

The City of Dreams

The heat was stifling. It enclosed her, surrounded her and imprisoned her. She pulled out her embroidered handkerchief and dabbed gently at her forehead, biting her lip, before staring down the track once more. Nothing coming.

‘Have you remembered your purse?’ fussed her mother.

‘Yes,’ she replied.

‘And your reference? Your peppermints?’

Natalie ignored her and rolled her eyes. Only her mother could worry about peppermints at a time like this, although she knew it was only because she cared.

The day which signalled a whole new chapter in her life, the day she had been waiting for since, tumbling down the hillside with her brother Jake, she first caught sight of the train pulling into their small station, had finally come. Her blackberry-stained mouth had dropped open in astonishment as they had watched all the passengers getting on and off. How they had stared along the track that went as far as the eye could see! On the horizon, she could just make out a faint smudge — the city.

Since that day, it had been her dream to get on that train and travel to that city, the city of her dreams. It captivated her and some day it would make all her wishes come true. Today was that day. Armed with a brand new hat and a shaky smile, today was the day she was going to show the world the real Natalie Fairbank, the girl she had always wanted to be.

She frowned and stared down the track as, suddenly, she heard the unmistakable high-pitched squeal of the train. Before they knew it, it was upon them, a huge mass of steel and cogs and steam that seemed almost alive to her. As passengers disembarked onto the dusty platform and others began to climb aboard she turned nervously to her parents. Her father, dressed in threadbare Sunday best, looked on impassively as Natalie hugged her sobbing mother. With one last adjustment of her hat, she turned on her heel and boarded the train, turning her back on all that she had ever known.

With her stomach churning slightly with a mixture of fear and excitement, Natalie made her way along the carriages searching for an empty compartment. Eventually she found one and stowed her luggage overhead before sitting down next to the window. The cracked leather of the seat underneath her was uncomfortable, but nothing could perturb her. She leaned out the window and waved as the train pulled out of the station, not stopping until her parents were little more than specks of dust on the horizon.

Settling back down into her seat, so as not to mess up her hair too much, Natalie began to take notice of the view. It captivated and entranced her as the countryside passed by. Everywhere was fresh and green and new as she had never seen it before. The trees waved merrily at her as the sunshine shone down gently on her inquisitive face. Countless cows and horses stared peacefully at her, while birds sang overhead. It was

idyllic and yet she had never really seen it like this. She had always focused on one thing — the city.

As they drew nearer, the landscape began to subtly change. Gradually, grey had seeped in, like ink spreading slowly over blotting paper. The ground was grey, the buildings were grey and even the people had an ashen quality about them. Everyone and everything appeared exhausted, like all life had been sucked out of them. It was soulless. Natalie was scared — this was not how she had dreamt it. The streets were meant to be paved with gold, everywhere was meant to be bright and welcoming. Everything she had thought her old life was not. Only now was she realising just how wrong she might have been.

Natalie shifted uncomfortably on the hard seat. A man had joined her a few stations back. He was obviously a businessman commuting in to town but he did not seem at all friendly. One scowl was all she received upon greeting him, before he hid behind a copy of the newspaper, vigorously smoking a rotten-smelling pipe. The smell had not bothered her before, but now, combined with her growing sense of dread of the unknown, it made her feel slightly sick. Natalie hung her head as far as she could out of the window but what she saw only made her feel even worse.

Gaudy neon lights flashed loudly at her from the sides of buildings on the edge of the city, but it was what was looming over them that scared her the most. Out of thick smog, which seemed to hang over everything, rose countless skyscrapers, so tall Natalie thought they might touch the sky. The train sped up and suddenly they were all around her. She could see nothing but grey. Panicked, she looked up, desperate to see the blue of the sky, but all that lay above her was a thick, relentless carpet of pollution. She recoiled in horror at the stench and sat back down in her carriage, shaking slightly as they drew into the main station.

Reluctantly, she removed her battered suitcase and prepared to leave the relatively safe haven of the train. People rushed impatiently past her as she stood on the cold concrete platform. Everyone seemed to know where they were going. She had thought so, too, until today. Standing on the edge of the seething crowd Natalie had never felt more lost in her life.

Gingerly, she made her way up a flight of steps to the street outside. The sheer noise shocked her. Cars screeched, people yelled and birds flapped. The skyscrapers loomed ominously overhead. They taunted her as if to say they did not believe she could ever make it here.

As the crowd swirled around her, Natalie set her jaw and took a deep breath before joining it. She was going to make it here. She had to.