
Laura Bellini
Late for Our Own Train
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ROMANS

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INTRO

The train was scheduled to leave at seven forty-two. At seven thirty-nine, I was standing on the platform with a cup of coffee whose lid was leaking, staring at the electronic departure board as though sheer determination might persuade the numbers displayed there to be a little more accommodating.

I hadn't missed a train in three years. Not because I was exceptionally punctual. I had simply learned to leave myself a safety margin. Twenty minutes for a connection, an extra day for unexpected delays, a backup plan in case the original became impossible. In my work as a travel guide writer, that kind of caution was considered professionalism. In my private life, my friend Marta called it a fear of surprises wrapped in elegant packaging.

That morning in Chur, Switzerland, my safety margin was three minutes.

"Watch out, please."

A man's voice sounded directly behind me. I drew my elbow back, but too late. My cup tilted dangerously, and a brown trickle ran down my wrist. I swore under my breath.

The man who had almost collided with me stopped half a step away. He wore a dark coat, his hair was slightly disheveled, and a leather bag hung from his shoulder. He looked like someone who had already finished his morning coffee and had no intention of apologizing to the world for his existence.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Apart from the fact that I've just lost half my breakfast?"

He looked at my cup.

"You've still got the other half."

"An optimist."

"More of a man who believes in sticking to the facts."

I wanted to come back with something equally cutting, but then I heard a whistle. I turned my head. Beside the door of the last carriage, the conductor was raising his arm.

I broke into a run.

The man ran with me.

We reached the carriage at the exact moment the doors began to close. I pressed the button, although I knew it wouldn't make any difference now. In the glass, I caught my own reflection: dark hair escaping its pins, a red scarf hanging crookedly over one shoulder, and an expression of disbelief I would have struggled to describe even in the most candid travel diary.

The train lurched.

Then it pulled away.

For several seconds, all we could hear was the metallic clatter of wheels and the soft rush of wind threading its way between the station buildings.

"Well, that's just wonderful," I said.

"I admit it's difficult to call this a promising start."

I turned toward him.

"If it weren't for you..."

"If it weren't for me, you'd still be standing beneath the departure board with your coffee. I watched you for a good two minutes."

"You were watching me?"

"The board above your head. Although I'll admit your argument with your watch was more entertaining."

I shouldn't have smiled. But I did, briefly and despite my irritation.

The man noticed. He didn't use it as an opportunity for another teasing remark, which irritated me even more.

I took out my phone and opened my saved itinerary. The first day of documenting a mountain railway line that was due to close at the end of the season. Three stations, two interviews, a series of photographs, and the last available service along the most scenic stretch. Everything arranged in advance, paid for, and confirmed. In a month's time, the editors expected my finished contribution to a new travel guide, and I intended to prove that after leaving a major publishing house, I could handle ambitious projects without anyone looking after me.

Now the first item on my schedule was disappearing into the mountains.

"The next one leaves in an hour and twenty minutes," the man announced, checking his phone. "But it doesn't take the same route."

I looked at him more closely.

"How do you know?"

"I work with railway routes."

"A conductor?"

"A designer."

He said it without the slightest hint of self-importance. As though designing railway lines across mountains were as ordinary as choosing bread for breakfast.

"Then perhaps you can explain why the timetable was changed two days ago when the operator's website was still showing the old connection time."

His expression grew serious.

"I can explain several reasons. You won't like all of them."

He took a folded sheet covered in technical markings from his bag. I noticed a diagram of a railway line running through the valley, several red dots, and a small heading referring to an assessment of operational alternatives. Before I could read anything else, he slipped the document beneath a notebook.

"Are you going to Bergün?" he asked.

"Among other places."

"Then we may have a similar problem."

"We may?"

"I missed that train too."

"That much I noticed."

He smiled properly for the first time. Not broadly or for effect. Just enough for the severity of his face to give way to something considerably more dangerous to my peace of mind: genuine amusement.

"Hubert Maj," he introduced himself, holding out his hand.

I hesitated for only a moment.

"Izabela Markiewicz."

His hand was warm, his grip firm but brief. He released mine before I even thought of pulling it away.

"Markiewicz... You write travel guides?"

"Occasionally."

"I read your article about traveling through Lower Silesia without a car."

He surprised me. That article was one of the most personal things I had ever published. I hadn't written only about connections and attractions. I'd written about little stations where people greeted each other by name, and about how a place didn't need a motorway to deserve a visit.

"And what did you think of it?"

"That you're far too forgiving of railway delays."

I burst out laughing.

"You've just lost your chance of having a pleasant conversation."

"But I liked the line about how you can see things from a train window that a driver never has time to notice."

I didn't answer immediately. He remembered a sentence I'd written late one evening, sitting alone in a rented apartment, wondering whether anyone still read travel writing for the simple pleasure of traveling.

Hubert glanced toward the empty tracks.

"If you're serious about documenting that route, there's another connection. Slower, with a change and a short stretch by bus. You'll arrive before noon."

"Are you going there too?"

"Yes. I have a few sites to inspect."

"A coincidence?"

"More a case of it being a very small world. Especially when railway lines keep disappearing from it."

That last sentence sounded different. Quieter, stripped of his earlier ease. For a moment, he looked toward the mountains as though he knew something about them he wasn't ready to tell me.

I could buy another ticket, find a connection, and set off on my own. That was exactly how I planned all my journeys. I didn't need a strange man, even one with a voice I could happily listen to for hours and the knowledge that might save my day.

I opened the app. The route he'd suggested really did exist, but it involved changing at a small station whose name I'd never come across before.

"I can manage," I said.

"I don't doubt it."

He didn't try to persuade me. He nodded and headed toward the underpass.

I watched him walk away at an unhurried pace. His dark coat shifted in the wind, and the leather bag bumped lightly against his hip. He didn't look back.

Then my phone rang.

A message from my editor appeared on the screen:

"Iza, urgent. The operator has confirmed earlier restrictions on access to some of the stops. If you don't gather your material now, it may be too late."

I read it twice. For a moment, I had the impression that the narrow platform had become even narrower, and the mountains surrounding the valley had moved closer.

I looked up. Hubert had already reached the stairs.

"Mr. Maj!"

He stopped.

"That bus," I called. "Are you sure we'll make it?"

"No," he replied. "But I know how to improve our chances."

He turned all the way around and waited.

I put my phone away, straightened my scarf, and walked toward him. I didn't yet know whether I intended to trust him. I only knew that, for the first time in a very long while, my carefully prepared plan was no longer the most important thing in the world.

When I reached Hubert's side, he didn't point out the way. He simply asked:

"Ready?"

I looked at his face, then at the stairs leading beneath the tracks.

"For the journey? Yes."

"And for a change of plans?"

I didn't answer.

Because how was I supposed to know whether I was more afraid of missing another train or of the fact that, this time, I genuinely wanted to go somewhere with a stranger?

Chapter 1 - The Price of the Last Journey

The bus smelled of wet wool, vending-machine coffee, and something citrusy, probably the cleaning product used on the seats. Beyond the windows, slopes covered in dark spruce trees slipped past, with mountains rising above them, their peaks disappearing into low-hanging clouds. I sat by the window with my camera on my lap and an open notebook in front of me. Hubert had taken a seat across the aisle, leaving a space between us that I didn't have to defend. Even so, every few minutes I looked away from the landscape to see what he was doing. He was studying documents on his tablet, sometimes enlarging a section of a map, sometimes making notes with a stylus. Unlike me, he hadn't checked the time once.

"Doesn't it bother you that we're late?" I finally asked.

He looked up.

"We're late for a train that's already left. We still have time to catch the next one."

"That's not an answer."

"I know. But I suspect you wouldn't be satisfied with the real answer either."

I closed my notebook.

"Try me."

"Not everything we arrive late for is lost."

He said it calmly, without the slightest attempt to give his words any deeper significance. That was precisely why, for a moment, I didn't know how to respond. I disliked people

who could disarm my carefully prepared irritation with a single sentence. What I disliked even more was the realization that Hubert apparently didn't have to try very hard.

"Are you forty or eighty?" I asked.

"Forty. Why?"

"Because you sound like a man who's already made peace with every disappointment in the world."

He smiled, but this time something more serious appeared in his expression.

"Most of them. I'm still working on the rest."

The bus slowed before a sharp bend. Through the window, I caught sight of a stone viaduct spanning the valley several dozen meters above the river. I raised my camera, but before I could focus, the structure disappeared behind a wall of trees.

"Damn it."

"That was the Landwasser Viaduct," Hubert said. "You'll get a much better view from the train."

"The one I missed?"

"The next one. Provided you stop trying to photograph everything through a bus window."

I gave him a look that should have ended the conversation. Instead, Hubert stood, came over, and pointed to a small spot on the map in my notebook.

"Here. If you're there tomorrow morning, the light will come from the valley. Ten minutes after sunrise, you'll get a photograph no passenger can take from inside a carriage."

I studied the marked location.

"There's no stop there."

"There's a path from the service road."

"Is it open to the public?"

"As far as the viewpoint, yes. Beyond that, no."

I didn't like the fact that he seemed to know the answer to every question. I liked even less that his suggestion was a good one.

"Thank you," I said reluctantly.

"You're welcome."

He returned to his seat as though he expected nothing more to come of it. I, meanwhile, spent the next several minutes wondering why I'd noticed that he smelled of cedar and cold air.

We reached Filisur before ten. The bus stopped near a small railway station surrounded by mountains. The air was sharper than in Chur, and the sun struggled to break through the clouds. Only a handful of people stood on the platform. In the distance, I could hear the distinctive metallic sound of carriages being moved along a neighboring track.

Hubert got off first, but he made no attempt to take charge of my luggage. He stopped only when he noticed me checking my messages.

My editor had sent another update. The local railway operator had brought forward its schedule of restrictions. Some stops were going to be taken out of service earlier than originally planned. My assignment was no longer simply a travel article. It was becoming a record of places that might soon disappear from the timetable.

"Has something happened?" Hubert asked.

"A change of dates. I have less time than I thought."

I took out my printed list of stops and spread it across a bench. Hubert glanced at the page but didn't lean over it without an invitation.

"May I?" he asked.

For a moment, I considered refusing. Then I handed him the list.

He read it quickly. His finger stopped at the third name.

"You may not have time to document this one."

"Why?"

"Access to the platform is restricted during maintenance work. They'll be taking measurements there over the next few days."

"How do you know?"

"I'm involved in the technical analysis of this line."

That was the first answer that genuinely caught my attention.

"So you work for the railway operator?"

"For a design team working with the infrastructure manager."

"And you're here on business?"

"Yes."

I felt the familiar prick of professional caution. The man I'd considered a chance fellow traveler barely an hour earlier had access to information about the very route I was trying to describe.

"What exactly do you design?"

"Connection networks. Modernization projects. Options for using existing routes. Sometimes solutions for lines that are becoming increasingly difficult to maintain."

"Including closing them?"

Hubert studied me carefully.

"Designing railway routes and making decisions about their future are two different things."

"But one influences the other."

"Of course."

He didn't deny it. His honesty was both appealing and insufficient. I folded the map, aware that our conversation had just ceased to be an innocent exchange of information between travelers.

"I write about the people who use these connections," I explained. "Not just the views. I want to show what closing a railway line actually means for the communities it passes through."

"Then you should also look at the safety and cost data."

"Provided it's reliable."

"Data can be reliable while interpretations differ."

"A convenient distinction."

"A necessary one."

For a moment, we looked at each other in silence. His eyes were dark gray, with fine lines at the temples. He didn't look like a man accustomed to making easy concessions. I had no intention of making any either.

"Tell me something else," I said. "If you had to choose between preserving a scenic railway and closing it for economic reasons, which would you choose?"

"First, I'd check whether those really were the only two options."

His answer surprised me.

"And if they were?"

"Then I'd need to know who would bear the cost of each."

"Sounds reasonable."

"You said that as though being reasonable were a character flaw."

"Sometimes it is. Especially when it's used to justify decisions no one wants to take responsibility for."

For a moment, his expression remained perfectly still.

"That's something I find difficult to disagree with."

A railway employee wearing a reflective vest emerged from a nearby building. When he spotted Hubert, he raised his hand.

"Herr Maj! Die Unterlagen sind angekommen."

Hubert replied in German, briefly and matter-of-factly. The man indicated the door to a technical room, then looked at me.

"Are you with the team too?"

"No," I answered before Hubert could open his mouth. "I work independently."

The employee nodded and walked away.

"Is that important?" Hubert asked.

"Very."

"Good to know."

His calm reaction robbed me of an argument I hadn't even had time to formulate.

The regional train arrived twenty minutes later. This time, I boarded without rushing and took a seat beside a large panoramic window. Hubert sat two rows farther down. We hadn't discussed it; each of us had simply chosen our own space.

When the train began moving, the landscape opened before us so suddenly that I forgot about my phone. The tracks followed the mountainside. Far below lay a valley divided by the silver ribbon of a river, while pale limestone cliffs rose on the opposite side. The scattered houses looked like toys dropped onto green slopes.

I took photographs, wrote down the names of villages, and recorded short fragments of sound. The distinctive rhythm of wheels passing over rail joints, the soft murmur of conversations, the clatter of opening doors. I wanted to preserve more than images. The sound of a place could summon a memory more precisely than a photograph.

At a small station, an elderly woman stepped off carrying a shopping basket. The conductor helped her set it down on the platform. Before the train pulled away, she waved to someone standing at the window of a building opposite the tracks.

I took a photograph only after making sure her face wouldn't appear in it.

"That's exactly why places like this are worth saving."

Hubert was standing beside my seat. I hadn't noticed him approach.

"Because people know one another?" he asked.

"Because the railway is part of everyday life here. Not a tourist attraction."

"For some people, certainly."

"And for others?"

"For others, it's expensive infrastructure that requires costly maintenance."

I turned toward him.

"Do you have to reduce everything to spreadsheets?"

"No. But you can't reduce everything to a single moving image either."

His words touched a subject I defended with particular determination. For years, I'd fought against the assumption that travel writing should be exclusively beautiful. That all you needed was a sunset, a few atmospheric cafés, and a catchy headline. I wanted to describe real places, including the parts of everyday life that didn't fit into a glossy brochure.

"You don't know how I work," I replied.

"I know one of your articles."

"That's not enough."

"Then I'd be happy to see more."

He said it so casually that it took me a moment to recognize the double meaning. Hubert apparently noticed it too, because one corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

"Of your work," he clarified.

"Of course."

"Although your arguments are interesting too."

This time, I smiled without resistance.

The train rolled onto the stone viaduct. Through the window, I saw the deep valley, followed by the characteristic

curve of the tracks leading straight into a tunnel carved through the rock. The light changed suddenly, reflecting our silhouettes in the glass.

For one brief moment, I could see both of us there. Me with my camera raised to my face, him standing beside me, leaning slightly so he wouldn't obstruct the view.

We looked almost familiar together.

The thought came unexpectedly, and I dismissed it just as quickly.

In Bergün, I had an appointment with the owner of a small guesthouse. I had forty minutes before I needed to catch the next train. Hubert got off as well, but headed toward a technical building at the far end of the platform.

"See you later?" he asked.

"That depends on whether you intend to question my working methods again."

"Only if I find a reason."

"Then I suspect we will."

He nodded. For a moment, he looked as though he wanted to say something else, but in the end, he walked away.

The interview took place in a small dining room that smelled of freshly baked bread. The guesthouse owner, Mr. Reto, told me about tourists who arrived by train simply to stroll through the town and have a coffee. He also spoke about seasonal workers, young people traveling to school, and elderly residents for whom a bus was considerably less convenient.

"They show us numbers," he said at one point. "How many passengers, what the costs are, how much needs

repairing. But when I ask how my mother is supposed to get to the doctor in winter, no one can answer."

I wrote down his words exactly.

"Who shows you these numbers?"

"The project people. They came here in the spring. Then they sent documents."

"Could I see them?"

Reto hesitated.

"I don't have the full version. Only a summary."

He took several sheets of paper from a drawer. The first contained a comparison of options for the line's future operation. One was marked as recommended, but the detailed appendices weren't included.

I photographed the pages after receiving his permission.

"Did you speak to the authors?" I asked.

"To several people. I remember a woman who took a great many notes. And a man who asked about winter track maintenance. I don't remember their names."

Before leaving, I promised to send him the finished article. I paused in the doorway when I heard his voice behind me.

"Ms. Markiewicz? Please don't write only about how beautiful it is here."

I turned around.

"I don't intend to."

When I returned to the station, Hubert was standing beside an information board, talking on the phone. He was speaking Polish, quietly but firmly.

"We can't treat every section the same way. Seasonal data doesn't show the full level of demand."

He noticed me and ended the call.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"I've just heard something that isn't in the official description of this route."

"That's usually the most interesting part of the job."

I looked at him.

"You know about that too?"

"About what, exactly?"

"That numbers don't always show how people really live."

For a moment, he looked at me without smiling.

"I do."

There was something in his voice I couldn't yet identify.

"Then perhaps you should help me," I said before I had time to consider all the consequences.

He raised his eyebrows.

"With what?"

"Understanding this railway. Not just as a landscape, and not just as a technical project. I want to know what I'm failing to see."

Hubert glanced at his watch, then toward the doors of the train standing at the platform, which were closing behind the last passenger.

"I can," he answered. "But on one condition."

"Which is?"

"That you won't assume every technical solution is an enemy of the people who live here."

I studied him for several seconds.

"And you won't assume that every human story is merely an anecdote that doesn't belong in a spreadsheet."

He smiled slowly.

"That's a fair arrangement."

We didn't shake hands. There was no need.

We stood facing one another on a small Alpine platform while the train departed toward the tunnel. I was aware that I'd just agreed to something that hadn't appeared anywhere on my carefully prepared schedule that morning.

And that this time, it wasn't only about the journey.

Chapter 2 - Between Timetables and Desire

The following morning, I woke to the sound of church bells and the smell of coffee drifting up from the ground floor of the guesthouse. For a moment, I didn't know where I was. The wooden ceiling, heavy curtains, and view of snow-covered peaks beyond the window reminded me that the previous evening I'd decided to stay in Bergün instead of returning to the larger hotel in Chur.

It was six twenty. My notebook lay on the bedside table, filled with questions I'd written down, and beside it was my phone with a message from Hubert.

"The viewpoint will be accessible from seven. If you want to take photographs before the clouds arrive, it's worth leaving early. We don't have to go together."

I read the message twice.

The last sentence was characteristic of him. Hubert knew how to offer help without making gratitude a requirement. He didn't insist, demand agreement, or try to use his knowledge to direct my decisions.

I replied, "I'll be there at seven. But if you start lecturing me about infrastructure maintenance costs again, I'll abandon you in the mountains."

His reply came almost immediately.

"I accept the occupational hazard."

I smiled at the screen before remembering that I was thirty-six years old, had an important contract to fulfill, and

had very little time for getting involved with men I'd met by chance at railway stations.

Outside the guesthouse, the cold greeted me with a sharpness that immediately penetrated my coat. Hubert stood several meters away, leaning against a low stone wall. He wore a dark jacket, a gray sweater, and held a thermos in one hand. He straightened when he saw me.

"Good morning."

"That depends on your definition of good. It's seven in the morning."

"In the mountains, that's already late."

"In Warsaw, people are still pretending they can't hear their alarms at this hour."

"You too?"

"I negotiate with mine."

He handed me a second cup of coffee. I hesitated.

"How did you know?"

"Yesterday, you had two coffees before noon. You drank part of the first one through your wrist."

"That's a disturbingly detailed observation."

"I have a good memory for things that cause delays."

I accepted the cup. The coffee was strong, bitter, and exactly what I needed.

We set off along a path leading above the town. Fine gravel crunched beneath our shoes, and the air smelled of damp earth and wood. Hubert walked beside me, adjusting his pace without drawing attention to it. Every so often, he pointed out sections of railway infrastructure visible

between the trees, but he didn't overwhelm me with technical details.

After fifteen minutes or so, we reached a place overlooking a curve in the tracks, the stone viaduct, and the valley stretching far below.

I stopped.

The light was extraordinary. The sun was only beginning to break through the clouds, illuminating sections of the slopes with a soft golden glow. The train was due to appear in about fifteen minutes. I set up my tripod, checked the exposure, and chose my composition.

Hubert sat down on a nearby rock.

"Aren't you going to comment?" I asked.

"On what?"

"On how I'm positioning the camera in violation of engineering principles."

"I don't know enough about photography to pretend I'm an expert."

I looked at him approvingly.

"That's a rare quality."

"Admitting ignorance?"

"Especially among men."

He laughed quietly.

"I'm forty. I've had time to learn that I don't need to know the answer to everything."

"And what else have you learned?"

He considered his answer for a moment.