

The Space between Heaven and Hell
By Tamara Palmer

I met Kyle on a rainy Sunday afternoon. He was standing under the red-line L-tracks near the Granville stop half-heartedly holding an “Anything Helps” sign. The rain was beginning to run the letters together. Water poured off his jagged black hair and fell carelessly into his soft brown eyes. His long lashes twinkled in the neon reflection of the liquor store sign. He held himself in a slouched, defeated sort of way that could have been real or simply well affected. His black trench coat was second-hand vintage, and narrowly covered his fading Smashing Pumpkins t-shirt. His jeans fit handsomely around his slender legs and buckled above ankle high Doc Martens. He could have been nineteen, twenty-nine or anywhere in that lost zone in-between. I looked him up and down, and all I wanted to do was take him into my arms and hold him for the rest of eternity.

“Spare some change?” Was how it all started. He reached out his hand with a look of pity. His fingernails were clean. He was a newbie. It was his voice, deep and full of pain that stopped me in my tracks. When our eyes met, a piece of my soul melted.

“Are you hungry?” I asked, and I thought I saw a brief sparkle of human recognition in his eyes.

“Starving,” he answered in a defeated tone as his gaze looked past me.

“I was just going to grab some food. Wanna join me? My treat. You should get out of the rain. It’s freezing out here.” He hesitated, retreating into his urban shell. I noticed a tattoo on his neck. It was a dagger with a red rose winding around it. I wanted to lean towards him and lick it dry. “It’s okay, I don’t bite,” I said, reaching for his hand.

“It would be good to get out of the rain.” He moved forward, but wouldn’t touch me.

“Come.” I gently grabbed his frail arm and pulled him along, careful not to break him. We turned the corner and entered Max’s Deli. I don’t know why I was surprised to find it empty – it was 3:30 – the dead time between lunch and dinner. “Have a seat,” I nudged him towards my favorite corner booth.

“Hey, Max,” I whispered across the counter. “This kid is freezing. Can you spare a towel? He needs to dry off. And can you bring over two coffees?”

“Mother Theresa returns.” Max turned up his nose and wrinkled it disapprovingly as he looked at the rain-drenched sot I had brought in. He changed his expression after I batted my baby blues at him, though. “Order up,” Max said, shaking his head at me and heading into the kitchen.

Max delivered the coffees and the hand towel, but then quickly walked away. I watched bewitched as this stranger wiped his face with the towel, and scrunched out the rain from his hair. His fingers were long and delicate.

“You’re really nice,” he said, still not making eye contact. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“Nobody has to do anything.” My comment finally caught his attention. He looked at me now, for the first time really looked at me. I couldn’t discern pupil from iris as his piercing eyes bore into me. I quivered deep inside, hoping that I could reflect back his better half, or at least remind him that life was a choice.

“What’s your name?” he asked, cocking his head to drain water from his ear.

“Meg. What’s yours?”

“Kyle.”

“Do you want to talk about it, Kyle?” I ask what I’ve never dared ask with another.

His eyes didn’t leave me. My body ached to touch him, and my hand reached out to grab his. He pulled it away and went back to gazing past me.

“Why you’re on the street. Do you want to talk about it?” I pressed on.

“Is that a requirement in order to be fed?” He turned to me with a look of hostility, his guard returned.

“No. I just thought that maybe no one ever asked. Maybe you’ve been waiting for someone to care.”

Nothing.

“Okay. Well, here’s a menu. Pick out whatever you want,” I said trying to match his coldness.

Kyle ordered a roast beef sandwich with extra horseradish. I ordered my usual tuna melt. We sat in silence until the food arrived, and then when it did he began to relax a little more with each bite. After half the sandwich was devoured, he took off his soaking wet trench coat, and placed it over the seat beside him. His arms were peppered with needle marks. My eyes traced the lines as if I would uncover his truth if I just followed the map.

“I’m an idiot,” he said when he saw me staring.

“I want to help.”

“I don’t want to be helped.”

I sank deeper into my chair.

“You came to me in a dream,” I said.

Kyle's eyes didn't grow wide as I imagined they would. He just continued eating his sandwich as if someone might take it away. He forced potato chips into his mouth like a squirrel storing them to get through the winter.

"I was dreaming that I was on the L and a stranger in black approached me. He was tall and handsome, and in pain. I reached out to hug him, but he disappeared into the next car. I followed him, but each time I passed through another car, he had already moved down one past me. I reached the last car and he was gone. I thought he was you."

"Sounds pretty trippy," Kyle said through a mouthful of food. He ran a hand through his hair to push away a stray lock. I fought back an urge to reach for his wrist and kiss away the needle marks.

"Something brought me to you, Kyle."

"We're all looking for something."

"Yes, yes we are."

As we left I offered to take Kyle home with me. I offered him a bath and fresh clothes. I pleaded with him not to go back to his spot under the L. I offered him my bed, my body, anything he wanted. He took me in his arms, pulling me in close he whispered in my ear. "Meg, you are an angel looking for someone to save. I'm a damned soul trying to find the entrance to hell. We weren't meant to meet in this world. I'll look for you in your dreams." Kyle then placed his thin, pale lips against mine and kissed me fully and passionately on the mouth. I became enveloped in his smell of cigarettes, dirty clothing and perspiration – he smelled like the dangerous boys from junior high – the ones who first got my fire started. Electric waves of heat and cold coursed through me as I stood there releasing into his hold. I let his tongue explore every space inside me. I swallowed the pain I could suck out of him, greedy to draw out more and more. When I opened my eyes there was no one there.

I went to bed that night and the train returned. The dark man was there again going from car to car, but this time when he reached the end, he turned around and I saw Kyle's deep brown eyes. His hurt that I had taken, melted away from me. I could see it swirl around the train like a small tornado, before blowing into the ether. He looked at me one more time and blew me a kiss before disappearing.