

Reservoir

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I step off of the Boston College shuttle onto the pavement. I am dressed just like every other student on the bus in jeans and an oversized sweatshirt with the name of my college centered in gold and maroon letters. I walk down the hill to Reservoir Station, looking down at the maze of dull metal tracks embedded in the pavement. I try to figure out where they all meet but they just crisscross over each other to where I can't see them anymore. There are no trains in sight. The lot is quiet, and an eerie stillness settles in. A track worker points me in the direction of the lounge. It is on the side of an old brick building. It looks like an entrance that you use when you're a local, when you know the place like the back of your hand. I have never been here before. I have only been in the state for two weeks. I am out of my element and feel as though I don't belong as I stand in front of the unsuspecting steel door, painted black.

I open the door and walk into a room. There are four tables and little offices off to the side and nothing else. Three women sit together at a table in the corner, laughing. Two men sit silently at the table next to them reading newspapers and look up from their lunches when I walk in. The women barely notice me. I walk over to a man who stands in the division between the office and the lounge. I assume he has some kind of authority based on the difference in color of his button-down shirt. I tell him I am a college student who needs to interview someone for a class project and was wondering if there was a driver who had some time to talk to me. He furrows his eyebrows and cocks his head slightly. He doesn't speak, but shoots me a glance that says, "I don't know why you're wasting my time. I have better things to do." The blanket of silence that covers the room suffocates me. It is finally lifted by the soft crackling of whispers from the drivers in the lounge. I shift my weight awkwardly and fiddle with the straps on my

backpack.

Out of the corner of my eye I see a big woman coming towards me. She is chuckling and I watch her shoulders bounce forcefully up and down. She smiles a smile so big, it brightens up the dismal space, though the dark wrinkles that frame her mouth suggest that she is not always this happy. The boss looks at her. He smiles. I breathe. "That's the one you should interview!" he says, laughing and pointing. I look at her with desperate eyes, but she explains she only has five minutes before she has to get back to driving. She tells me to ask someone in the lounge; they'd be glad to help. I hesitate, so she grabs me by the hand and drags me to the center of the room.

"Excuse me, everybody!" she announces. The women at the table smile. The men don't. "Can I have y'all attention!" She asks if anyone wants to help me out on a school project. They eye each other skeptically and glance at me. Seeing this, she emphasizes again that I am just a student; I am not threatening. She pulls me in close to hear and whispers in my ear to go over to the table of women. In the midst of their laughs they look at me. The air bubbles in the plastic-tiled floor pop under my sneakers as I am led over to them. The woman, still gripping my hand, assures me that they will answer my questions. I stand there awkwardly for a few seconds and soak in their laughter until one of them gestures for me to sit down next to her. Underneath their laughter there is fear. I never thought I would be threatening, but something about the way they shifted in their chairs told me they didn't trust me. They couldn't figure out why I would ever want to interview an MBTA driver. Sensing this, and doing my best to fill the gaps between us, I smile and assure them the interview would remain anonymous. The one sitting next to me seems the most enthusiastic and the most willing to answer my questions.

"Well, my name is Victoria," I tell her, breaking the ice and forcing a smile. "I am a student and I just need to ask you some questions so I can do a project for my English class."

The woman leans back and pulls her shirt down tight over her chest and stomach; she laughs a big, deep laugh. “Now what do you need to do that for?” she asks, eyeing her companions across from her.

“Uh ... well ...” I try to make things as comfortable as possible on this unexpected visit. “We are interviewing people and then writing about our interviews. It's supposed to help us with writing technique and things like that.” I hold my breath as I wait for her response.

“Sweetie, I got a book for that!” Her chest heaves with laughter. Despite her smile, I sense that the sarcasm in her voice indicates that I am just another one of those college students who walks around carrying a big cup of Starbucks coffee and pays no mind to her when I ride the train. I cringe because I know that there is some truth to that. I look up at the ceiling. It's the kind with the little holes spaced randomly in white foam. There are light brown stains in the space where the wall meets the ceiling. She asks why I keep looking around. I tell her it's because I'm trying to remember the atmosphere, that it's part of the assignment.

“Ha! Just make sure she doesn't go into the bathroom!” one of the women across from us says. She is older and her voice is slow and deep with a distinctive island drawl. They laugh and so do I, in another attempt to bridge the gaping hole between us who sit so close. I lean in and put my elbows on the table. The woman next to me tells me to call her Twinkles, and says, “Shoot.”

I ask her to start with the basics. She tells me she's from Detroit. Growing up, she spent her summers in Boston. She has been working on the Green Line for eleven years, but this is the first year she drives the buses. She is working overtime right now. She tells me that without me asking. She wakes up at five o'clock every morning to make her 6:50 report time. She gets a three-hour, unpaid break, which she doesn't like. She tells me that if the station had a gym, she

would work out during that time. But it doesn't, so she just eats. She tells me this as she puts her hand on her bulging stomach. She works for eleven hours and twenty-two minutes every day.

“But I like people,” she interjects. “I really do.”

I relax. The gap between us is dosing. I stare at the open notebook on my lap and search for the next appropriate question on my list. Everything I had planned out seems too formal for this, so I close my notebook and just let them talk. “You'd be amazed at what you see on the T,” she starts. She shifts her focus and smiles as she tells me how most people just have no respect for her. They act like she isn't there and treat her as though she isn't a person.

“What is something that you like about people?” I ask, attempting to steer the conversation in a positive direction. She tells me how there are a few nice ones. And they are the same ones every time.

“You swap recipes with these people,” she explains. “And the old people come by and leave candy.” She especially likes that. But she always goes back to describing most people she deals with every day, the ones with no respect; the ones who don't understand. “It's a thankless job. I have passengers tell me I sit on my butt all day. They don't realize that we work just as hard as they do.” The entire time the three of them are laughing. They have seen too much to take anything seriously. “Ignorance,” she says. “They don't know, they don't understand. We've gotten assaulted so many times, it's ridiculous. The benefits are great, though. Good vacation. But you need thick skin to work here.”

The entire time the three women swap anecdotes about different passengers and the horrible things they have seen people do. They tell me the best part of their day is going home, but the entire time their smiles never fade. We converse for the next fifteen minutes and I listen to their stories: about the conversations between passengers that they wish they had never heard;

stories about the homeless woman who wanders on and off the T, and the stench oozing from her that burns their nostrils; stories about the old man who used to drop off bouquets of flowers every day for all of them, but never stayed for a ride. They tell me he is dead now. They laugh at the ridiculousness of it all and I laugh because the gap between us is just a crack now.

Twinkles looks at the dock and tells me she has to go. Boston needs to be on time. We simultaneously pack our things and I thank them for taking time to talk to me. They laugh and smile and say the same. I walk out the same door I came in. I watch the women pile onto the cars as I walk up the hill to the station. I wave goodbye and they wave back. It's back to work for all of us.