

BIBLIOPHILES

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FADE IN:

INT. COMMUTER TRAIN (MOVING) - DAY

A train car packed with the usual city mix of morning PASSENGERS. Newspapers. Coffee. Breakfast takeaway.

MARKHAM, late 20s, carefully groomed, quirkily coordinated sports jacket and shirt, sits on the aisle, his SHOULDER BAG at his feet.

He's engrossed in a BOOK: *A Brief History of Time*, by Stephen Hawking.

He looks up, gazes out the window, processing the reading. Suburbs stream past.

His forefinger itches a tiny, slightly inflamed SCAR on his right temple.

He scans casually around the train car, his gaze moving past MARAL, early 30s, four rows away. Something about her belatedly catches his attention and he stops, looks back.

She's thoughtfully stylish, almost the female equivalent of Markham. She peers out the window, lost in thought.

As Markham observes, she turns suddenly and looks him right in the eyes. It's eerie, as if she sensed him watching her. He averts his gaze.

A moment later, he looks back to her. She's turned to the window again, but a little smile appears on her face the moment his gaze finds her.

Markham grins at this curious exchange.

INT. COMMUTER TRAIN (MOVING) - DAY

Another workday morning. Markham sips a smoothie. His thumb holds his place in *A Brief History of Time*. He looks around.

His eyes widen.

Maral sits across the aisle at the far end of the train car, reading *A Brief History of Time*.

Markham watches her for a long moment. Her eyes never stray from the page.

He gives his head an incredulous little shake, and picks up his book, buries himself in the final few pages.

INT. COMMUTER TRAIN (MOVING) - DAY

Another morning. Sunny and blissful. COMMUTERS making their way downtown.

Markham comes down the aisle with his shoulder bag.

There's Maral again! In an aisle seat. Markham settles into a spot on the aisle two rows down on the same side.

He leans out slightly so he can see her. She looks up and he smiles. She offers a half smile and only the merest hint of recognition.

He looks down to open his bag. Inside, an INSTRUCTION MANUAL: "Bibliophiles: Connecting Book Lovers." Markham moves it aside and pulls out a BOOK: Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*.

INT. COMMUTER TRAIN (STATIONARY) - DUSK

The train's emptier than usual, and most of the PASSENGERS look like they're at the end of a long day.

Markham slumps in a seat. His skin has the sheen of a day in the city, and his shirt's askew under his sports jacket. *The Sun Also Rises* rests on an empty seat beside him.

His fingers fuss at the inflamed spot on his temple.

Maral sidles onboard as the doors close. She looks as fresh as ever, LEATHER BAG over her shoulder, DOCUMENT FOLDERS clasped in one hand, a BOOK just visible between them.

She sits three rows down and across the aisle from Markham, and sets her things on an empty seat.

Her gaze lands momentarily on Markham. He gives her a "what a coincidence" grin. She smiles perfunctorily, with barely more signs of recognition than last time he saw her.

INT. COMMUTER TRAIN (MOVING) - A LITTLE LATER

Maral emerges from a reverie, stretches, then pulls the book out from between her folders.

It's *The Sun Also Rises*, the exact version Markham is reading.

Her movement catches his attention and he looks over, sees the book. He checks his own copy instinctively, as if to confirm the match.

INT. COMMUTER TRAIN (MOVING) - DAY

Morning commute.

Maral's on the train.

Markham steps through from the next car carrying his bag and a smoothie. He takes a seat facing Maral but across the aisle. He studies her, but she's oblivious.

He settles in and takes a HARDCOVER BOOK from his bag, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, by Steven Pinker.

A LITTLE LATER

As Markham observes, Maral stares into space. Without looking, she reaches into her bag and retrieves a BOOK.

The Better Angels of Our Nature, hardcover.

He's flabbergasted.

MARKHAM

(to Maral)

This is the most amazing coincidence.

Maral looks up slowly.

MARKHAM (CONT'D)

This is the...

(thinking)

...third time you and I have had the exact same book!

She smiles, scans her book, then his, and gives him a "you don't say" look.

MARKHAM (CONT'D)

The odds are astronomical.

She shrugs noncommittally.

MARKHAM (CONT'D)

You've seen me on this train, right?

MARAL

I think so.

MARKHAM
 Every time, the same book.
 (beat)
 Great minds.

Maral looks inquisitive.

MARKHAM (CONT'D)
 They think alike.

MARAL
 Right.

He shakes his head in amazement.

INT. COMMUTER TRAIN (MOVING) - DAY

The train's half full and the PASSENGERS mostly dressed casually.

Markham talks on his cellphone inaudibly, the knuckles of his right hand tapping at his temple.

He drops his phone into his bag, presses his head into the headrest for a stretch, then looks around.

He jolts.

Maral is five rows down, absorbed in a BOOK: *Enjoy Your Symptom*, by Slavoj Zizek.

MARKHAM
 (to himself)
 No fucking way. There's no fucking way.

Amazement contorting his face, he flops open the flap of his shoulder bag and pulls out the very same BOOK, waves it around above his head, staring at Maral until he catches her attention.

MARKHAM (CONT'D)
 Unbelievable!

She smiles, not surprised, just normal.

MARKHAM (CONT'D)
 (pointing at his book)
 Same one. Again. The odds are literally millions to one. Maybe billions.

She turns a palm up, like "don't ask me."

He grabs his bag and scurries down and sits across the aisle from her.

MARKHAM (CONT'D)

How do we always end up on the same train? I'm never on this train on Sunday, and here you are.

MARAL

I'm never on this train, and here you are.

Suspicion creeps into Markham's expression.

MARKHAM

Is this some kind of joke?

MARAL

A joke?

Her speaking is strangely flat, lifeless.

MARKHAM

There's literally no way we could have the same book four times in a row.

MARAL

No?

MARKHAM

(lightbulb)

Tennant! It's Tennant! Is he putting you up to this?

(thinks)

How's he figuring out what books I'm reading?

MARAL

I don't know anyone called "Tennant."

MARKHAM

Come on! It's got to be him. He's famous for his pranks. Don't tell him I said so.

Half-smiling vacantly, she turns back to her reading.

MARKHAM (CONT'D)

He got me. Tell him he's hilarious. I'm going to get him back even better, but he's good.

She shows no sign of hearing him.

Markham gives up on trying to connect, leans back.

MARKHAM (CONT'D)
 (to himself)
 He's good.

INT. COMMUTER TRAIN PLATFORM - DAY

Markham runs up to the train just as the doors are closing and squeezes through.

INT. COMMUTER TRAIN (MOVING) - CONTINUOUS

Packed train. Markham follows other COMMUTERS down the aisle, pacing along behind a burly BUSINESSMAN until the man stops. No more seats.

Markham finds a place to lean. He looks down and jolts.

Maral sits in the seat next to him.

MARKHAM
 Of course. You're here.
 (beat)
 Are we still playing this little game?

She looks up inquisitively.

He reaches into his bag and pulls out a slim, old SOFTCOVER: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

MARKHAM (CONT'D)
 Let's see what you've got in your bag.

Maral looks confused.

The Businessman turns around, eyeing Markham suspiciously.

MARKHAM (CONT'D)
 Come on. Let's see it.

Her expression tightens.

BUSINESSMAN
 It doesn't look like she wants to do that.

Markham addresses them both, recounting his tale animatedly.

MARKHAM

She's been pranking me with a guy I used to work with. Every few days she's on my train and she has the exact same book as me. That can't happen by chance.

BUSINESSMAN

Maybe she just has the same interests as you.

MARKHAM

The books are about totally different things.

BUSINESSMAN

Well, maybe you should take a different train if it bothers you.

MARKHAM

She appears on whatever train I take!

(to Maral)

Show him what's in your bag.

(to Businessman)

You'll see.

Maral peers up innocently.

BUSINESSMAN

(to Maral)

It might get him to be quiet.

(to Markham)

Will you be quiet?

MARKHAM

(proffers the Nietzsche)

Wait and see. It'll be this exact book.

MARAL

I don't mind. If it helps you feel less upset.

She turns her bag around on her lap and slowly pulls it open to reveal -

- absolutely nothing. It's completely empty. Not even a tissue.

BUSINESSMAN

No book.

MARKHAM

(agitated)

This proves it! It's part of her game. Who rides the train with a completely empty bag?

BUSINESSMAN

Okay, man. It's time to move along.

MARKHAM

(to Maral)

Tell Tennant he's the master. You can stop now.

She looks at him blankly.

BUSINESSMAN

Come on. It's enough. Don't make me call the cops.

Markham hesitates, but then starts to squeeze down the aisle. He claws at his temple as he goes.

MARKHAM

(to Maral)

You made your point. It's not funny anymore.

She looks up to the Businessman gratefully.

INT. MARKHAM'S APARTMENT, MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

Markham enters his apartment, worn out and a little drunk.

He drops his shoulder bag by the door and proceeds to the kitchen, pours half a glassful of whisky. He pops a shepherd's pie into the microwave.

He carries his drink into the living room, where two massive BOOKSHELVES overflow with reading.

LATER

Markham lounges on the sofa, dinner remnants on the coffee table. He finishes the final page of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and closes the book reverently.

His eyes immediately dart to his packed bookshelves.

One book stands out, a THICK HARDCOVER sticking out a little from its carefully aligned neighbors.

He goes and pulls it from the shelf, examines it like he has never seen it before. The title: *Understanding Nietzsche's Zarathustra*.

There's no author's name on the front. Markham opens to the back inside cover and his knees go weak. He thumps down onto the sofa.

There's a picture of the author. It's Maral. No bio, no name, just her picture.

Markham flips through the pages. It looks like a normal book.

He drops it onto the table as if it's cursed, and eyes it suspiciously.

INT. MARKHAM'S APARTMENT, BEDROOM - NIGHT

Markham tosses and turns sleeplessly.

INT. MARKHAM'S APARTMENT, MAIN ROOM - DAY

Markham yawns exhaustedly as he straightens his collar. He pulls on his shoulder bag and approaches the bookshelves to hunt for a new read.

He stops, glances anxiously to the mysterious book still lying on the floor. He steps away from the bookshelves, over to the stereo cabinet, and retrieves a pair of HEADPHONES.

INT. COMMUTER TRAIN (MOVING) - NIGHT

The train pulls away from the platform as Markham moves down the aisle with other PASSENGERS. He peers around anxiously.

He spots Maral and quickly averts his eyes. She looks up innocently as he passes. He takes one of the few remaining seats, facing Maral a few rows down.

He pulls out the headphones and plugs them into his cellphone, scrolls and taps.

An AUDIOBOOK plays in his headphones, a DEEP, MALE VOICE narrating.

NARRATOR

You are listening to *Windswept*, a Denny Johnson mystery, written by Lisa Manuel, narrated by Bryce Powers.

Markham stifles a yawn as he settles in to listen. A nervous glance over to Maral, who's reading a news magazine.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Chapter One.

(beat)

Nine o' clock shift change couldn't come early enough for Officer Carmen Douglas. It was her first stakeout. She wasn't used to this much togetherness with her partner and his cologne. She could barely...

Markham's eyelids droop.

LATER

Emerging from sleep, Markham's eyes crack open and he sits up, adjusts his headphones.

He leans back and continues to listen to the audiobook. His brow furrows. Something's not right.

His eyes pop wide.

The narration has changed to a FEMALE VOICE!

MARAL (V.O.)

"...you say so," growled Denny.
"But it's going to cost us a week,
maybe more, of investigation time."

It's Maral's voice!

Markham snaps his eyes over to her.

As he listens to the audiobook in his headphones, Maral silently mouths the exact same words.

MARAL (V.O.)

"It's going to be worth it,"
snapped the captain. "And if it's
not, then it's not your problem
anyway, Johnson. Let me worry about
strategies. I need you to be my
eyes and ears, not my damn brain."

She peers down at her magazine, and it would appear to anyone else that she's reading silently to herself.

Markham's mouth gapes. He whips off the headphones.

Maral's mouth stops moving. She never looks up.

Markham jumps to his feet and lurches down the aisle and out through the door to the next car.

INT. COMMUTER TRAIN STATION - MOMENTS LATER

The train stops. Markham's pressed anxiously at the doors and he bursts out the second they open.

As he strides quickly away, he looks back over his shoulder and glimpses Maral, still reading her magazine.

He takes the stairs up two at a time.

EXT. CITY STREET - MOMENTS LATER

Markham walks down a quiet street.

A VAN sits facing the wrong way at the curb. As Markham nears, a HUSKY MAN opens the front door, steps out, and waves Markham down.

HUSKY MAN

Excuse me. Can you tell me how to get onto Paramount? Fucking city.

Markham stops.

MARKHAM

Paramount is tricky because of the one-ways. You're close.

As Markham speaks, BURLY MAN and STRONG MAN step silently from a dark alley behind him.

Burly Man grabs Markham's arms as Strong Man drops a BLACK HOOD over his head and cinches it tight at the neck.

The van door SLAMS open, revealing DOCTOR KENT, 50s. The three strongmen maneuver Markham the few steps to the door.

They shove him inside. An injection from Doctor Kent cuts short Markham's SCREAM as the door slides shut.

INT. MARKHAM'S ROOM - DAY

Markham sits motionlessly on his bed, pyjama-clad legs folded beneath him. He's staring down at a large, flat BOOK open on his lap.

It's a coloring book. A RED and a GREEN CRAYON rest in the crease where the pages meet. A black outline of two puppies and a kitten riding in a hot-air balloon. No words.

The edges of Markham's lips are moist and he slowly chews, although his mouth is empty.

The room is bare but for the bed and a night-table with no sharp edges. The beige walls are well-padded.

Markham shifts position, and the green Crayon rolls unnoticed from the book onto the bed, then off to the floor.

There's a KNOCK. Markham slowly turns his glazed eyes to the door.

NURSE CARLING (O.S.)
Markham? It's nurse Carling. I'm
coming in. Don't be alarmed.

The white-uniformed NURSE CARLING opens the padded door and enters.

NURSE CARLING (CONT'D)
(chipper)
Hello, Markham.
(beat)
Oof. You've dropped one of your
Crayons.

She bends to pick it up.

NURSE CARLING (CONT'D)
(while bending)
There's a special treat today!

An elderly VOLUNTEER pushes in a CART loaded with BOOKS.

VOLUNTEER
Library cart!

At the same moment, Nurse Carling stands up again, Crayon in hand, only her face is no longer her own, but Maral's.

Looking from Maral to the book cart, Markham's eyes widen in terror. He cringes away, back pressed against the wall.

As he smashes his right temple into the padded wall, his blood-curdling SCREAM slices through the room.

INT. CORPORATE MEDICAL LAB - DAY

BRYNNE, early 20s, white medical smock, writes notes. Beside her, binders labeled "Bibliophiles: Connecting Book Lovers."

Suddenly, a YELP.

Brynne jumps, her head swiveling to where Markham writhes under the CONSTRAINT STRAPS of a medical bed.

Doctor Kent rushes in and scurries to Markham's side. He fills a syringe and injects Markham in the arm.

Markham writhes for another moment, then calms.

DOCTOR KENT

(to Brynne)

Sorry. I should have warned you about that. Brynne, right?

BRYNNE

What's wrong with him?

DOCTOR KENT

We started receiving elevated readings from his implant three weeks ago. We brought him in for observation.

The doctor points to Markham's right temple, bright red and swollen.

DOCTOR KENT (CONT'D)

It seems his Bibliophiles implant has neurally networked with an emotion-linked dating service implant.

BRYNNE

Is he conscious?

DOCTOR KENT

Barely. The link's too much for his mind. And it's growing stronger. The emotional center of his brain is intensely active. The language center, the fear center. The visual. He's been hallucinating for some time, but it's becoming much worse.

BRYNNE

Can you take the implant out?

DOCTOR KENT

So far my simulations lead to death
or madness.

BRYNNE

Bibliophiles is fu...

(beat)

Sorry.

(beat)

What will we do?

DOCTOR KENT

If it happens to anyone else, we'll
consider what to do. For now, it's
an anomaly.

LATER

Brynne reads through one of the Bibliophiles binders.

Markham MOANS.

Brynne stands and goes to him, binder hugged up to her chest.

BRYNNE

Markham? Hello?

She bends close to examine Markham's temple. His eyes open slightly, and slowly focus on her, just for a moment, before rolling back into his head.

INT. COMMUTER TRAIN (MOVING) - DAY

Sunlight pours through the windows of the packed train.

Markham sits on the aisle, immersed in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. He turns the page to a new chapter, rests the book on his knee for a moment.

He gazes around.

His eyes widen when he sees Brynne reading the exact same book.

She looks up at him, right in the eyes. He holds up his book. She looks at hers and smiles, then goes back to reading.

Markham shakes his head at the coincidence.

FADE OUT.