

I. LIVE-SITE

All four of the railfans from the Internet were standing at the fence when Kate and Mesut got there. This was not the plan. The plan, which was really quite clever and well thought out, was that Kate and Mesut would get there at precisely the right moment: They didn't want to be first, which would have involved a certain amount of awkward standing around and wondering if they were at the right spot, and also would have given them an edge in the establishing themselves as *de facto* leaders of the group, if they wanted that edge, which they didn't. They also didn't want to be last, because then everyone who was eager to get moving (which was everyone, they were working on the assumption it would be everyone, that's why they were here) would resent them. And besides, who wants to be last? Cool people, probably. Kate and Mesut were trying very hard not to be cool.

The actual precise right moment for Kate and Mesut to arrive would have been sometime after at least one person had shown up, but before the last person had arrived. This would have put them in the middle of the group, literally, and metaphorically, which is what they wanted. The metaphorical one. They didn't want to come across as a gang of two. They wanted to blend in with everyone else.

"What would be really good would be if we arrived at different times," Mesut had said the night before. Kate had invited him to Pickles, a bar near her apartment. It was her favorite place to go, and yet she had a moment of panic about it when she got there and saw him standing out front. It was

raining and something about the cut of his pants and the length of the sleeves on his jacket (narrow and a little on the short side, respectively) reminded her that he was European. Europeans thought American things were lame, right? Especially American chain restaurants? Pickles probably wasn't famous enough for Germans to know about it and make fun of it (she imagined Mesut at home with some shadowy German friends, watching a TV show where dumb Americans go to a T.G.I. Friday's and are stupid, with all the Germans laughing uproariously at how dumb the Americans and their restaurant were). Still, there were three or four Pickleses around DC and maybe he'd seen another one already. Was there one at the airport? Oh, God, she was pretty sure there was one at the airport. He probably saw it. The gig was up.

But once they were inside Mesut seemed completely uninterested in sneering at the decor, which was all wood paneling and old-timey colored glass, and was probably exactly the same in all the Pickleses all over town. (Kate suddenly remembered being inside the one in the airport, which had the same layout as its neighborhood twin except one entire wall was missing and you could look out at everyone slumped over waiting to board their delayed flight Cincinnati. It was unsettling.) What Mesut was primarily interested in was beer, and talking about the next day's live-site.

"They don't know we know each other outside the message boards," he said, drinking beer number three, "and I don't see any reason to let on that we do."

This was going to be the first live-site where Kate was the lead, and not for the first time she wished that she were doing it with another Agent. Mesut knew in broad strokes what they were up to, of course, but he was thinking about it all engineer-y, or at least all engineer-after-three-beers-y. He wasn't showing any visible signs of intoxication, but was still saying things like this: "Ideally, one of the other guys should get there first, then I'll show up, then another guy, then you, then the last guy. That way we're seamlessly integrated into their group. Like the teeth of a zipper." He pulled the zipper of his jacket up and down a bit, in what he appeared to believe was a meaningful fashion.

Kate started to explain how hard it would be to hike to a remote location and time their arrival amongst a group of people whose own precise arrival times they had no way of knowing in advance, but the thought of it gave her a bit of a headache, so instead she just said, "But we're meeting four of them. The way you described it, it sounds like there's only three."

Mesut looked at her, a bit crestfallen, but respectful that she had found a fatal flaw in his plan. "Another beer, please," he asked the waitress as she walked by. She was no longer fazed that he wasn't asking for any particular brand.

Even though they knew they couldn't time their arrival with teeth-of-a-zipper levels of exactitude, they at least had high hopes of not being first or last. These hopes came to nothing when, parked in front of Mesut's hotel the next morning, Kate began to program their destination into her GPS, only to have the sinking realization that "Where the chain-link fence angles

off to the east along the Orange Line a quarter mile north of Addison Road" was not something that the GPS unit would understand. She began to worry less that Mesut would think she was a dumb American and more that he would just think she was dumb, in a totally nationality-neutral kind of way.

"It's a *Gewuffel!*" he exclaimed from the passenger seat as she poked feebly at the GPS's screen. She assumed this meant "a terrible problem caused by the person ostensibly in charge, because she doesn't know what she's doing," until she saw that he was entirely absorbed by the vending machine Clark Bar that he was eating for breakfast. "In Germany, we call these *Gewuffelbarren*. It's the exact same thing, except" -- he chewed thoughtfully - - "I think this has less peanut butter?" He peered at the archaeological layers of textured sugar making up the candy bar, as revealed by the bite he had taken out of it, then looked at the label. "Why is it a 'Clark Bar'? Who is Clark? Is it like Clark Kent?"

They did eventually find an abandoned gas station, surrounded by tall grass, along Addison Road where they could park. From there it was a short hike along the shoulder to the path that led through the woods uphill. It was still early in the morning, and the grass and branches were a little wet and the cuffs of their pants were getting damp. They only hit one dead end -- to be fair, it was the one that the description printed out from the message boards said they'd hit -- and it was around 7:10 a.m. when they abruptly emerged from the trees and saw the chain-link fence along the ridgeline and the four railfans standing along it.

Only 10 minutes late, but still late enough to be last. So much for plans.

"Hi! I'm Kate. Kmac1987." She gave her board name even though, as the only woman here, it was completely obvious who she was. *Mac* was as in *MacAlaister*, her mother's maiden name, and she was actually born in 1986 - - you never want to give anyone anything they could successfully Google -- but when the forums software asked her whether she was male or female, she had been straight there, out of necessity if nothing else. She knew other people at the Agency who juggled online personas of different genders, the better to gain trust or social currency or just alleviate boredom, but obviously this was a bad idea if there were even a chance that things would end in a live-site.

Still, introducing yourself was good protocol, as was smiling and making eye contact and a whole host of other things that she wasn't entirely sure her fellow trainspotters were going to do. She was pleasantly surprised on three out of four counts. Charlie, aka RailFanner, was a portly, grinning, bearded man in his 50s; his coveted board nickname was a testament to how early had joined the community. Darius, who went by Foamer Boy, was a younger, shier, African-American man, and Kate knew that he and RailFanner spent a lot of time skulking around train yards and were generally the instigator of in-person outings on the boards.

Jack, aka The_Real_Jack, was small, stooped, somewhere in his 30s or 40s. He looked suspiciously at everyone, and didn't say much. His username was the end product of a battle for dominance with a different Jack on the boards on the question of whether Federal Railroad Administration rules

ought to be relaxed for commuter lines in order to accommodate new diesel multiple unit trains coming over from Europe, and also on whether now-vanquished Other Jack really had any business talking about trains with anyone, anywhere. The fight had ended as the stuff of legend, with Jack as the real Jack. Finally, there was Rajiv, aka Rajiv, who was also making his first organized raifanning trip and had a camera that was impressively enormous, though Rajiv kept looking at it and fiddling with it as if he weren't exactly sure what its many buttons were for.

For a moment she tried to see herself as they might: short, red hair pulled back in a ponytail, glasses that weren't intimidatingly chic and weren't outright dorky but also weren't hipster dorky. She had agonized more about the glasses than any other part of the outfit, since for the rest -- anorak, comfortable jeans, white sneakers -- she had decided fairly quickly that the right note to strike would be clothes that conveyed a message of simple functionality, which had the dual advantage of not drawing attention to themselves and also being actually simple and functional.

"And I'm BerlinZug," said Mesut. "Real name's Mustafa." This brought Kate up short a bit. Live-site best practices were that you used your own first name, because otherwise you might not react naturally in conversation. She was pretty sure she had told Mesut this at Pickles, though that might have been around beer three. As she briefly looked him up and down, it occurred to her that his clothes, which had seemed so European last night, might actually just be the wrong size for him.

"You a Siemens guy, Mustafa?" asked Charlie, jovially. "Deutscheland uber Alles?" Kate's stomach did a flip-flop, seeing as she was under the impression that Germans didn't like being needled with Nazi slogans, especially Germans like Mesut whose parents were from Turkey. More to the point, Mesut was a Siemens guy -- specifically, he was a junior engineer for Siemens SA, Rail Systems division, which was of course why he was here with Kate and the others along the Orange Line tracks in the first place.

Mesut, to her relief, did not look surprised. He blinked quickly a few times, but he did that a lot anyway. "It's mostly Siemens equipment on the U-Bahn and S-Bahn in Berlin, though there's some leftover stuff from the DDR here and there. But I came out here because I want to see what WMATA has going on. Breda and CAF, right?"

Charlie grinned. "Yeah, though the last new cars on this line are from AdTranz -- before Bombardier bought it -- and got here in the early '90s. Ugly sons of bitches. Shitty seats too, and the PA systems are always on the fritz. If we're lucky, though, we might get to see the railcars WMATA has from up your way in here for testing this morning."

Mesut and Kate remained poker-faced.

While they had been talking, Darius had turned his back to them. Kate had filed this away in the back of her head -- *notice, but do not judge, unusual social behavior*, one of the first things the Agency tells you about live-sites -- but now she realized he was taking the fence apart. Some of the links had

been snipped, probably a long time ago; to a casual observer, the fence looked sturdy, or as sturdy as a chain-link fence ever looks, but when Darius unlatched a makeshift hook, he was able to peel some of it away, revealing a portal, just big enough for a person to squeeze through to the other side. Like a tiny little elf door, she thought, except instead of a twee little world of miniature shoemakers on the other side there were enormous pieces of machinery purchased with millions of tax dollars.

"Gentlemen," Charlie said, gesturing to the hatch. Then he looked at Kate and caught himself. "Sorry, it's usually kind of a sausagefest out here. Ladies first?"

Kate smiled and nodded and slipped through the fence, then moved to her left so the other railfans had room to stand. The fence ran along the top of a ridgeline, leaving her standing somewhat precariously at the top of a steep hill, which ran down around fifty feet, through tall grass and prickly bushes and the occasional tree to the railroad tracks that ran along the lowest point of a little valley below. On the other side of the tracks, there was another, gentler hill, more heavily wooded. It was a pretty pastoral scene, the green of the trees just starting to fade into fall colors, until you looked around more closely, and then you noticed the strewn bits of trash, wrappers and mysterious abandoned piles of paper. On the other side of the tracks there was what appeared to be a toilet, lying on its side in a puddle of water.

Mesut was the last through the hole in the fence, Kate noticed; she hoped this satisfied whatever OCD need he had to place her and him, the two cuckoos, symmetrically among the real baby birds in the nest.

The portion of the rail line that they could see was a long arc through the woods, and they heard the train coming before they could see it.

Thousands of pounds of metal, thousands of moving parts, all rattling against each other and cruising along steel rails at sixty miles an hour. It was the early part of the commute. Inside the train were the eager go-getters who were going to get so much done on their spreadsheets or whatever before their lazy co-workers rolled in at 9, or people who worked under the careful eye of the clock and needed to be in at 8 so they could take their hour-long unpaid lunch later. Maybe some shift workers making a reverse commute from the suburban office park where they sat behind a security desk to their little apartments, where they'd draw the curtains and try to sleep. They read or listened to music or stared into space or napped. Most of them probably didn't think about the mechanical marvel that was taking them where they were going. It was kind of grubby in there, admittedly. The colors were whatever WMATA's low-bid branding consultants thought were cool in 1994. Some of the passengers didn't like the look of some of the other passengers. In at least one car, something or someone smelled like pee, and everyone was trying to figure out who or what it was without being too obvious about it.

And yet. When the front of the Orange Line train to Vienna finally turned the corner so they could see it, Kate gasped a little, because it was still amazing.

Charlie waved his hand a couple of times, gesturing for them to crouch down in the weeds. "Operator probably can't see us and wouldn't bother telling anyone if he did, but no point in putting a sign up that says 'WE'RE TRESPASSING, PLEASE ARREST US.'"

This was Kate's favorite part of a live-site: the part where everyone shut up and loved it. All six of them silently watched three hundred feet of train go by, not so silently. It was different from being on the platform in a station, when other people have places to go and you have places to go and you're trying not to trip over anybody and the train is just a box that gets you there, hopefully soon. That morning, none of them wanted anything from the train except for it to be itself, metal and loud and fast. It was, Kate thought, the difference between seeing an animal at the zoo and seeing it in the woods. It wasn't here for them. They were in its element.

This part of Kate's brain -- the part that felt the joy vibrating off everyone else squatting awkwardly in the tall grass and vibrated along with the resonant frequency -- was the part that was most important to her job. It only takes a few minutes for an enthusiast to spot a phony. But as she enjoyed the feeling of the train's roar in her guts, other parts of her brain were at work too, assessing each of the trainspotters in turn. The client was going to make a multi-million-dollar pitch to a regional transit agency; this was way beyond a consumer-level game where you're trying to pick out who in the gang was the coolest, for whatever definition of "cool" had emerged from the group dynamics. Which of these guys was going to go to a public meeting at a middle school auditorium on a weeknight? And of

those, which of them would come across least like a crazy person? Darius had barely made eye contact with anybody but Charlie the entire time they had been there, and Rajiv, who hadn't taken his face away from the camera from the moment the train had come around the bend, would probably only show up to pick up brochures. That left two candidates.

When the train finished rounding the curve and disappeared from their view behind the trees, heading in the direction of the distant city, Jack was the first to break the silence. "What a cheap pile of garbage."

A little bell started ringing, loudly and insistently, in the back of Kate's head.

"Way to kill everyone's buzz, Jack," Charlie said. He wasn't unkind about it. This was a conversation that, as near as Kate could tell from the discussion boards, had been going on for years.

"If you cretins want to go ga-ga over an ugly trainset that WMATA got conned into paying too much for, just so that they could have the privilege of owning the shortest mean time between failures in the country, be my guest."

Action opportunity: When an enthusiast's affection for a category and his disdain for a specific instance of that category combine to cause internal dissonance—

Charlie shrugged. "Look, I said before they were ugly. Not gonna argue with you on that. That hexagonal cross-section was maybe OK in the '70s

when they thought the space age was around the corner. Doing it in the '90s was a joke. Doesn't mean you can't enjoy the moment."

"The air conditioning's out in how many cars in that train, do you think? Two? Three? I'm sure those guys are really going to be enjoying their moments with all the sweaty commuters."

—he is open to having his category affection rekindled by a new product, even if he doesn't know it.

Charlie shook his head and started gingerly picking his way down the side of the hill. "Whatever, man, we should get moving if you wanna get a close look at something that you haven't decided to hate yet."

Kate was already positioning herself to make sure she was closest to Jack for the hike down.

"My guy told me it will be on schedule block 1456," Darius piped up. "That's the next block."

"If your guy is right," Charlie said. "They might have put it off for a few days."

"1456," Darius said. "Next block."

The six of them made their way down the slope to get closer to the trackbed. They could have covered the whole distance in a run in a few

minutes if they didn't mind possibly stumbling onto the tracks; as it was, they took it in a sort of slow trot. For a moment, Kate was very aware that Mesut was brushing past her to catch up with Charlie, but mostly she stuck by Jack. "Have you seen any of the pics of the S360s online?" she asked him.

He snorted. "Glamour shots. Taken inside a factory. I think most of the pictures of the interiors are just for show, not even inside a car body."

"Someone's gotta be the first. I mean, we need new railcars. You said it."

He looked her, brow furrowed. "What do *you* think of the pictures? You ask a lot of questions on the boards, but I never hear you offering much by way of opinions."

She shrugged. "I like the materials they're using for the interior. Rugs and cushy seats always sound great in theory to someone who never rides the train but thinks they should be classy, but they get real grungy real fast. And the nextstop display looks awesome. Huge screens. They can put up pictures of the tourist stuff so that even the dumbest people can't miss it."

"What d'you think of the braking system they use?"

She shrugged. "I don't really know much about brakes."

Jack's mouth twitched in what was probably a smile. "Neither do I, to be honest. I was hoping you might. Read something about how they've had

some trouble in France. But in France they put rubber tires on trains, so who the hell knows what goes on there."

They were almost to the bottom of the slope now, and Kate could see Mesut gesturing grandly as he talked to Charlie. She was hoping he wasn't overselling the S360, or at least wasn't overselling it in a way that sounded like *selling*. There was always the potential for a live-site to blow up in your face, especially when a client was involved.

"You know they bought S360s for the new metros in Dubai and Mecca?" Kate said to Jack.

"Hope the air conditioning works."

"I know, I thought about that the other day when I was on the Orange Line when the AC was on the fritz, so I looked it up. They have crazy uptimes there, written into the contract. I think it's 97 percent or something like that."

"Is that right." *Click*, she heard in her head.

The six of them had arrived about as close to the tracks as they dared, about five or six feet. Kate had caught up with Charlie and Mesut, close enough to hear them. Apparently these two did know quite a bit about brakes, because they were having a very animated discussion about them, though Kate was kind of surprised at the side Mesut was taking. "Oh, absolutely the design Kawasaki uses is much more clever," he said. "You can

run this many tests on it and find it scores that many points better on whatever brake quality score you come up with. But, you know, they're both within every country's safety margins by a long shot. Like, it's the difference between a one-in-a-billion and two-in-a-billion accident rate. Twice as good, but both fine for the real world."

Client employees who really work on products were the only ones allowed on live-sites, engineers like Mesut, not sales or marketing. *Genuine enthusiasm is not totalizing and can accommodate criticism*, another oft-repeated Agency maxim.

"Well, you better hope those brakes work," said Charlie, "because here it comes."

The Siemens S360 emerged suddenly around the turn. This was the train that Mesut had helped design, that Siemens was trying, with the Agency's help, to sell to WMATA. They had paid who knows how many millions to ship a prototype to Washington for test runs. It was the train that, with any luck, an unusually large number of interested, well-informed, slightly obsessed citizens would praise on their own accord at informational meetings, and would say nice things about in letters sent in response to Requests For Comments put up on obscure government websites.

It was much quieter than the older Adtranz train they had seen from up above. If they had really wanted to get a good look at it, take in its details, their original vantage point would have been better. But if they wanted to do that, they could have just watched and rewatched the videos on

Siemens' YouTube channel. The point of driving out to a pre-arranged spot near Addison Road and slipping through a hole cut in a chain-link fence was to have a more visceral experience.

"1456!" shouted Darius. "That's my guy!" The AdTranz cab window had been a tiny portal, but the operator of the S360 sat in what was almost a fishbowl at the front of the train. This was one of the many WMATA employees who Darius had cultivated through awkward, irrepressible love of transit, and he nodded and smiled at the assembled trainspotters as the S360 barreled towards them. It really was beautiful, all curves and sleekness where the Adtranz train was boxy and clunky. And someone at Siemens, in what was a winning but surely expensive gesture, had painted the whole thing orange, orange for the Orange Line, but a more muted version of color than what you saw on wayfinding signage, nothing garish. It was quieter than the older train too, but the wind howl still quickly built up to near unbearable levels, and Kate realized that some of the noise was coming from her because she was shouting, they all were, Rajiv behind his camera, Darius jumping up and down. Even Jack was smiling visibly. And then the train was on them, a huge orange blur, and Kate, who was by far the smallest one there, felt herself picked up and knocked to the ground by the blast of air that the train pushed ahead and around it. It was the difference between seeing an animal at the zoo and having it charge at you in the woods.

Mesut did a double take and kneeled down besides her. He shouted something at her that she assumed was "Are you all right?" or something like it. She gave him a double thumbs up and a big smile. "This is amazing!"

she shouted at him, and if before she had been experiencing joy vibrations, now she was feeling joy in her lungs, they were all breathing it in and out, and it felt fantastic. Joy, joy, joy, joy.

The train passed by and Kate jumped up and everyone was laughing and talking at once. Darius high fived everybody, then hugged Charlie. Kate scrambled to pick up some of the stuff that had tumbled out of her purse when she fell, but the six of them quickly decided that they had been trespassing for long enough and it was time to scam. They ran up the hill, that-was-greating and did-you-seeing and I-can't-believe-you-fell-overing, heading for the hole in the fence. Left behind on the ground, difficult to spot among the trash strewn about, was a card that had fallen out of Kate's purse, which she was lucky none of the trainspotters had seen. It read:

Kate Berkowitz

subConscious Agency

"ENTHUSIASM IS OUR BUSINESS"

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Thanks for reading! --Josh Fruhlinger