A Perfect Stranger

Joanne Nicoll

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.una.edu/lightsandshadows

Part of the Fiction Commons

Recommended Citation

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by UNA Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Lights and Shadows by an authorized editor of UNA Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact jpate1@una.edu.
It was hard for her to concentrate on the magazine. Her eyes kept wandering to the large window where the gray, late-autumn countryside slowly passed by. It was funny. She used to think that riding in a train was like traveling in a bullet—flower-filled meadows, screened-in back porches, and sheets flapping on clotheslines; all whizzing by in a homogeneous blur. But when she began making regular trips to her grandfather’s small cottage in Greenport she discovered that the Long Island Railroad had few trains which could go faster than 35 miles per hour.

The train appeared ancient. She could imagine the compartment she was riding in once carrying frilly-bonneted ladies with parasols to the seashore at the turn of the century.

She stroked the hard, black upholstery of the empty seat beside her, returning her eyes to the window. But it was already so dark outside that all she could see was a yellowish reflection of herself staring out of the dimly-lit car.

As usual, for this time of year in New York, it began to rain. She listened to the wind pound the large drops against the glass. God, how she hated returning to the city. Manhattan—with its turd-filled gutters, its sidewalks dotted with green phlegm, and its garish store fronts beckoning to passersby to enter their darkened hallways for the fulfillment of unmentionable delights; it frightened her in the same way that walking down the sawdust-covered midway of the Southeastern State Fair used to terrify her when she was small. Short, stocky men in stained clothing who looked as if they barely missed being classified as freaks themselves, would call out to the crowd. “Come and see the women from the Amazon. Watch them do amazing things with amazing parts of their bodies.” They would intone the phrase over and over, like perverse monks chanting a strange liturgy.

She shuddered, remembering the nightmares that always followed her visits to the fair. And now, here she was living in the largest midway in the world, surrounded by freak sideshows wherever she went.

When she married James she knew that he hoped to get a job with a large advertising firm in New York City, but she just assumed they would always stay in Atlanta. He was doing well with his job at Lamar and Associates and she saw no reason to leave their comfortable, brick home in Marietta. But one evening he came home excited and out of breath, telling her that he had been offered a job with the home office in Manhattan. It was the first time she had ever seem him show so much emotion.

“Honey, just think,” he said, his face red with excitement. “Once I get my foot in the door at the home office I can go straight to the top. There’s no limit!”

Her tears and pleas only made him angry and accuse her of trying to stifle his career.

Her parents tried soothing her with reminders that she could visit her grandfather on Long Island if she got too homesick. At the airport, her
A Perfect Stranger (continued)

father with the same large, gray eyes as herself looked at her, trying not to show his concern. He smiled and stroked her thick, brown, shoulder-length hair. “Your mother and I will be up in a few months when you get settled in.” Her tears fell on his white knit shirt. “Don’t worry Pumpkin, pretty soon you’ll think of it as your home.”

Her mother stood behind him, not hiding her distress. She blew her nose with a pink Kleenex.

Alicyn sighed, listening to the rhythmic clacking of the tracks. She wiped her eyes. For once her father was wrong. After a year and a half, New York was still as foreign to her as on the day she first stepped off the plane at Kennedy International Airport.

Her frequent visits to her grandfather’s were her only solace. He usually left her alone to read and write or sail his small Sunfish in the choppy Sound.

He wasn’t an affectionate man but he loved his blood kin. With a proud, possessive smile he would remind her that she was a true Wakefield. “You’re just like your father,” he said, as they walked alongside the bay. “There’s salt and sea air in your blood.”

The train was slowing down as it approached the next station. Alicyn pressed her cupped hands to the cold glass and peered out. She was barely able to decipher the faded inscription “PATCHOGUE” on the metal sign, standing like a ghostly specter beneath a naked, blue lightbulb.

At least another 60 miles, she calculated, relieved that her confrontation with the city and her husband was at least two hours away.

The station was almost deserted, she noticed, except for a tall man leaning against the far wall of the platform. She watched him as her window came to stop directly in front of him. The brim of his tan fedora was pulled down low over his brow shielding him from the driving rain and hiding his face in shadow. Alicyn wiped her palms on her corduroy jeans.

No one left the train as the doors opened. The stranger stepped inside and looked around the car. He appeared not to notice its solitary occupant. Walking slowly to the rear of the compartment he took the seat directly across the aisle from her. The train jerked and began moving.

She watched him covertly from the corner of her eye, pretending to be engrossed in the Cosmopolitan she held on her lap. She had picked it up at the bathroom in the Greenport station where someone had left it behind. She wished now it had been a Scientific American. She casually tried to hide the bare-bosomed model on the cover with her hand.

He didn’t seem to notice. He removed his soggy hat and shook it out. His features stunned her. She couldn’t remember ever seeing a man who looked so perfect in all her life. Even living in Manhattan where gorgeous male models were as thick as flies in syrup she hadn’t seen anyone who caused her to stare openly. She forgot to feign interest in her magazine and stared unabashedly.
Damp, bluish-black hair clung to his forehead and the nape of his neck. She stared at his profile, reminded of a drawing which fascinated her as a child. It was a detailed illustration of the prince from her favorite fairy tale, “The Prince of Light Kingdom.” She used to believe that one day he would come to her from his faraway land, where magic hung in the air like dew-frosted spiderwebs, shrouding the land like morning mist. Those enchanted fantasies became an important part of her young world.

When she and her older sister played house, her sister always chose Ricky Ricardo as her pretend husband. While Alicyn, to the frustration of her sister, would always select her tall, dark-haired prince with the brilliant emerald eyes as her heroic breadwinner. “But Alicyn,” her sister protested. “He’s not real. You have to pick someone who’s real. Why not Luke McCoy?”

“No,” she answered defiantly, the only time she ever had the nerve to oppose her older sister. “Prince Hilbrund is as real as your ol’ Ricky Ricardo anyhow. You wait and see. You’re just jealous.” Her lower lip protruded into a pout.

She smiled at the memory. She hadn’t thought of her fairy prince in a number of years. In grade school, when she first realized that life was made up of thoughtless classmates who made cruel jokes about funny-looking bookworms, Alicyn only wrapped herself tighter in her fantasy realm of shimmering castles, woodsprites dancing on moonbeams, and of a brave, handsome prince who didn’t care that she wore glasses, was buck-toothed and skinny. “You’re special,” she imagined he told her. “One of these days you’ll be my queen. And we’ll share this beautiful kingdom.” She looked about her cluttered bedroom—at the books scattered on the floor and the clothes lying across the unmade bed, but she saw instead a valley stretched out before her with a clear, blue river through it. His castle, set proudly amidst green rolling hills, looked very similar to the one she saw each Sunday night on the “Wonderful World of Disney.” Its slender turrets spiralled upwards and colorful banners flapped in the gentle breeze.

Because of her special friend Alicyn was able to ignore the teasing of her classmates. She was even able to feel a little sorry for them since they had no such marvelous future waiting for them. But gradually those romantic visions faded. By the time she was 13 they were no more than fuzzy recollections.

She looked at the man sitting across the aisle from her. She thought it was strange that he had not acknowledged her presence since entering the train. He just stared out his window into the inky darkness.

She shivered and pulled a cable-knit sweater out of her overnight bag. She put it on, drawing it tightly around her. The train whistle sounded, like a wailing tenor lamenting the loss of a beloved. The stranger flinched. For some odd reason Alicyn was touched by his involuntary reaction.

“It really isn’t a night to be out,” she said, feeling her pulse race. She
watched his reflection in the dark glass and continued speaking, not really expecting a reply. "I believe it'll turn to snow by morning." She pressed her fingers against her window to feel the temperature.

He turned his attention away from his rain-spattered pane and took a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket. "Do you mind?" She was shaken as his brilliant green eyes looked directly at her for the first time. At her murmured consent he lit the cigarette and exhaled a white cloud of fragrant smoke into the gently-swaying car. "Yes, I suppose you're right. It does feel like nasty weather's afoot." He spoke with a soft burr she could barely detect. But she couldn't tell if it was Irish, Scottish, British, or what: she didn't have an ear for accents. Yet she was certain it wasn't Brooklyn. She had never heard a New Yorker or, for that matter, anyone speak about the "weather afoot."

She searched for something else to say, afraid to let the conversation die. And at the same time she was angry at herself for being so affected by the stranger. But it was impossible for her to ignore him. All of her senses seemed abnormally acute. She felt like she was waiting for something to happen—like when she used to lie outside on cold, winter nights and stare into the Milky Way. The stars would flicker and dance and she would hold her breath . . . waiting. But waiting for what she didn't know.

"Weather up here is so strange," she said finally. "Especially at this time of year. I'm never really sure how to dress. Like right now I'm freezing." She laughed nervously and briskly rubbed her hands back and forth.

He stood up and reached into the overhead carrier. "Here," he said, handing her his tan overcoat. "Why don't you put this on. It'll be too big for you but it may keep you warmer."

She returned his smile and stammered her thanks. Taking the coat, she wrapped it around her like a large cape. It smelled like a combination of cigarette smoke and sandalwood. She hugged it to her feeling lulled by the security and warmth the jacket provided and by the easy motion of the coach.

"Do you live in the city?" he asked. She nodded her head and began telling him all about Atlanta and how she had been jarred out of her comfortable life because of her husband's burgeoning career.

"You're not happy here, then?"

"Oh, I guess in a way I am," she answered without commitment. "It's just that the people up here seem so cold. Everything moves at a frightening pace. I believe if I were to collapse in the middle of the sidewalk in downtown Manhattan during rush hour, people would only step around me. Tsk-tsking, they'd say, 'Too bad, she'll probably miss her train.' "

He studied her silently. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know that sounds cynical, but being from the South I'm used to genteel hypocrisy—where people smile and speak politely to you whether you've just given them a
$100 bill or just stabbed their mother in the back. I’ve got to admit," she said, tracing an imaginary pattern on her pants leg, "I like the pretense. It’s comfortable."

He laughed softly. "So you prefer the games. As long as the surface is smooth don’t bother to look underneath, correct?"

“No,” she replied quickly, her large eyes pleading. “I’d like to see some human compassion. But if there isn’t any, why flaunt it? If you pretend long enough, you may find yourself really caring.”

A light from a passing farmhouse briefly illuminated the raindrops racing frantically down her window. “That’s an unusual philosophy,” he said eventually. “I’m not sure if I agree with it but,” he shrugged, “that’s not important. If it helps you, then that’s good.” He took another cigarette from the pocket of his tweed jacket.

“That’s interesting,” she said, leaning over the aisle to get a closer look at his cigarette lighter. He flicked open the gold object. A silver ram’s head was embossed on each side. He quickly lit his smoke and returned the lighter to his pocket.

“It was my father’s. He gave it to me before I came over here. I think it’s supposed to remind me to keep out of trouble,” he laughed. His eyes were the color of the Long Island Sound just following a storm.

*Lights and Shadows 11*
Where are you from?" she asked, finally posing the question she had been wondering about ever since he first entered the coach with the rain dripping off his limp hat.

"My parents live in Northumberland, a county in the north of England," he said hesitantly. She remained silent hoping he would continue. "I grew up around Warkworth, a small fishing village on the verge of falling into the North Sea." He put out the half-smoked cigarette. "Whenever a large storm would come blustering off from the coast we'd all hold our breaths and pray the town was still there in the morning. Some folks who came passing through from the South would swear the whole county was damned, which may be true. The countryside is stark and the winters are bitter, but the true Warkworthman wouldn't trade one day of it for a thousand in King's Lynn." He looked at her and grinned. "I can remember some of the villagers say 'any mon who got a itch for the South ought to move to Birmingham and earn his livin' making lace hankies.' " For a brief moment he was far away from the rocking train. He smiled. "But now, that's a while back. I've been living here for a good many years."

She looked at his coal-black hair and his finely chiseled features. This stranger didn't belong in "The Rotten Apple," as she had sometimes heard it referred to. It was like a meeting between St. George and the dragon. Yet, she felt confident that St. George would win, that he wouldn't become tainted by the city's iniquity—the ubiquitous billboards graphically advertising triple-X movies; the block upon block of store-window displays exhibiting everything from leather manacles, to glow-in-the-dark slime, to numerous odd-shaped devices whose purposes are left to the imagination of the purchaser; and the pitiful, clownish women standing in the open doorways performing their pantomimes. She could imagine his green eyes looking past these displays as if he didn't see them. He would refuse to be touched by them.

"You must miss your home," she said quietly.

"Sometimes. But I have a place hidden away in the Catskills where I go when the city's pace becomes too much. It overlooks the Hudson and at times it's almost like being back in Warkworth."

"You know, I feel strange," Alicyn said. "Here I am asking you all sorts of questions, I'm wearing your coat, and I don't even know your name." She held out her hand, "I'm Alicyn Prague."

He looked at her quizzically for a moment, then he took her hand and shook it. "I'm Richard Gareth."

Alicyn smiled, "Pleased to meet you, Richard."

As they neared Grand Central Station, just before going underground, Alicyn took a deep breath, preparing for the welcome.

"Congratulations, Miss Prague, your prediction was correct." Alicyn looked over at her companion.
"It's beginning to snow," he said.
The train came to a stop in the bright, flourscent station. Movement could suddenly be heard coming from within the other cars. The train doors whisked open.

A tinny, nasal voice came over the intercom. "Everyone exit. This is our final destination. Everyone must get off."

Alicyn slowly stood up. She unwrapped the large coat from around her and handed it back to its owner. "Thank you. I really appreciate you letting me borrow it."

He looked undecided for a moment, then he asked, "Is your husband going to meet you here?" His sharp eyes moved quickly across her face, searching for her reaction.

"Yes, I believe so," she noticed for the first time a small scar on his jaw. "I'm supposed to meet him by the card shop. But ... he's usually late." She stopped, embarrassed. She didn't know what she meant by that last statement. "It's just that he's usually so tied up in his work that he forgets the time."

"Maybe I should wait with you then," he offered. "I hate for you to have to hang around here by yourself."

Alicyn picked up her overnight bag and her Cosmopolitan and followed the man in the tan fedora off the train. "There's really no need to stay. I'll be all right." They stepped into the smoke-filled station.

"Look Alicyn, I know this will probably sound bold, but I really want to see you again. But I'll leave it up to you." He handed her a neat, white card. "I'm here if you need me." He walked to the escalators and was quickly out of sight.

She stared down at the card he had given her—Sir Richard Gareth—Dealer in Fine Antiques. Two phone numbers followed and the top of the card was embossed with a ram's head. She delicately ran her finger over the raised emblem.

"Hi Hon. Sorry I'm late. But I had to finish outlining that new ad campaign." The sandy-haired man placed a quick kiss on her forehead. "How was old Grandpop?" She looked up at him smiling. She felt lightheaded.

"Just superb, he couldn't have been better." They walked to the escalators. She paid no attention to the NO SPITTING sign.

"James," she asked, slightly out of breath. "Would it be all right if I called my sister tonight?"