London Tube Scene

Blagovesta Momchedjikova
She sits up straight in her perfect black business attire—plain black high heel shoes, a neat, knee high black skirt, a crispy white blouse, a black blazer carefully folded and placed over her left arm, a black purse tucked under the right. Like a cold blond statue she resists the mix of immigrants, tourists, & other misfits slouching carelessly around in random tank tops,
T-shirts, 
sweat pants, 
shorts, 
their hair 
in uncontrollable, 
unidentifiable 
styles 
unlike her 
picture 
perfect 
bob. 
As the 
westbound 
DLR snakes 
lazily 
avove ground 
to its next 
destination, 
her 
manicured 
right hand 
reaches 
toward 
her right eye—
tap, tap, tap 
she taps 
a tear 
away— 
and then toward 
the left, 
tap, tap, tap. 
She is 
crying 
and she is 
trying 
to stop 
her black 
eyeliner 
and black 
mascara 
from 
streaming 
down 
her pretty 
pale face. 
Tap, tap, tap, 
she goes again,
her index finger
diligently
wrapped in
a white
wipe
wiping
the slate
under her
now red
eyes
clean.
Did she
lose a
loved
one?
Did she
lose her
job?
Now that
the London
sun shines
on her
through
the train
windows,
she seems
to have gained
back
her
business
composure.
Or maybe
not.
As the train
rolls out
of the next
station,
her tears
continue
to do
what tears
know what
to do
best—
roll down.
Tap, tap, tap.
Did her
boyfriend
cheat
on her?
Did her
best friend
die?
Did she
lose
a pet?
By now
two young
guys—
the casual
moustache
on each—
standing
some
six feet
away,
swaying as
they hold onto
the hand rail,
have caught
onto her
pain
and decide
to entertain
her.
“Don’t be
sad,
Miss!”
they shyly
half-say
half-yell
in a heavy
East
Asian
accent
across
the moving
train car,
and laugh
uneasily,
mostly,
at their own
bravery—
they have
just broken
the unspoken indifference among passengers on the tube.
The sad Miss does not seem to either hear or care.
Tap, tap, tap.
The rest of us shoot angry glances at the violators of this impromptu display of private pain in public.
What did you just do? — we want to scold them.
You think she cries here by chance?
You silly young fools!
You think she cannot cry in the privacy of her home?
(Did she lose her
home?)
She cries here because it is safer to cry in the company of strangers. She needs us here—witnesses of her struggle to keep her pristine public persona intact—and it is because of our stare that she will never break down, not here! She will endure. In exchange, she simply allows us to wonder about her. For as long as she taps her tears away, we can imagine what gave her the pain, what made her so sad, who she
happens to
love,
who happens
to love
her;
We can
imagine
where she
comes from,
where she
goes next,
what she
wears
at home
(any loose
straps,
stains,
jeans
with tears?),
what her
favorite
food is!
And this
is our
silent
but strong
pact
with her,
here, on
this public
stage of the
train, on
this warm
day in June:
we help
keep her
unstained
public
persona
intact;
she helps
keep our
disheveled
private
personas
in awe.
And so,
gracious greenhorns, we must remain strange to her and each other, at all times.
About the author

Blagovesta Momchedjikova teaches writing at New York University. She holds a PhD in Performance Studies as well as a deep interest in the scale models of cities. She is the guest editor of Urban Feel, a special edition of Streetnotes, and of Captured by the City, a collection of essays on urban culture, forthcoming from Cambridge Scholars Publishing.