

Five Minutes

Kathump. The only thing I hear is my own heartbeat thumping, somehow, in my head. The only thing I see is the fear and worry in my parents' eyes. The only things I feel are beads of sweat trickling down my palms and my luggage slipping out of my hand. The only thing I taste is the bubble gum sticking to my tongue, the distant sweetness chewed away hours ago percolating my mouth, the dryness of my mouth calling for water, the anxiety filling it back up. The only thing I smell is the engine of the train, the smell of gasoline permeating the Seoul train station.

Five minutes left. I notice things I have not before: the right hand of the clock pointing at six when it is actually three; the five-year old boy furtively slipping a Snickers bar into his ripped jeans; and a fifty-year old woman promenading with two strollers and a baby boy around her back like draped curtains. The crimson walls are flaking away, and spider webs encircle the statue of King Sejong in the center of the station. People rush to catch their train, jostling to get on first; they think only about themselves, about their own hectic schedule. Their trains are going somewhere, to jobs or homes; mine is a train to nowhere it seems.

Swooshing by from here to there, almost blowing my military green hat off my head, the train goes by. My train is #4 at station four. This train will lead me to my next journey, a journey for which I do not know what to expect. My little sister, Ashley, fakes a smile. She's trying to be strong but I know deep down she's fragile. I pinch her cheeks and tell her not to worry. It will be two years before I will tease her again. I turn to my parents. It will be two years before I hear from them again.

Four minutes. A flock of commuters comes and goes. On my left is an old bearded man with a wooden cane and a black briefcase, and on my right is a young woman talking on the phone. No one else is lined up, and we all stand behind the yellow bumpy line that runs forever on the floor.

Three minutes. My family and I have not yet said our goodbyes because we're still pretending the two years in front of us is not the gaping hole in time.

Two minutes. In the crisp autumn air, I almost pray for the train to arrive early, to get it over with already. It's as if time is frozen here on the train platform, as if everyone else's life is trundling along and mine is stuck in place.

One minute. My sister hugs me and I think about all of our memories together: walking back from school, playing in the street in front of our apartment, and I even fondly remember the fights we used to have. Suddenly, I want time back. I want to rewind the last five minutes, to stay here on the platform forever. I was not ready to leave.

A bell rings and the clamor of metallic wheels grinding over railways runs the platform in inevitability. The heavy flush of displaced air gush over my face. People next to me cover their mouths and look away. I have a duty to serve, and my new chapter begins here, at the Seoul train station.

My train is here.

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