

She had been calling someone, holding a paper bag that had two peaches inside of it.

I was excited to leave home.

(This is not true.)

I had been excited three months ago, when my father bought the tickets.

I had been excited two months ago, when my mother helped me make a list of things to pack.

I had been excited last week, when the suitcase came out of the closet.

But on the morning of the journey, excitement had become something else. Something heavier.

Something that sat underneath my ribs and refused to move.

Still, I smiled when Mom drove me to the station.

(She did not smile. She pressed her lips together so hard they turned white. I remember because I was sitting beside her.)

The train was leaving at 8:14.

Destination: Northbury.

Three hundred and seventeen miles from home.

I had never been there before.

I guess that was the point.

I wanted somewhere unfamiliar. Somewhere where nobody knew my name, or the fact that I had spent the last six months avoiding the bedroom at the end of our hallway.

(She means her sister's bedroom.)

My sister had died in February.

There.

That is the part I didn't want to write.

She liked peaches when they were still a little hard.

I liked them soft enough that juice ran down my wrist.

(She didn't want people to know that at first.)

The notebook stayed open on my lap.

I had bought it specifically for the trip. The first page said:

"THINGS I WILL REMEMBER."

I would write everything down. I would make sure the journey mattered.

(She thought if she remembered enough things, she could forget one thing.)

The train arrived.

I hugged my parents.

Mom told me to call when I got there.
I told her I would.
Neither of us said goodbye.

(We had been saying goodbye since February.)

It was February, and she had wanted to go to Northbury to see the ocean.
She wanted to surf, and had no idea how.

The first hour of the journey was beautiful.
I wrote in the notebook.
Green fields passed the window. Sheep appeared and disappeared behind hills. A little girl in a yellow sweater counted telephone poles until she fell asleep against her mother's shoulder.
I watched everything.
I wrote everything down.

(She did not write about the empty seat across from her.)

I didn't notice the seat.

(She noticed it every ten minutes.)

I noticed it.
My sister had always sat across from me on trains.
When we were little, she used to insist that the seat facing backward was better because the land behind looked like it was chasing you.
I used to tell her that was stupid.
She used to say I was boring.
She was probably right. She had been the writer, and I the pragmatist.

(Her sister was definitely right.)

We had gotten into a fight; our principles were just so different. I didn't remember what it was about.

In the end, I didn't want to go on that trip to Northbury.
But she wanted to go, so she went.

At 10:32, a man got on the train carrying a red umbrella.
At 10:47, it started raining.
At 11:03, we passed a lake.
At 11:04, I began crying.
Maybe I should've eaten the peaches.

(She says "began crying" as if there were a beginning. There wasn't. She had been crying since the station.)

I closed the notebook.
I didn't want to write anymore.
So I slept.

I was asleep the night she called me twenty-four times, trying to apologize.
She had purchased fresh peaches from a local produce stand a few walking blocks away from the station.

It was the reason she remembered to call me.
Peaches. We both liked peaches.
I had been asleep.

When I woke up, the train was stopped.
People began looking toward the front of the carriage.
A conductor walked through.
"Signal problem," he said. "We'll be moving shortly."

(We would not be moving shortly.)

Twenty minutes passed.
Forty.
An hour.
Someone was calling her husband.
Another was complaining about the weather.
The little girl in the yellow sweater woke up and asked where they were.
I got off the train.
I wanted air.
I wanted to escape the smell of wet clothes and utter disappointment.
I thought if I stood on the platform long enough, I would understand what I was supposed to do next.

(She had already decided.)

She stood on the road, waiting for me to pick up.
A car turned the corner. The wind had blown one of the peaches onto the road.
She had gone after it.

The station was tiny.
Just a bench, a vending machine, and a cracked sign that read: ABBEY'S CROSSING.

An old man sat beneath the awning.
He looked at me.
“You going somewhere?”
“Northbury.”
He nodded.
“Wrong way.”
Apparently, there were two trains leaving from Abbey’s Crossing.
I had just gotten off the wrong one.

(She had not.)

The notebook was still in my backpack.
I opened it.
The pages were wet from the rain.
And somehow, underneath everything I had written that morning, there was a sentence I didn't remember writing.

YOU CAN GO BACK.

I stared at it.
Then I wrote:
I KNOW.
A second sentence appeared.

WHY DON'T YOU?

I shut the notebook. I wished she was here.

She wished I was there. If I had been, maybe I could’ve saved her from that car.
Wheels ran over the peaches, and sent the paper bag and my sister onto the other side of the road.

The old man offered me half his sandwich.
I accepted.
We sat under the awning while the rain came down.
He told me his name was Roger.
I told him mine.
He asked why I was going to Northbury.
I said I wanted to see the ocean.

(She wanted to see the place her sister had planned to visit.)

Roger looked at me for a long time.
“Sometimes,” he said, “we say we’re traveling somewhere because it's easier than admitting where we’re really going.”
I hated him a little for saying that. I asked how he knew.

He shrugged.
"I'm old."

(This was not an answer.)

It was enough of an answer.
The next train came at 4:26.
Northbury.
I did not board.
I sat beside Roger until the rain stopped.
We talked about ordinary things.
His wife.
My school.
The weather.
Lucy.

(She said her sister's name.)

For the first time in months, I said her name without feeling like I was breaking something.
Lucy.
It was just a name.
A name belonging to someone who had existed.
Someone who laughed unselfconsciously.
Someone who hated mushrooms.
Someone who once convinced me that the moon followed our car.
Someone who had wanted to see the ocean.

(She finally understood.)

I gave Roger a peach.
It was just a peach.
At 5:10, I stood up.
Roger asked if I was going to catch the next train.
"No," I said.
"Going home?"
I looked at the tracks.
Then at my notebook.
Then at the road beyond the station.
"No."

(That was the truth, for a bit.)

I never reached Northbury.
I never saw the ocean.
I missed the train home, too, and spent the night in a hotel that smelled like dust and oranges.
The next morning, I called Mom.
“I’m okay,” I told her.
She cried.
I cried.
When I finally came home two days later, the house looked exactly the same.
The hallway.
The kitchen.
The blue bowl by the door.
Lucy’s bedroom.
I stood outside it for a long time.
Then I opened the door.

(She had been avoiding the door for six months.)

Inside, nothing had changed.
Her books were still stacked beside the bed.
Her jacket was still hanging from the chair.
On the desk was a folded piece of paper.
I opened it.
It was a list.

THINGS TO DO THIS SUMMER:

1. Learn to surf.
2. ~~Go to Northbury.~~
2. ~~Go to Northbury with Jill.~~
2. Go somewhere.

I laughed.
Then I cried.
I took the paper downstairs.
Mom was in the kitchen.
“I think,” I said, “we should go somewhere.”
She looked at me.
“Where?”
I didn’t know.
And for the first time, I realized I didn’t need to.

I was halfway down the street when I heard my father call my name.

“You forgot these.”

He held out the peaches.

“You bought them this morning.”

Then he hugged me.
"You don't have to go," he said.
"I know," I replied. Then I left.

(She thinks she went three hundred and seventeen miles and came home. She is wrong. She went nowhere near Northbury. She went somewhere much farther. And when she came back, she brought back the part of herself that had been waiting to keep living.)

*(She still doesn't know who is writing these.)
(That's okay. She will, eventually.)*