THE DORIS PLUM

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The Wellington wind did not just blow; it interrogated. It scratched at Raya's thick school uniform jacket, asking what the hell she was doing on the platform at Wallaceville Station at five o'clock on a Tuesday evening when she should be at her desk. The rain had stopped, but the tarmac was still dark and wet, reflecting the orange lights of the platform. Around her, other people who were silent statues in thick coats, looking at their mobile phones. They looked anchored, heavy with the absolute purpose of going home. Raya felt weightless, as though a strong gust off the harbour could lift her right off the concrete and carry her over the Rimutakas.

In her right pocket, her fingers pressed against the bruised skin of a black Doris plum. It was overripe, plundered from a neighbour's tree on her walk from the school gates. She hadn't eaten it. She had just held it for the two miles, letting her thumb sink into the soft flesh until the skin split, leaving a sticky, dark crescent under her fingernail. It felt like a small, pulsing heart hidden in the dark.

Her phone buzzed in her bag—a frantic vibration against her shoulder blade. *Where are you?* Her mother's text would say. Or maybe, *Pick up milk.* Raya didn't look. The text belonged to the world of calculus internals, university applications, and the suffocating expectation that she should cross-section her life into neat, predictable boxes. Everyone else seemed to have received the blueprint for growing up, but Raya felt as though she were still staring at a blank piece of paper, terrified of making the first mark.

The train arrived with a heavy, metallic sigh, its headlights cutting through the damp Hutt Valley dusk. It hissed to a halt, the doors sliding open to release a wave of warm, stale air. She stepped into the carriage. It smelled of wet wool, cheap coffee, and the damp ozone of the afternoon rain. The interior lights flickered, casting a fluorescent hue over the passengers. Raya bypassed the empty rows near the doors and walked further down the carriage, seeking a corner to disappear into. She chose a window seat, slipping into the row opposite a woman in her late sixties.

The woman was a stark contrast to the drab, grey interior of the 5:08 train. She wore a brilliant, defiant yellow scarf—the colour of a gorse bush in full, chaotic bloom. Her hands were busy,

aggressively driving a pair of plastic needles through a shapeless lump of heather-grey wool. *Click, click, slide. Click, click, slide.* The rhythm was relentless, a tiny metronome ticking away against the roar of the engine.

"It’s a terrible colour, isn't it?" the woman said suddenly. She didn't look up from her work; her fingers kept moving with blind precision.

Raya blinked, pulling her hand out of her pocket and tucking her stained thumb out of sight. "The grey?"

"The grey," the woman confirmed, finally lifting her eyes. They were a piercing, watery blue, surrounded by a complex roadmap of fine lines. "My daughter-in-law insists on 'minimalist neutrals' for the nursery. As if a child wants to grow up inside a cloud of oatmeal. A child needs colour. They need something to fight against. I’m thinking of secretly knitting a bright red streak right down the spine of this blanket. Like a sudden crack of lightning. Or a crime scene. What do you think?"

A small, genuine smile tugged at Raya’s lips, breaking through the tightness in her chest. “I think you should. Or maybe hot pink.”

“Hot pink,” the woman mused, her needles pausing. “Yes. A scandal in the cradle. I like how you think, love.”

They relapsed into silence as the train rocked forward, pulling away from the station with a groan of steel. The tracks ran parallel to the Western Hutt hills, which rose up like dark, slumbering beasts against the purple twilight. Raya looked out the window, watching the blurred outlines of suburban backyards flash past. Trampolines glinted with rainwater; lemon trees hung heavy over wooden fences, their fruit glowing like miniature lanterns against the dark green leaves. Every house had a window lit up, a yellow square of warmth revealing a life being lived.

Raya looked down at her lap. Her thumb was stained a deep, bruised purple from the plum. She felt an absurd, sudden wave of prickling heat behind her eyes. The containment of the other passengers felt oppressive. The man three rows up was reading a financial report; a girl not

much older than Raya was typing furiously on a laptop. They knew their trajectories. Raya, however, felt like water—taking the shape of whatever container she was poured into. At school, she was the quiet girl in the front row who never raised her hand but never missed a deadline. At home, she was the dependable youngest, the one who didn't cause trouble. But who was she here, suspended between stations, carrying stolen fruit in the dark?

She pulled her hand out of her pocket and slowly opened her palm. The plum sat there, deflated and ruined, a tiny tear in its side weeping dark, sticking juice onto her skin.

The woman with the yellow scarf stopped knitting. The plastic needles fell silent on her lap. She looked at Raya's hand, then up at her face. She didn't look away with the polite, embarrassed awkwardness of a stranger on public transport. She just looked, comprehensively, as if she could see right through the school blazer and the calculus anxiety.

"A bit past its prime, that one," the woman said softly.

"I stole it," Raya whispered. The confession shook loose from her chest before she could stop it. "From a tree on Logan Street. It was hanging over the fence. I just... reached up."

The woman chuckled, a low sound that smelled faintly of peppermint lozenges. "The best ones always are. When I was your age, we used to raid the orchards up in Otaki, running from furious farmers. It's a wonder I didn't turn into a pear myself." She set her knitting down, her sharp eyes softening. "But you're holding onto it tightly enough to turn it to jam, love. You look like you're waiting for the conductor to come through and arrest you for fruit theft."

Raya looked back out the window. The reflection of the carriage overlays the darkening landscape outside. She saw herself—pale, eyes too wide, swallowed by her uniform—and she saw the yellow scarf like a beacon behind her shoulder. "It's not the plum. It's just... everything else. It feels like if I make one wrong decision this year, the whole thing just implodes. Like this fruit."

"Ah," the woman said, her voice dropping beneath the mechanical rumble of the tracks. "The 'everything else.' It builds up like dust in the corners. Everyone tells you where to look, what to

become. They all want you to jump into the deep end, but nobody bothers to check if the water is warm."

The train brakes squealed aggressively as they rounded a sharp bend, the sound echoing off the concrete hillsides.

"What do you do if the pool is empty?" Raya asked, genuinely wanting to know.

"You don't dive headfirst," the woman said simply, picking up her grey wool again. The needles resumed their dance. *Click, click, slide*. "You make a bomb. It makes a bigger splash and protects your skull. Eventually, you just have to dive and see if you splash."

The train began to slow, the brakes grinding to a halt as the automated voice chimed: *Next station, Silverstream*.

"This is me," the woman said, gathering her yarn into a faded canvas bag. She stood up, adjusting the brilliant yellow scarf around her neck with a sharp tug. She looked down at Raya, her expression entirely unreadable but kind. "Eat the plum, dear. Or throw it away. But don’t let it rot in your pocket."

With a hiss of air, the doors slid open. The woman stepped out into the crisp evening, a flash of yellow disappearing instantly into the stream of arriving commuters. The doors slid shut. The train lurked forward into the dark.

Raya sat alone. She looked at the plum in her palm. With a sudden, definitive movement, she reached into her school bag, pulled out a tissue, and carefully wiped the sticky purple juice from her skin. She dropped the wrapped fruit into the small bin.

She pulled out her phone. The screen lit up with three missed calls. The cold knot of panic vanished completely. She opened her messages, deleted her half-written, frantic apology, and typed a single line:

On the train. Home soon. Please tell me we aren't having plums for dessert.

Instead of opening her books, she leaned her head against the cool glass of the window, watching the rain catch the passing streetlights, turning the dark Wellington night into a blur of brilliant, unwritten streaks of gold.