The East Window

A short novella in three parts

M. R. Hale

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Dedication

For everyone who keeps a light on in an empty building.

One: The Key

Mara opened the station on Wednesdays. That was the arrangement she had made with the county eleven years ago, when the last passenger train stopped running and someone in an office far away decided the building should not be allowed to fall down on its own. One day a week she unlocked the doors, swept the platform, wound the clock above the ticket hatch and wrote *all quiet* in a ledger nobody read.

So the envelope bothered her.

It lay just inside the door, face down, as if someone had pushed it under on Tuesday night. But when she turned it over, the postmark said Wednesday, this Wednesday, 2:40 p.m. It was not yet nine in the morning.

"That's not possible," she said to the empty waiting room, and the waiting room, as usual, agreed with her by saying nothing.

Inside was a brass key with a crooked tooth. She knew it at once. It was the key to the east window, the tall one behind the ticket hatch that had not opened since the year the river

flooded. She knew it because its twin was in her coat pocket, where it had been every Wednesday for eleven years.

She laid the two keys side by side on the counter. Same brass. Same crooked tooth. Same small nick on the bow where, long ago, she had dropped hers on the platform edge.

* * *

The clock above the ticket hatch struck nine. Mara counted the strokes the way she always did, and on the ninth, from the far end of the empty platform, came a second chime, softer, as if another clock had answered.

There was no other clock.

Two: The Platform

She walked the length of the platform with the broom held in front of her like a lance, which she knew was foolish, and which she did anyway.

The boards were wet. That was not unusual; the roof had leaked for years. What was unusual was the pattern of the wet. It ran in a line from the end of the platform to the east window, a line of footprints no wider than a child's, each one pressed into the grime and then filled with water, as though whoever had made them had walked out of the river.

"Hello?" Mara said.

The wind moved the loose tin on the roof. Down the line, where the rails ran into the trees, a signal arm she had never seen move lifted, held, and fell again.

She went back inside and wrote in the ledger: *Wednesday. Envelope. Second key. Footprints, east side.* Then, after a moment, she crossed out *footprints* and wrote *marks*, because it was easier to keep a ledger than to keep a story.

* * *

At noon she ate her sandwich on the bench where passengers used to wait for the 12:15. She had never seen the 12:15. It had stopped before her time. But she knew its timetable by heart, because the timetable was still painted on the wall, and on Wednesdays she read it the way other people read the newspaper.

12:15, eastbound. Calls at all stations to Harrow Junction.

At 12:15 the rails began to hum.

Three: The Window

The east window was taller than a man and narrower than a door, and its glass was the color of weak tea. Mara stood in front of it with a key in each hand.

She tried her own key first. It turned halfway and stopped, the way it had always stopped, the way it had stopped the year of the flood when she had tried to open it to let the water out.

Then she tried the key from the envelope.

It turned all the way.

The window swung inward without a sound, and the air that came through it was warm and smelled of coal smoke and oranges. Beyond it was the platform, the same platform, but dry and swept and crowded with people in coats she had only seen in photographs. A train stood at the edge, its engine breathing. A boy in a cap held up a ticket to the guard. On the station wall, the timetable was freshly painted.

The end

The east window, open onto the platform.

The guard looked up, directly at Mara, and touched the brim of his hat.

"You'll be the keeper," he said. "We wondered when you'd come."

Mara looked down at the two keys in her hands. Then she put her own key back in her pocket, where it had always been, and stepped through.

* * *

In the ledger, in a hand that was hers and was not, the next Wednesday's entry reads: *All quiet.*

About the Author

M. R. Hale is a pen name used for this formatting sample. The story, the author and the town of Harrow Junction are invented.