shift and rattle of the train tracks.

By the time he crosses seven of the eight carriages, the glow of Toronto's downtown casts scattered light across the train line. He pauses at a junction of train cars, places his

notebook and ticket puncher into his jacket pocket and watches the city's light run lines across the black back of Lake Ontario.

He thinks of Van Gogh standing by the Rhone, painting gaslight lines deep into the folds of the river; pulses of gold and bronze furrowed into the inky blue. On that night in 1888, Vincent had painted for eight summers and had two yet to live. A threadbare coat hung on his narrow shoulders, absinthe burned in his throat, a few well-worn coins clinked together in his pocket. The smoke on his breath curled into the night and the stars whirled above. "*L'art c'est l'homme ajouté à la nature*", Vincent had written to his brother. Art was man added to nature. As Will stares out at the night scene, Toronto and Lake Ontario rattle back against the window.

Five years ago Will dropped out of his college engineering degree and moved to a share house. That summer he painted every day, obsessed with the work of Pissaro and Cezanne. His brushwork was rigid at first, but loosened with the lengthening days. He painted the high heads of Cumulonimbus clouds, the twist of rivers curling around towns, the eyes of elk peering through pine thickets. With a smattering of oils he tracked the movement of photons, the shift of water and heat and energy, trying to capture their delicate and monstrous motion. He learnt how the scatter of light could enhance or diminish the mood of a scene. How each moment from the high dry summer sky to the blackest snowstorm brought its own beauty and purpose, if only you could find and meet it.

At the end of summer, his parents cut him off and he could no longer make the rent or pay his gas bill. Then he had taken up a job with Via Rail and moved his way through their systems and networks, traversing the tangle of Ontario's railways. He couldn't say much about the past few years except that they happened; they had run through him like a fever, changing his posture and his weight, leaving a tingling feeling at the back of his skull.

The train slows its acceleration as office blocks rise around the tracks. Will steps onto the juncture and blinks in the dust and darkness. He stands here for longer than he should, vibrations humming through him, a locus point of forces, a tuning fork reading the pull between inertia and friction, desire and duty, past, present, future.

He steps into the last carriage, notebook open, ticket puncher ready.

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‘You are a fool,’ Nicole announces as he enters the room, her voice clipped in a cold British accent. She reads from a sheet, not looking up at him.

Will stands in the doorway, arms straining with groceries. His conductor’s uniform hangs loosely on his shoulders, brass buttons limp, the crimson shoulder stripes garish against the white walls of their living room.

The room is furnished with Scandinavian replicas—MDF chipboard cloaked in laminate, pastel paint and glass. The most expensive item in the room is a woollen rug that Nicole had seen on high street and gushed about for days before he put it on his credit card. The oldest is the paint stained desk that Will had bought from a second-hand store on West Queen. He kicks his shoes off and carries the groceries to the kitchen bench.

‘You are such a sweet fool,’ she proclaims, an American accent this time. The lubricious vowels make her round and pout her lips, showing off the narrow gap between her front teeth. She shakes her hair into waves for effect.

He kisses her forehead and removes his coat, watching her pull fruit and vegetables from the paper bags: speckled bananas, potatoes dusted with burnt Umbrian dirt, half a bag of yellow bell-peppers that the wind and sun had blown into strange shapes. They glowed against the white enamel, lumps of molten glass cooling on the kitchen bench. He’ll make a painting of them later, he tells himself, with Nicole holding them against her skin, their colours blooming out of the shadow of the night.

He points to the manuscript on the bench, ‘What’s the gig?’

‘An ad for a storage company. Absolute crap, but Mikey reckons I have a shot.’ She speaks in her own Antipodean accent this time, changing her posture and complexion—shoulders dropping, her right cheek flaring up to meet the upward twang in her voice.

‘But the bloody agency can’t decide whether my character’s British or American, so I need to prep both. The usual bullshit.’

He prefers the American, but doesn’t say so. He’s also learnt not to ask whether an actor in an advert is really a ‘character’. Instead, he says ‘I’m sure Mike’s right.’

She hasn’t had a decent role in months. When she first moved to Toronto, the casting agents had been charmed by her irreverence and blue streaked hair, but Will suspects her novelty has worn thin. Back then Advertising Creatives looked for actors who were *quirky*, sought out faces that had the *style and attitude* that embodied brands’ *unique personality and values*. Nicole had been the face of a Hyundai hatchback and a special run of florescent coloured watches, but after the GFC the Creative Executives wanted clean, fresh faces and she had bleached the blue out of her hair.

‘I told Mikey about your exhibition,’ she says as she pours cheap Merlot into two glasses, ‘he’s going to come along tomorrow with someone from the agency. You know they’re always looking for someone with a good eye.’

Will nods and sips the wine. It’s not really *his* show, he’s just paid for wall space in the gallery, but he doesn’t correct her again. The laundry door is open and the light from the kitchen pales into the makeshift studio space, half lighting the ghost of a still life and small piles of dirty clothes. He won’t work tonight; his joints are thick with fatigue, his hand as unsteady as the shunting movement of the train. Instead, he sips his wine and flicks through windows on his phone.

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The morning light scatters between buildings, flickering light and sparking synapses. The passengers stir and hand up their tickets as they sense him at their side. Two school girls sit together, scrolling their phones in silence, eyes blinking in the blue kick back glow; a middle aged businessman with white flecked hair thumbs his blackberry; a tourist in an orange jacket is taking photos of the skyline, leaning his camera forward, tapping the screen to frame and contain the blur of billboards, passing parks, and apartment blocks.

When Will started this job on the rails, he had thought of these journeys and his duties as an interlude, a juncture between two separate, more vivid and purposeful parts of his life. Soon he'd be elsewhere, he'd thought, a throng of bodies and cars and trams pulsing around him as he walked through the streets, a stronger, surer version of himself. But recently he had begun to suspect that really this is all there was, this momentum of metal on metal, pushing you onto another junction, moving between beginnings and endings.

The hours and direction of his days were mapped out for him on the bright weaved lines of the rail map. When his duties were done on each leg of the journey, he could sit and feel the g-forces press him into his seat as the rail curved away from a river, or hill or motorway. He'd be free to look out and watch the way sunlight turns paddocks of green to straw, the way ridges of rock and soil give way to pastures of cotton and wheat, the way cities rise and fall in the landscape, just as they do across centuries.

A few miles outside Ottawa, his phone buzzes in the pocket against his chest and the digits of his childhood home phone number light up on the screen. He closes his compartment's door to block out the rattle of the track and answers the call.

'Will?' his father's voice is thin on the line.

'Yes Dad. I'm at work, on the rail. I might cut out.'

'Will?' Will it's your mother. She's in hospital.'

'What? Why?'

'You better come home and see her--' the line croaks and dies, a high-pitched ringing replaces his father's voice. Will hangs up and puts the phone in his pocket. It's the first call he's had from his father for years and he doubts he'll get another.

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Crowds pool and disperse on West Street, moving through cafes and bars, drifting in and out of spheres of light and music. Will is running late and he darts between bodies, catching elbows and plumes of perfume laced with coffee and booze. He hurries through a wide gate at the entrance of the old industrial district, past a partly dismantled wall of dark brown brick.

It's a mild evening but the temperature drops as he enters the cavernous warehouse; its high wide bulk and concrete flooring seem to draw in the coming winter. Before all labour was pushed out of the city, pushed out to drift at sea, generations of men and women had worked here, their hard bodies pressed against steel and flame, their thick shadows working at a piston's pace, sparks of sulphur and carbon smouldering in their chests.

Now the furnace is blackened and the crane arm is still. Rusted chains hang from splintered rafters. Faded signs warn of eye damage and head injury. Art critics and investors drift coolly past them all, working the space with long slow gazes. As a venue for *emerging and early career* artists, *The Factory* is a place to be seen and to be found. Murmurs hover around the bare brick walls, wine is swirled, fingers point up to smatterings of oil and canvas, a gentle harmony hums through the crowd. Above them, sunset hues smoulder in the high windows.

With the rush to arrive still tingling in his joints, Will feels warmth rise from his chest to blush on his cheeks. His heart seems to pulse faster than any in the room, running at a harder rhythm from a harder time. He sees Nicole across the room, champagne flute in hand, Mike at her side. They look up at a four-metre-high portrait of an American actress painted on reclaimed windowpanes. Mike is pointing to a detail in the paintwork, his shoulder presses against Nicole's side. Light shimmers off the exposed glass.

Will takes a beer from the bar and moves to his small stake of wall space: four canvases in a shadowy corner alongside a few dozen prints on a black table. Nicole had set up the space while he worked and he sees the paintings now as though for the first time, cast in a hard white light. The colour is washed down, he thinks; the brushwork is thick and heavy.

The gallery manager, Jennifer, arrives beside him and places her hand on the curve of his back, straightening his posture. She wears her black fringe down to her brow and a white silk blouse over her thin figure.

“Will I just adore these, they’re such strong examples of their kind.” She holds a determined smile that Will feels obliged to return. Her hand presses into his side, turning him away from the paintings to face a greying couple.

“You should meet John and Susan, I’ve told them about you.”

The smiling man wears a cabbie hat over thick-rimmed glasses, his wife pulls at a rainbow patterned shawl that hangs off her shoulders.

“Fine to meet you son,” John says as he swallows Will’s hand with his own, “and can I say you’ve done a fine job with your work. I like a man with an eye for tradition, unlike...’ he sweeps his arm in the general direction of the exhibition, ‘some others.’

Will thanks him and explains his method, the styles he is drawn to. Jennifer asks him about his *inspiration* and he feels the question burrow a hole inside of him, something he should know how to fill. He mumbles something about light and colour and *plein air* painting. John and Susan leave with a landscape print wrapped in beige paper, days of Will’s work scanned, pressed and repeated on the cheap canvas. Jennifer moves onto the next wall and vacant space surrounds him again.

A press of bodies huddles between the bar and the art. The warehouse is poorly lit, but lamps project light onto the walls, casting a chiaroscuro glow on the audience’s faces. Nicole and Mike have moved on from the glass panel portrait, Will’s lost them in the shadows of the crowd.

Art students with straight hair and slender arms traipse from wall to wall with upright chins and vacant eyes. Baby boomers walk up to artworks, blink, smile softly and move on. Between them Will feels too old, too young, too stable, too poor. The wool of his blazer pricks at his neck. His jeans aren’t *distressed*, just worn and frayed. He drinks his beer and watches faces move in and out of the light.

Some stop by his wall, ask polite questions and move on. Most move straight past him, drawn to the crowd at the other side of the warehouse. Above them an installation hangs from the leaden palm of an old crane arm. Thousands of strings of twine drift in the

breeze while pulses of colour from Light Emitting Diodes play patterns across the threads. He had heard Jennifer gushing about the piece earlier. The *Celestial Chandelier* sought to *interact* with the industrial space by exploring the way *transient physicality* is sculpted by the eternal laws of light and motion and gravitational waves. Faces gaze up through the screens of their phones, filing the strings of colour into pixels and streams of data. Will finds himself staring up at the spiralling lights, feeling the movement turn deep in his gut.

‘There you are!’ Nicole’s slim body arrives at his side, pinching his arm, ‘How are the punters treating you?’ She smells of wine and Calvin Klein perfume. He feels unexpected relief at the warmth of her arm against his.

‘Just one print sale so far,’ he smiles and presses back against her arm, ‘a couple more will cover the costs.’

‘You’re getting your name out, that’s the main thing.’

‘That’s right.’

‘And you can’t expect too much so soon.’

‘No.’

‘And I’m sure it will pick up across the weekend. Jennifer says it’s a good turn out for opening.’

He wants to hold her body against his, to feel her curve and her warmth, but she turns to wave out into the crowd. Mike arrives with bluster of jokes and hand shaking.

Nicole moves away from them, ‘You two catch up, I’ll get some drinks.’

Mike puts his arm on Will’s shoulder. ‘It’s a great night, you must be happy with the turn out.’

Will nods. 'It's a good crowd.'

Mike looks past Will, up at the paintings and smiles. His hair is gelled up into a deliberately ruffled quiff, he wears a navy blazer over a black t-shirt and he tucks one hand into the back pocket of his skinny jeans.

'So what are you hoping to do with all of this?'

'What do you mean?'

'You know, the painting, the art. You've got a plan right? What's it all for, where's it going?'

Will searches the shadows of the gallery for an answer. 'I just want to do good work.'

Mike nods earnestly, 'You know Nicole's worried. I said I'd talk to you, see if you can get a gig in the agency, but you need to work with me on it.'

'I don't—'

'I want to help you but right now with this kind of work,' he waved at the paintings, 'I can't do much. But, you know if you move into a digital space—photography, web design. I can maybe line up something for you, something creative. Something lucrative.'

'Not sure if that's for me.'

'Just think about it, you move forward or you die in the water buddy.'

Nicole returns with three flutes of sparkling. They tap glasses and toast the night.

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Beyond the city, the fields flatten and open up to sky and space. Faded signs mark the mounds of gravel and concrete that rise along the railway—*West Lake Falls, O'Donnell's*

Way, Brooklyn Downs. The tangled heads of buckwheat and thistle lap at the platform's crumbling edges. Occasionally, passengers wait there, waving the trains down the way you might hail a cab in the city, their shaking arms halting the mass of steel and motion as the carriages shift their weight into the earth.

Will imagines his father in the faces of the men who wave the train down, his hard long stare cutting through the metal of the carriage to meet Will's gaze. Between stations, the gravel stones rush beneath the carriages, moving so fast they blur into a static mass of slate, blinking black and grey. Will closes his eyes and he pushes the image of his father out of his mind by imagining the long endless network of steel and wood he rides on. A network that could carry him inland or to the sea, to the West or the East. Each junction channelling him forward, moving him onward inevitably to the end of the line.

That morning, he had arrived in Stanton on the first train from Toronto. A pastel blue sky hung above the town and the air was still and crisp. He'd walked the half-mile to the hospital, through the wide streets, past a few familiar shops and faces as well as a few new ones. Bare maple tree branches scraped the sky and heavy-duty trucks rumbled past as he hiked through fallen leaves. He spent the morning at his mother's side, while his father smoked out the back of the hospital. She was happy to see him, she said, despite the circumstances. A smile stretched at the corner of her mouth. The room was small, painted beige and partitioned into six curtained areas that beeped and droned with monitors and pumps. His mother was thinner than he'd remembered; her Prussian Blue eyes were a shade darker. A few weeks ago, the doctors had found a shadow on a brain scan. Now the scans showed that the shadows had spread to her lymph nodes and chest. It crept up on us all, she had said. Chemo would start on Monday. The details piled up so suddenly, Will didn't know what to say or what to think. She asked about Nicole and Toronto and his work. He held her hand and talked about his work, the changes in Stanton, the coming winter and the Fall crop from her garden. He left after lunch with a promise to come next week.

A screech and thud wake him. Out the window, dusk hangs on the horizon and he can hear unsettled voices murmuring through the carriages. He pulls on his jacket and heads for the conductor's car. The door is open, so he can climb through and down onto the tracks.

The sky is clear, but the wind kicks up dust in flurries, twisting over and over in swarms of white and grey. Tom, a grey haired conductor is standing by the track, not moving. Will places his hand on his shoulder and looks down. An elk lies on one half of the tracks, a deep wheezing sound coming from its throat.

Tom turns back to the train. 'Good you're here Will. A god-damn mess this is. We'll be held up some. Wait here.'

The elk's legs are crushed, glanced by the side of the engine car. The screech of the brakes meant the driver had broken hard, but too late. It must have run from the shadows of the pine forest onto the tracks as it headed for the fields and forest on the other side. He crouches beside the great wheezing body. Its head is wreathed in broken glass and gravel, its nose points out to the field and the indigo and bronze horizon beyond.

Will presses his hand on its broken body, feeling the last of its life stutter out. He kneels down lower, searching for something that is already gone. Up close, the elk's face is a landscape of ridges and planes; its bristling whirls of hair are cut through with black rivers of blood. Its great eyes, as deep and black as time, do not blink.