

UNTITLED

Deja vu seared through her body like a bullet; looking around at the dust-clogged empty seats and the flickering overhead aisle lights, she wrote the sensation off as nervousness. Usually she avoided empty carriages out of fear of encountering a serial murderer, or a serial thief, or a madman.

However, today, Diana was sure she was the one succumbing to madness. Although she had dedicated her life to conspiracy, the chance that one of the thousands of deranged theories actually being correct was always as small as a forecast for a snowstorm in Hell.

The train tore through the darkness, wind howling past. She'd get off in two stops, rush to Dave's (a very respected journalist in the conspiracy theorist underworld); no sidetracking, no communication. A heel-crushed mobile phone lay a while back, drowned at the bottom of a river bed.

With a half-calming sigh she leant back in her seat, tilting her head upwards against the headrest. With a gasp she froze, eyes wide, pupils dilated.

Burrowed into the ceiling were two small bullet holes, the copper bullet protruding from the metal like ticks.

Despite her earlier panic, a cool sense of acceptance washed over her as she returned to forward resting position. They weren't her bullets, and they weren't in her skull, so who cares if a gun had been fired here who-knows how many years ago. Gave the carriage a rugged charm, she thought.

Suddenly, a gust of wind tore through the aisle, scattering a flock of abandoned newspapers and various items of litter. Diana snapped out of her daze and looked towards the gangway as two strangers crossed the threshold, slamming the door behind them.

Maybe it was their mangy appearance, or the way their salmon-pink skin stretched over their skull like rubber, or their weird, shuffling gait, or maybe it was just the weather — either way, Diana's pulse rose to a hummingbird's pace.

She squeezed her eyes shut, knuckles whitening over the armrests. If she couldn't see them, they couldn't see her! But some small, logical part of her brain lit up, telling her that this behaviour was unbecoming of a blooming journalist. Journalists do not back away in the face of danger.

She opened her eyes by a millimetre, cautiously watching them settle into the seats opposite her. Another voice chimed in: also you're always going on and on about not judging books by their covers. So what if this one is covered in blood and dirt and— oh god.

"Why is there blood on your shirt?" Diana cried, pointing to the stain on the woman's otherwise white shirt.

The woman stretched her shirt out to look at the spots of blood. Licking her finger she rubbed the blot, the edges blurred into the shirt. "Forgive me, I had a nose bleed this morning." She explained calmly

Diana turned her attention to the man next to her who leant crookedly into the armrest, chewing absentmindedly, gazing out of the viewless windows like he had something better to be doing.

"Hello, Diana," the woman greeted in a voice as comforting as a cliff edge, "you are Diana, right? We're friends of Dave."

She frowned. "How do you know Dave?"

"Because we're friends of his! What about you? How do *you* know Dave?" She smiled as invitingly as a crocodile enticing a rabbit into harsh waters.

Diana folded her arms into herself. "I write for 'The Code Black paper,'" she couldn't help but advertise herself even in the face of danger, "it's a conspiracy theorist magazine. We're coworkers, friends too, I guess. Is that supposed to make *us* friends?"

"Well I certainly feel very close to you, and I'm sure my partner does too, don't you, John?"

Pan to John bobbing his head dutifully, hand knuckle deep in his breast pocket. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"She as asthma, John, for chrissakes we've..." The woman whispered aside. Then, suddenly remembering Diana's presence, turned back to her with an apologetic smile. "Oh, I'm sorry, where are my manners? My name is Jane, this is my partner, John. We've dedicated our lives to conspiracy. What's your name?"

She looked between the two of them incredulously. "Diana."

"Diana!" Jane remarked, yellow teeth flashing, "that's a lovely name! My name is Jane, this is my partner, John. We've dedicated our lives to conspiracy."

"Dedicated our lives." John echoed

Diana looked up at the tube map. The space between the stations felt a lot longer than it did usually, and the train seemed to be dragging itself along the track as opposed to propelling through it.

In the little time it took for Diana to imagine escaping, Jane's features had hardened into a look of dead sternness. Leaning forward, she said, "By the way, how's Drew, your younger brother by five years?"

"Um, he's fine. How?—"

"We're friends with a *lot* of your friends." She held up a hand and counted each finger, "Drew, Amelia, June, Vicky," she swapped hands "—Rudolph, Henry and Dave! You know what they say, the friend of my friend is my friend!"

She suddenly burst into violent laughter. Without anyone joining her, the laughter ended as abruptly as it started; she continued:

“Diana, I feel we can trust each other now, so I’m going to ask you something and when I do, I don’t want you to...” she paused, alternating her hands up and down like a scale. “What’s the word?...”

Still surrounded by pitch black, the train slowed to a full stop. The driver muttered something over the crackling intercom — the only words Diana could make out was “signal failure.”

“...react!” Jane snapped her fingers. “I don’t want you to react.”

Diana had practically fused with her seat from fear. Despite her being face drained of colour, her eyes did not leave Jane’s, at least, not until she was asked,

“Have you ever encountered, what you may consider to be, a time traveller?”

Her lips parted with quiet shock. Three seconds of hesitation passed before she uttered, “No.”

John lunged at her.

Her vision exploded into fragments; John’s hands, cold and clammy, wrapping around her throat, thumb pressed into her windpipe. Worse still, the other hand dug the barrel of a revolver under her chin. Finger on the trigger.

“We know you know the traveller!” He shouted, foaming at the mouth. “What’s his name?”

“I don’t know his name!” Diana choked, flailing her legs around

Jane sprang to her feet. “Oh my god you’re horrible!” She flung

“Not as horrible as this bull session!” John fired back, “she’s no imbecile, you know that!”

“Well— Christ! Just don’t shoot her! I think we’re really...” the woman visibly deflated, what little tenderness her tone had held before completely removed as she conceded, “Don’t rough her up too much, please.”

“He didn’t tell me anything!” Diana cried

“Aha! So it’s a *he!*”

“Of course it’s a *he,* we know it’s a *he!*” Jane shot, “what did he tell her?”

“What did he tell you?”

“Nothing! Honestly he just—“

BANG!

The gunshot exploded like thunder. Diana screamed, a shrill, painful noise, more painful than—

BANG!

Another shot. Jane flinched, eyes darting upwards. The ceiling now bore another two holes almost directly in the place of the previous two.

Diana seemed to notice this as well for her fear turned into realisation — then back into absolute terror.

“It’s called a tell,” John explained, “when you say “honestly” or “no kidding” I know you’re lying.”

Diana nearly screamed the words, *“There’s four bullets in the ceiling!”*

Her assailants craned their heads up in unison, studying the damage.

“Yep.” They said

“You only fired two, and there were two earlier! And now there’s two more in that same exact!...” her mouth hung open, the cogs were turning now; Jane picked dried blood from under her nails.

On the brink of tears she finally muttered, “you’re time travellers.”

John scoffed, “Time traveller?— Do we look like we have the kind of money to be travellers. And if we were we certainly wouldn’t be in dingy 21st century *London*.”

“We’re time **agents,** not travellers.” Jane elaborated, “and yes those are the same holes from the last time we spoke, sometimes things seep through especially after seven loops.

John grinned. The barrel of the revolver now pressed firmly against her forehead, he leaned in closer. The gun was warm — alive — the barrel pulsed against her skin. Diana exhaled a shuddering breath. These people were crazy, but, working in conspiracy theories, she was surrounded by crazies everyday. She could work this. “Okay, well, I wasn’t lying when I said I didn’t know the guy’s name. He just dressed weird and spoke in this accent I’ve never heard, kind of like yours, and gave me some **equations.** I tried but couldn’t make sense of any of it. Dave’s been studying these things for a while, he’d know.”

“Kirsten from Signalling dresses rather queer.” John mused, looking to Jane.

“Kirsten’s not a **he** though, is she?” Jane replied patiently, “I’m more curious about this Dave character...”

“Could be a bootstrap ritual.” He surmised

“Exactly!”

He returned to Diana. “This Dave character...”

She froze. "I thought you were friends with him!"

"We're not that close. Who is he?"

Diana gritted her teeth. "No no no! Don't you drag him into this!"

"You aren't in the position to be making demands." Jane said

"But he can't be a time traveller! I've known him for years!" She protested, "and the guy I met looked nothing like him!"

"You likely talked to *old* Dave. You see, there's limits to time travel, your future self can't interact with your past self. It just doesn't work. The universe won't allow it. So instead Dave's future self is using *you* as a way to communicate information to *your* Dave who will eventually go on to go back in time and talk to you again and continue the bootstrap loop."

"But—"

"If Dave isn't our guy you won't remember us and everything will go back to normal. If he is our guy, you won't remember him or us or anything about time travel at all."

"But!—"

John tapped Diana's head with the revolver. "If you don't have anything *new* to say, we should wrap this up."

"What?" She cried, "wait! No! Don't kill me!"

His index finger began to tense over the trigger, then,

"One more thing: That paper you write for... did you say it was 'The Cold Black Pepper?'"

"*Code* Black *Paper*!" She couldn't help advertising, even on the brink of death, "it's a—"

"That's all!"

She didn't hear the gun fire.

For a split second, a second so small it couldn't even be classed as a blink, there was nothing.

The next time Diana would be conscious she'd be sitting cross-legged on a field with a notebook and a pair of binoculars looking into the windows of an abandoned factory for signs of 7ft humanoid lizards. Unsurprisingly, after there hours of waiting and watching, there had been no signs yet. The glow of the sun warmed her skin, the sky was blue and clear, the grass was soft to touch.

The chance that time travel existed was as small a possibility in her mind as a forecast for a snowstorm in Hell.

