

Waiting for a Train.

The couple swept in to the station buffet like actors making their opening entrance on a stage, brash and loud. The woman was petit, dressed in a dark tailored coat with a lilac pashmina draped around her shoulders. The man was large and framed by a long, billowing, light coloured rain coat, one of those that has a belt, always undone, worn by the professional classes, barristers, doctors and professors with bow ties. The woman was talking on her mobile phone, not loud but not quiet.

“We’re at the station, we’re going to London.” Pause then, “We’re going to see the new Pinter; we’re going by train.” Pause. “Yes, I’ll ring you next week. We’ll have dinner” Pause. “Yes, we’ll be back on the drunk’s express”, she continued with a chuckle. “Yes!” and here she laughed loudly.

The man looked at her and said much louder than his wife, “Darling, not everyone wants to hear you conversation.”

The woman ignored this remark and carried on, “Ok, Bye. Yes, Yes, dinner next week. It will be lovely!”

Kate moved up to give the man room to sit down. There were two benches that stretched the length of the buffet window, overlooking the platform and the man had decided to sit on the side occupied by Kate, even though there was no one sitting at the other bench.

“Is he invading your personal space?” Kate looked up, part surprised, part embarrassed. The woman had finished her call and was addressing her. Kate felt like a pupil who had been caught by a teacher not paying attention, talking or day dreaming.

“No, I was just making a bit more room.” she said truthfully, in a small squeaky voice, although she did feel that the man had sat a tad too close.

“I understand!” the man boomed and smiled. He had a coffee in the standard plastic mug and he was picking at piece of fruit cake. He started talking. He was not looking at her but Kate knew he was talking to her.

“Not like it used to be!”

“Sorry?” Kate asked in that voice again. She couldn’t help it. This voice emerged whenever she was communicating with perceived authority figures, teachers, bank managers, doctors and such. It wasn’t a voluntary thing, not like her mothers telephone voice, the posh one she used just in case it was some one important calling. No, this voice was an involuntary reflex, a response to those who she found intimidating, which in Kate’s case was the world and his wife. “This buffet, well it’s not a buffet now is it? Don’t know what it is. What’s that say?” he peered up at the sign over the buffet counter. ‘The Cocoa Bean’?” he read in a world weary voice.

“Do you remember when it was run by that woman who did the most wonderful bacon butties? Wonderful breakfast! Proper tea, in a proper cup with milk from a jug!”

“No.” said Kate about to explain that she hadn’t lived here long and then thinking ‘What am I doing? Why am I encouraging him?’ It didn’t matter. The man didn’t need an answer. This wasn’t a conversation, this was a soliloquy.

“Marvellous woman! The sausages and bacon were to die for! When I was working I used to get off the train and stop here for a good, old, fry up.”

“Did you?” the woman looked up from her tea and the peanuts she was nibbling, but only for a second then she looked away again.

“Marvellous! Wife never knew! Devil of a job explaining why I wasn’t hungry!”

He went back to his cake. For a big man it took him a long time to eat a small piece of cake.

Kate smiled awkwardly and went back to her sandwich. Both the man and woman started reading broad sheet newspapers. They made comments about the time of the train and whether it was late or not. The woman answered her phone a couple more times and they both passed

remarks about items in the news but so disconnected that they could have been talking to imaginary friends. All of this private dialogue was conducted with projected voices, suggesting an awareness of an audience, unaware that that audience was reluctant, if not actually captive.

After a few minutes the woman said she was going to wait on the platform and the man followed. Kate watched them leave the buffet and troop up to the ticket collector for their next performance. She could only speculate at what was being said but, as with the first act, the second required no active participation from the ticket collector, just a smile and a laugh in the right place. A train rolled in to the station and fascinated, like the rabbit and the headlights of the car, Kate continued to watch as the man and woman climbed aboard. The train was not very full; there were plenty of seats. The woman took an airline -type seat by the window but the man, rather than sit next to her went further up the carriage and spoke to people sitting at the seats with tables. He turned back to his wife and, after a few seconds of what Kate thought was probably a monologue about leg room and space, he took a seat with this new audience of unsuspecting passengers. The woman rose and Kate watched as she took a window seat behind the man's. With that the train pulled away and they were gone. Kate could only guess at how the rest of the journey would be played out. She remained at the window looking out at the now deserted track and continued the drama in her mind. The presence of the self styled leads in the drama had filled every area of the station that had been their stage, this strange, fascinating couple. Kate mused on the performance, trying to flesh out the lives of the two people. She seemed to know so much about the minutiae of their life. They dined out with friends, they go to the theatre, and they like to use trains. She knew they had the internet; it was where the man said he had checked the train times and she knew what papers they read, at least in public. But she couldn't imagine their home, their car or any of their life together. How big was their house? What did they talk about behind closed doors? Did they have family? How long had they been married? Were they faithful? What was the real story of this couple who had such a busy and shared social life but would not sit next to each other on a train? Kate found herself wanting to know but knowing that this was one of those times when lives touch but, like bubbles in the air, bump once and then float away, never to touch again. As she sat there, her mind drifting like a cloud, another train drew to a halt on the opposite platform. A few minutes further wait and there he was, with the familiar beaming smile and stunning blue eyes that were just for her. Kate was back in the real world. She left the buffet by the main entrance and met him at the station door. A gentle kiss and a smile and the world was once more a quiet, serene place, all thoughts of the actors burst like bubbles and vanished.

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