

# TAKE THE Z TRAIN

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THE SEER HAD said—all things of certain wisdom and uncertain origin would derive so well from seers—'At the end, the old look back to relive and see again the pattern of their lives. But the young, peculiarly favoured by a destiny which otherwise seems to have neglected them, look searchingly forward, and for this brief instant of eternity see truly what would have been ahead—before the light snuffs out.'

It was a few minutes past five when Henry Abernathy left the office. It was always a few minutes past five when Henry Abernathy left the office. By that time he had taken care of the overflow of work which somehow always found its way to his desk toward the end of the working day and had put away his seersucker coat in the General Employees' Locker.

Longer ago than it would do to remember, Henry had been pleased by the title of Junior Assistant Supervisor of Transportation. He was Assistant all right—to everybody in the office—Supervisor of nothing, and Junior—that was a laugh, with the gray in his hair and the stooped shoulders!

As usual, Henry walked three blocks directly south from the office to the subway station, stopping only for the evening paper at the corner stand. It was all quite as usual. But he had been telling himself all day that this was an important day. He was going to break clean from the old life.

From the earliest, a phrase had been running through his head. It ran in well-worn channels for he had thought this thought before, he knew, though its authorship was

obscure. The seer had said . . . and the quotation, for that it must be, fascinated him, he knew not why, he'd never known why. Henry Abernathy had believed before in the clean break from his meaningless routine, from the same old faces at the office, the same stupid tasks, the same fear that lashed him with its thongs of insecurity to his humble position.

Thinking this way took him down the metal-tipped subway stairs, through the turnstile and onto the lower level where he waited for his train as he had, it seemed, thousands of times before.

He was suddenly struck with this dim, twinkle-lit cavern way, beneath the perimeter of the earth's surface. The people around him, the steel girders holding the rest of the world from tumbling in upon him, the gum machines, the penny scales . . . all these seemed to go out of focus with his concentration on his inner thinkings.

Through instinct he watched the black hole to his left at the end of the platform. He watched more closely, narrowly, as first the noise and then the flickering something away in the tunnel came closer, still closer. He looked up, he knew not why for it was a completely irrelevant act, at the ceiling of the underground station. It seemed, in the subterranean gloom, as far away as the top of the universe.

He was tired, he supposed. Supposed? He *knew*. Life does that to you, doesn't it? To everyone. Abernathy wondered if those around him were as miserable as he was, or if their misery was an unrecognised, locked-up something deep inside. For this underground tomb was a place for reflection, although conversely, in its bustle and noisome urgency, humans could take a holiday from their consciences, and pushing, wriggling, hurrying off and on these mechanised moles that bore them to and from their tasks, forget, and in the forgetting be complacent.

Times before beyond counting when Henry Abernathy had waited here like this for his A or B train, he'd thought that people must age faster in such an alien environment—the so-hard, yieldless platform, the dank air, the

farness away from things that counted like sky and sun and wind. He wondered if people like himself didn't surely age more rapidly in a subway tomb like this where neither hope nor anything else could grow or flourish.

The dull metal thing slid into the station, its caterpillar length bucking with shrill, rasping protests, its garish-lit cars beckoning. The doors slid open and Henry Abernathy walked automatically forward, glancing as he always did—for he was a meticulous man—at the square in the window that gave the alphabetical letter of the train. There were only two that came to this platform—the A, which was an express and the B, a local. Both would get him home.

He was aboard with the doors slid silently closed behind him and the train jerking, jumping to life again; he was sitting on the uncomfortable cane seats when what he had just automatically glanced at in the identification square on the outside window took form in his mind. So strongly that he got up and walked over to the window and looked at the letter in reverse. It glowed smally against the moving black background of tunnel, for they were out of the station now. It said plainly, so there could be no mistake, Z train.

The subway shook with its gathering speed, and Henry went back to his seat. It was most peculiar. Never before had any but an A or B train run on this track. He'd never heard of a Z train! Why . . . he didn't even know where he was going!

He sat with his hands clasped in his lap and felt, on the other side of the wonder, a relief that may be this was the beginning of his adventure. The train lurched and zoomed on, and as the moments ticked away ominously, he realised that the underground monster fled headless and heedless without the reprieve of those occasional light oases in the dreadful night of the subway. Surely they would have come to another station by now! Then . . . wait a moment more. Certainly by *now*! This, then, was his adventure! This was the difference that would, despite himself and his own weakness to effect the change, *any*

change, alter the course for him. That part he gloated over—no more boss, no more regular hours. . . .

The train was going faster. It has been a monotonous life, Henry Abernathy, he told himself. Monotonous and quite terrible. He could confess to himself now something that he would never do in the sunshine or on the street that was somewhere miles above him and this rushing thing that bore him on. He would confess that he had thought of self-destruction.

A clamminess came over him. The air from the tunnel was dank as it whistled in an open window at the other end of the car. It was a very long way between stations, and at this speed, that wasn't right!

He sought out other faces for reassurance. Somehow, quite suddenly, there seemed to be so few of them, and with those, the eyes were averted or hidden behind bundles or papers. Abernathy cleared his throat to test his voice. He would say to someone—the nearest person—'Beg pardon, but what train am I on?' Now wasn't that a silly question! He was sitting nearly directly across from the window whereon the identification plate was set, and the plate said so clearly—Z train.

He sat more stiffly against the seat back, tension taking hold of him and ramrodding his body. It was his imagination that said that the train plunged forward eagerly into the ever-greater darkness of the unfolding tunnel, for a train doesn't plunge eagerly—not even a Z train! A poetic liberty, a figment of the imagination!

Henry fixed his eyes on the nearest person to him—a very young man with books and sweater, obviously just from school, an eager young man, so eager. With dreams, Henry Abernathy thought with a kind of sadness. The young man was looking at nothing particularly, and Abernathy thought, Ah, soon he will look at me. I shall catch his eye and say, leaning forward so I don't have to advertise it to the whole rest of the car, 'Young man, I seem to have gotten on the wrong train'—a small smile at my own stupidity—'but just *where* are we going?'

But the young man in the sweater would not look his

way. He tapped his books with his fingertips, tapped his foot on the floor, whistled through his teeth and looked out the window or up and down the car, casually, swiftly.

Abernathy got up to speak to him directly then thought better of it. He passed by close enough to see that the youngster was cleaner than most. He rather imagined *he* had looked something like that on his way home from school years ago, but that was far from here in both time and space.

There was a girl, a pretty girl, he noticed—for he was not too old to miss those things—wide-set eyes, a good chin, nice mouth, well-dressed. He would ask her, but of course one didn't do that. With other men in the car, it would look . . . well, *forward* if he directed his inquiries to a pretty young girl.

There were several other men, heavy set, semi-successful or better, watch chains over their paunches, briefcases—the business type. Bosses. They reminded him so. . . .

Then nearly at the door that opened between the cars there was another man, youngish, in an ill-fitting tuxedo, probably going to a party. It was a rented tuxedo, Henry Abernathy thought to himself with some satisfaction. He knew what *that* was, all right! Why, when he'd been just about that age, he'd once rented a tuxedo and it probably had looked no better on him than it did on this fellow.

Abernathy reached the door and clutched at the reddish-yellow brass knob. It had the reassuring feel of all of life, of reality with the stickiness from scores of hands; people opening and closing it, walking forward, walking back, touching it with their hands.

He went forward then, adding his steps to the speed of the train in that direction. Was it one, two, or three cars, he wasn't sure, nor was he of the other passengers. He staggered a little to the rocking of the subway beneath him. He yearned suddenly to be rid of this thing—this scene, this place. All those figures, those persons he'd sat with in the first car took on a strange, nightmarish familiarity in his mind.

It was the drudgery, the overwork, and the hopelessness of his life that made him this way, he excused, like other people say, 'Something I ate.'

That was what made him *know* that the young boy with the sweater was Henry Abernathy, and so too perhaps, was the slightly older man in the rented tuxedo. The girl was the *she* who had said no. That was long ago too. And those men, those out-of-shape pudgy, expensive cigar-smoking men, were the bosses he'd worked for and others he hadn't worked for, who had given him a glance and dismissal with a look as being beneath them and unworthy of their attention.

The fullness of horror overtook Henry Abernathy as he reached the front of the first car. He leaned against the motorman's compartment and looked ahead at the tunnel rushing onto them and around them. The tunnel curved away, curved away, always turning, it seemed, as though they were going in a circle.

Henry stood and watched fascinated. He could go no further. He could not go back. He looked curiously into the motorman's cubicle. That place was dark, the shade drawn nearly to the bottom of the window.

But there was a man in there with a motorman's cap, and a gloved hand rested on the throttle pulled full open . . . a man who swayed with the motion of the train he drove. A motorman.

The years came back to Henry like leaves falling in sequence, and those people back there behind him were all parts of it, of himself and of others he had known. This train then was what? His life from beginning to end and his destiny?

He stood hypnotised by his thoughts, drawn by the dark fascination of the tunnel ahead, the little yellow lights that flashed by, marking with their feebleness both space and speed. It was an eternity that Henry Abernathy stood there . . . or it was one second. It mattered neither.

But ahead, finally, he saw something. It was not exactly a station, but there was a light, a small flickering light set in the side of the tunnel, and they seemed now instead of rushing towards it, to float towards it.

The screeching, groaning, complaining shrieks of the subway at high speed died away so that they must be slowing down. The light came nearer. There was a sign, a very big sign. He'd seen them before on the occasion when a crowded train at rush hour stops between stations in the darkness of the tunnel and the sign, perhaps pointing or indicating a nearby stairway that leads to the above—the sign says 'Exit'.

There was a sign here under the light. But look, there was more. Across the tracks there was something. He watched intently during the hours it seemed that it took their train to roll closer. It mattered not which he saw first, in what order he perceived these things—the sign, the thing on the tracks; the thing on the tracks, the sign.

It was a body on the tracks, lying face upward fully across them like a sack of something. The face was strangely luminous in the tunnel's darkness, and that face was as terribly familiar as those others behind him in the train. And it was so *right* and so *of course* that the sign under the flickering, yellow light simply read 'Z'.

They were close now, within a couple of rapid pulse beats; the body nearly under the metal monster; the sign, the Z of it growing larger and larger.

And then there was a blinding flash—all the brightness of all the world, of all time exploding in the tunnel, across the so-familiar face and body and Z sign, into the train, into him and his head, touching chords and notes that came out like music—that's what it was—music, easy to hear as it played around and around.

It was the sound of the carousel, the Calliope, and as the little series of whistles, played by keys like an organ, popped and hooted, Henry Abernathy went around and around in the sea of remembering on the gaily painted horse—a horse that fed and brightened itself on his tears of joy and pleasure.

This was an important train day for Henry. He was going to break clean from the old life, and perhaps the old life started—or the only part of it that counted started—on the floor at home with the cream-coloured walls that



seemed so tall at the age of seven.

And though he was much beyond it, there were blocks on the floor. He was to spell something out with them, and Mother was persistent. It was a word, a meaningless word, that matters not among the thousands in our language. He was perverse, and there was one letter he would not add, but Mother was so persistent.

'Think!' she said. 'Think!'

And he remembered the deepening colour of her face, remembered it as he remembered now all these other things, past and future.

'Think!' she repeated. 'Think!'

One letter he had to add to make the word perfect, to fill it out for her adult mind to correctness.

'Think!' she said again. '*It's an unusual letter!*'

He knew the letter so well. He had but to push it into place with his foot or his hand. But revolt stayed him.

And then Mother said darkly: 'Think, Henry! Do it or you don't go to the fair!'

And with that the roulette wheel completed its final spin and stopped, marking its choice, and he, petulantly and still unwilling but broken down by the knowledge that he would lose something greater, kicked the letter into place.

And she smiled with the victory and said, 'Of course! Z! You knew it all the time, Henry!'

It was later, then, that he had gone to the carnival almost exploding with his small-child excitement. Was there enough time for all the things that had to be done and seen, touched and played with? Was there enough of him to smell and eat all the things to be smelled and eaten?

And at the end, the best of all—the merry-go-round, on the horses that went *up* and down, *up* and down, round and round, with the strange, strange wonderful music of the Calliope—he would travel miles on his green and yellow horse even as Mother stood outside the world of his race-track and gestured and seemed to stamp her foot, wanting him to stop and making motioning noises.

It was then—sometime during his umpteenth ride on

the bucking green and yellow merry-go-round horse—then so that his seven-year-old mind knew well the whispering sounds of the Calliope organ, then that something had come out of another world, it seemed—a thing of crashing noise and blinding light; a thing prefaced only by a little wetness and Mother's anger as she stood, no longer controlling him, already completely outside of his world, under a hastily raised umbrella, stamping her foot and calling to him.

Henry was caught up then in that instant by his friend, who took him in this time of greatest joy bursting like the nod of a flower. It was for that moment that the seer had spoken . . . that the Calliope played . . . that Z was remembered.

It was that moment that showed him how it would have been in times yet unborn, to be forgotten forever in time never to be. . . .