

# A YOUNG MAN AND THE SUBWAY

Moving Standing Still

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# Hospital

“Hisato, you know why you’re here, don’t you?”  
Ryoko sat at a square, heavy table where four would normally sit and calmly watched her son wander around the tightly sealed snack room.

Hisato liked this room. It smelled different from the other rooms in the ward. Not like people or sleeping or medicine, but it didn’t smell like anything in the room either. Not the vacuum cleaner or the stove or the fridge even when Miss Shandra opened it, or the crates of bottled water in the corner, or the plastic chairs stacked beside them, or the cartons stuffed with snacks that sat three rows high along the wall under the window you couldn’t see out of. It did smell just a little like the glue they used to stick the brightly colored notes Miss Emily made for them onto the “What Makes Me Happy” board, and it smelled a little like the floor when it got mopped, and it smelled a little like stale pretzels.

But what the room really smelled like couldn’t fit in. That was the outside. The building had security desks and glass-walled booths, guards and conveyer belts to examine bags and belts and shoes. It had sealed windows and sealed doors, but the outside came in anyway. Hisato could smell it. He could smell the sidewalks and the streets that surrounded the building, their cement and soot, the engines and feet that pounded through them. It crept in through microscopic channels that were everywhere. Those invisible channels were very important. It was how the building breathed.

Behind the smell of the outside was something even bigger, something mighty, the real smell that contained all the other smells. It was the smell of the inside, the deep inside, the smell of the building itself, the smell that collected in all the secret spaces the

building had that nobody knew about, because human beings didn't know anything about buildings. People could walk through rooms and look out windows and shut doors and ride elevators. They could turn on lights and plug things in, turn on water and even drink straight out of the faucet, but they didn't know about the building's million secret spaces that rested undisturbed by a mop or disinfectant or a cleaning machine, by breath or even seeing eyes. From out of those spaces exuded the smell of the real building, because now and again trickles of air would lift a particle from those spaces and carry it into the rooms where breathing people waited and paced and worried into space, to acquaint them with the building that cradled them all – with the steel and the brick and the wood, of the applied masonry and plaster, of the wires and heating and plumbing, all packed dense by the weight of the city and time into something more powerful than any of them, something that lasted longer than any of them, something that saw more and knew more sitting right there on O'Hara Street for 80 years, stirring nothing but a particle or two from its secret spaces every once in a while. But Hisato did know something more. He knew that in between the outside smells he didn't understand and the inside smells he didn't understand were smells he knew all about – of Mr. Percy's perfume, of Miss Emily's leftover black cherry tea in her unwashed cup, of the open bag of stale pretzels stashed behind the rows of cartons under the window – and he knew that all those smells mixed together made the smell of the snack room. And he liked it.

It was here in the snack room that they all gathered at four o'clock to get their juice and pretzels and yogurt and watch as Miss Emily wrote things on the whiteboard for them to repeat. It was here that his mom came every evening at seven with his dinner packed in a neat burlap bag that said *GÖTTERSPEISE CHOCOLATERIE & CAFÉ* on the outside and had silver foil on the inside to keep his dumplings and chicken wings and rice warm. It was here that she would sit with him as he ate his dinner and ask him about his day, and he would tell her what he had learned and what he was not to do and what he was to do and what he had done. As soon as Mr. Percy appeared in the hallway window, his mother would quickly pack Hisato's dinner things into the burlap bag, stand up, and ask him what he wanted for dinner tomorrow.

Mr. Percy would let them out into the hallway, where Ryoko would say goodbye to her son. Mr. Percy then unlocked a door to another hallway, a normal hallway beyond Hisato's world that had normal, not glass, walls, a hallway that led to everywhere. As his mother slipped out into that other world, Hisato had already turned away. By the time she stepped into the elevator, he was eagerly following Mr. Percy down the ward's short, windowed hallway to another door Mr. Percy unlocked just for him. It was here that Hisato's journey transformed from color to shadow, from activity to apathy, from "What Makes Me Happy" workshops to suicide watch.

Hisato shared a room with Ryan. Two plain unmade beds stood opposite each other against bare walls. Of the sturdy twin cubbyholes mounted on the walls, one was assigned to Hisato, one to Ryan. This was where they stuffed all their things. Those things had to be kept separate because Hisato and Ryan were learning about separateness and respect. The only other feature of the room was the most important one, a high narrow window between the beds that you couldn't open. The window had a tremendous thick grate clamped over top of it from the outside. Hisato liked that grate. It was strong, much stronger than he was. It kept him safe. Because of that grate, the sky cast a peculiarly patterned gray northern light across the floor. It made Ryan's strewn pajamas and tee-shirts look mucky. Hisato didn't like that, but he walked around them instead of kicking them at Ryan's bed, because they were Ryan's and Hisato was learning respect. He had learned it so well, in fact, that they had said he would be leaving soon. He wasn't sure how he felt about that.

And now the time had come.

Hisato walked around and around the table where Ryoko sat watching him. He combed his dark hair down over his eyes with his fingers. Yes. He knew why he was there. He nodded to her question as his eyes roved over the rows of cartons stuffed with snacks and up to the black window above that showed nothing of the night that loomed immensely cold and distant beyond. It was another window that didn't open. It had bars on it. Those bars were good. They protected him.

Hisato liked the hospital. He felt safe in the hospital. He had asked to come. But he had been good, very good, and because he had been so good, he knew he would be leaving now. He didn't