

Unnoticed

She was the kind of woman who went unnoticed. You could tell just by looking at her. The understated clothes, the sensible shoes, the mousy hair, the glasses. She wasn't unattractive, exactly, but nothing about her stood out.

She was the kind of woman who ran an office so smoothly, nobody noticed it was being run. The coffee was always fresh. The cheques were on time. The copier never ran out of toner. She got overlooked for promotions but never complained.

All she wanted was to come home every night and curl up with a good book and a cup of tea. Maybe she tended to her ailing mother. Maybe her cat woke her up promptly every morning to be fed.

She was dutiful.

I don't know any of these things for sure. But I had a good vantage point from my seat on the rush-hour bus from Boucherville to Longueuil metro.

She would be there, every morning at the same time, waiting at her usual stop. She wasn't one of those harried suburbanites who came running down the street, waving frantically at the driver, climbing aboard all dishevelled and out of breath. She was unfailingly punctual.

Her stop was near the end of the milk-run, just before the bus got on the highway. It was packed by then, so she never had a seat. She would cling to a post or a handle, never exasperated, just resigned.

One evening, as I boarded the bus at the Longueuil terminus to come home, there she was. It was odd to see her sitting down. She was no different, really, other than an imperceptible slump in her shoulders after a long day in the stifling late-August heat. At least she didn't have to stand morning and night, I thought. It made me feel better somehow.

She was staring out the window, temporarily ignoring the book propped open on top of her purse. I took the aisle seat next to her. She didn't acknowledge me directly, but ensconced herself further in, lest she inconvenience me.

As we expressed down the highway, I thought about making small talk, perhaps even trying to engage her in an actual conversation. I wondered what her voice sounded like. But she only fleetingly looked up from her book. I didn't find an opening.

It was too late now. The bus was beginning its reverse milk-run in Boucherville, and within a couple of stops, she would leave her quiet commute behind for an evening of her quiet home life, with her mother and her cat and her book and her tea.

She hadn't started gathering her things yet, with that discreet but purposeful way that commuters have, to let their fellow riders know they need to get past them imminently. But I got up, unprompted.

She looked up at me when she realized I wasn't getting off the bus, but merely letting her out in anticipation of her stop. It didn't compute for her that I knew. In those two or three seconds that our eyes locked, I thought I saw perplexity give way to shock then slowly to gratitude, as slowly as two or three seconds allow.

She swiftly collected her things and her thoughts, then stood up. She looked at me once again.

"Merci..." she managed to whisper as she edged past me into the aisle.

I cracked a sheepish half-smile and nodded.

Summer was over, and I reverted back to my student schedule the following week.

I never saw her again.

I wonder if anyone else ever did.