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A DEPARTURE AND A MEETING

In the cold December rain, the big blue diesel eased its load of coaches out of King's Cross Station.

Peter stood at the door of the first coach, his head through the open window. The right side of his face became numb with the stinging rain as he watched the gravely waving figure of his father on the platform recede.

As the train entered the Gasworks Tunnel, Peter pushed the window up and went to his seat in the otherwise empty coach. His sandwiches, *The Railway Magazine*, and *Football Monthly* were on the table; his case, a blue quilted anorak stuffed roughly inside, was on the rack above, where his father had stowed it only a little while before.

He sat down and stared sightlessly at his magazines. Slowly, life came back into his face. The train, its huge diesel engine throbbing very close, picked its way cautiously toward Finsbury Park: Peter felt a sudden stab of guilty shame at realizing he was enjoying its progress.

And why shouldn't I? he thought.

There came into his mind the picture of a hospital bed, its occupant swathed in bandages; a blood transfusion being given; doctors and nurses looking tense, worried.

But you don't *know* that's what it's like, he said to himself. That's only what you've seen on television. But they wouldn't let you go to the hospital. So you don't *know* that's what it's like.

He opened *The Railway Magazine*. But the thoughts which came into his mind would not let him concentrate.

You may as well enjoy the journey. You can't do anything to help at home; that's why they've shoved you on the train to Dunfield all on your own – you're best out of the way. Anyway, you've never had a proper train journey before, so make the most of it while you can.

He doggedly turned over the pages – but to no purpose. Whether he liked it or not, his mind was going to try and piece together the previous sixteen hours – since the time he had been watching television the night before and his father had said to him, “Your mother will be home soon. Why don't you save her a bit of work and get yourself to bed, ready for when she comes in?”

Three days before Christmas is not the time for arguing, thought Peter – though it was an argument he and his father often had on the nights his mother was out at her exercise class.

“Come on, Peter. She'll be soon home – she's only got to cross the park from the Church Hall.”

So Peter had washed, cleaned his teeth, and scuttled off up to his bedroom, feeling quite self-righteous.

But his mother did not come home.

And from then on, everything had become confused. For the rest of the night was a cacophony of police-car sirens, people in and out of the house, urgent voices. Soon, Peter could stand it no more – whatever was happening, he seemed to have been forgotten.

He went downstairs – and heard, from the kitchen, an only half-familiar voice say, “Well, I think he's too young to be told all of it.”

He opened the door.

“Where are Mum and Dad?” he said.

Three people were there; the couple from next door and the woman from over the road.

“Your Dad’s all right, Peter. He’s at the hospital,” said the woman from next door.

“That was a damn stupid thing to say,” said her husband.

Peter said nothing.

“You see, Peter,” said the husband. “Your mother’s had – well, she’s had an accident.”

“But she’ll be all right,” said the woman from over the road brightly. “They’re very clever these days. She’ll be all right, you mark my words.”

Peter still said nothing. There was nothing he wanted to ask of these people. So he went back to his bedroom and put the light on. He sat down on the side of his bed and looked at all the objects which until an hour before had been parts of a well-ordered existence, thoroughly understood: his desk, his football portraits, his books, his plastic models – especially “Evening Star,” the half-finished railway engine, with its brunswick green boiler and silver connecting-rods, already looking massively impressive.

How long he sat there he did not know. It was very late when a car drew up outside. Peter could hear his father’s voice as the neighbors went out, so he rushed downstairs. He saw his father and a policeman enter; the policeman was holding his father’s arm, as if he could not stand on his own. Peter was shocked at his father’s drained, grey face and red-rimmed eyes.

“I’ve brought him home,” said the policeman. “He can’t do any more at the hospital.”

“What’s happened?” said Peter.

“Has nobody told you?” said the policeman.

Peter's father sat down on a kitchen chair, his head in his hands. The policeman looked embarrassed, as if given a job he had not bargained for. He cleared his throat.

"Well," he said. "It's your mother. When she was crossing the park. There were some jobboes around. They set on her and they – well, they beat her up."

Peter stared at him.

"We call it mugging," said the policeman, as if he thought more explanation was needed. "They ran off with her hand-bag. Someone disturbed them or it might have been worse."

Peter looked at his father, who had not moved.

The policeman continued, obviously hating every minute of it. "She's unconscious and she lost a lot of blood."

"Will she be all right?" asked Peter.

"Nobody knows. Not for a long time yet." The policeman's tone changed; it became more business-like. "Best go back to bed. Try to get some sleep. The hospital will let us know."

After that, it had all been like a dream. A night of disturbed snatches of sleep; a morning spent with a school-friend down the road who made heroic but vain efforts to cheer him up and keep his mind off things; then, at midday, his father coming in and speaking at last.

"I've fixed it up. Tom and Elsie up in Dunfield will have you for a while. Get ready; there's a train in two hours' time."

"But I want to stay here. I want to see Mum."

"You're going to Dunfield. It's all fixed."

Dunfield. Where Mum came from – where she and Dad had met, in fact. Peter had never been up there to Yorkshire – but he knew Uncle Tom and Auntie Elsie well enough, for they had often come down south to visit.

"What about Christmas?"

"You'll have it up there. You'll get two Christmasses in the end."

They packed a case together; Peter chose some books, decided not to take “Evening Star,” feeling somehow that it was good to have unfinished work to come back to – and then changed his clothes. He made a point of wearing his new black shoes with the leopard tracks moulded into the sole. He remembered his mother talking when he bought them. “You’re twelve – you’re too old for that sort of thing now.” But he had insisted, and the memory of his insistence made him recall why he was leaving. His newfound excitement evaporated.

A quick meal and a packet of sandwiches for later, then a scaring drive through London to King’s Cross, his father’s fingers showing white on the steering-wheel, betraying nervousness and worry.

“She’ll be all right, Peter. She’ll be all right,” he kept saying, until Peter was sure he didn’t believe it.

When they were on the station and walking along the line of blue and grey coaches, his father said, “Tom and Elsie will meet you at the other end. And I’ll ring up when there’s something to tell. And don’t worry. Mum wouldn’t want you to.”

So here he was, sitting alone in the front coach of the Leeds train, calling at Peterborough, Grantham, Newark, Retford, Doncaster, Dunfield, and Leeds, gathering speed through the northern suburbs behind its Brush Type 4, Class 47 diesel, and taking him further away from the awful fact which lay like a lump at the back of his mind and which nothing could alter.

“Tis a terrible thing not to know,” said a voice.

“Yes,” said Peter unthinkingly.

Then he looked up to see a man in the seat opposite; a man with a leathery face and dark, deep eyes. How did he get there? thought Peter. He felt a shiver of alarm.

“There’s much to happen yet,” said the man. His voice was deep, guttural, strange.

He must have come from the rear coaches and sat down while I was thinking, Peter decided.

The train went quickly through Potter’s Bar: the station buildings passed by as little oblong shapes each seen for a split-second. The neighing of the engine’s two-tone horn sounded very close.

“Those are t’first two notes of ‘On Ilkley Moor baht ’at,’” said the man.

“Yes,” said Peter.

“The driver must be a West Riding man. He’s probably glad he’s going home,” said the man. The voice now seemed strongly north-country.

“He’s either King’s Cross or Doncaster,” said Peter, hoping he didn’t sound too knowledgeable.

“I would think a London man would sound t’horn t’other way round,” said the man.

“You mean like the beginning of ‘Colonel Bogey’?” said Peter.

“This man’s going home,” was the reply.

The connecting door at the end of the coach suddenly slid open and the ticket-collector appeared. Peter held out the half return to Dunfield and it was clipped.

“Are you on your own?” said the ticket-collector.

“Yes,” said Peter, presuming the remark asked him how he was travelling.

“First stop after Doncaster,” said the ticket-collector. “I’ll see you get off all right.”

He walked up the coach, saw nobody else was there and went back the way he had come, totally ignoring the large man in the corner.

“Haven’t you got a ticket?” said Peter.

“I have no need of one,” said the man.

Obviously, thought Peter, he works for the railway and is so well known that the ticket-collectors don't bother to ask him any more.

"You must be very important," Peter said.

"I suppose I may have been once," said the man.

Yes, he looks old enough to be retired, thought Peter.

"What art tha reading, lad?" asked the man.

Peter held up *The Railway Magazine*. "I expect you know much more about it than I do," he said.

"Why should I?" said the man.

"Well, you used to work for the railway," said Peter.

"What made you think that?"

"Because you haven't . . ." started Peter, and then stopped.

"I think I would have liked to," said the man.

Peter wondered if he was like one of the nineteenth-century dukes who had free railway passes and private stations in return for letting the track go across their land. But surely British Rail had got rid of all that sort of thing. He turned back to his magazine and was on the point of becoming lost in a vanished world of steam engines.

"Why be so fond of the past?" said the man.

Peter's concentration broke.

"They're not all gone," he said. Obviously the man could see the photographs in the magazine. "I've seen a few engines preserved and still running."

"But 'tis not the same as seeing them all the time."

"I might not appreciate them so much," said Peter.

"But if tomorrow all t'steam engines were back, wouldst thou not be pleased?"

"Yes. But that's daft. It won't happen, however much I'd like it to. Time can't go back. We couldn't start again."

If only we could, he thought. I'd like to start again just from last night. Things might turn out differently.

"Think about it," said the man.

Yes. If only last night could come again and they could stop mother going to the exercise class, or his father would pick her up in the car. It was like a story read for a second time in the hope that the ending might be changed. Or a film seen twice – couldn't the second time the gunfight at the end be avoided? Or – and the sight appeared clearly to him – every time he saw an action replay of that last-minute goal that had beaten his favorite team and left him desolated.

“Yes,” said the man, as if reading Peter's thoughts. “This time it might be different.”

“But it can't be,” cried Peter, suddenly feeling alarmed.

“But what if it is?” insisted the man.

Peter was silent.

The train bustled through Sandy. Peter peered through the window looking for the bridge which carried the old Oxford-to-Cambridge branch over the main line.

“Well?” said the man.

“That's stupid,” said Peter.

“Is it?”

Peter took out his packet of sandwiches and ate them, offering none to the man. He tried to read *The Railway Magazine*.

But he couldn't. He was worried. Had the man really known he had seen again in his mind's eye the television picture of a goalkeeper trying to stop a certain goal? And why was he himself so worried about something so stupid? But was it stupid? What *would* happen if just once, the repetition of something were different from the original. It was a mind-boggling idea: Peter's mind somehow could not get hold of it.

“And what about plays?” the man continued, a note of excitement coming into his voice. “What about plays?”

Peter's eyes strayed to the communication cord. But £25 seemed a fortune, so he decided to stick it out.

The man's voice grew more and more urgent, as if he was saying something he had to get out of his system at all costs.

"What about plays? I know tha went to pantomimes when tha wert smaller. What about the Demon King? I'll wager tha shouted 'Look out' to t' Dame when t' Demon King crept up on her. It were like real, weren't it? But he weren't a Demon King – he were a man; a man like thi father, or – or like me."

Peter thought that if the Demon King was like him, there wasn't much difference between pantomime and real life. He was, the truth to tell, becoming frightened.

But it was an interesting point the man had brought up. It deserved an answer.

"Of course I thought it was real," he said. "But I was only six then. I'm twelve now. I know it's only make-believe. So do grown-ups: they just go to watch."

"Why?" asked the man.

"Why what?" said Peter.

"Why should they go to watch if 'tis only make-believe? What's t' point?"

"I don't know, if you put it like that," said Peter.

They passed Huntingdon: Peter knew they were approaching a stretch of line where it would be worthwhile timing the train with his watch.

The country was flat and dotted with stretches of flood-water after the heavy rain. The absence of rail-joints and the bareness of fenland outside the window made it very difficult to have any real idea of the speed of the train; even so, Peter's excitement mounted as the next four mileposts whisked by with exactly forty seconds between them.

"We're averaging ninety," he said to the man. "If we'd got a Deltic instead of a Brush we'd be doing the ton easily."

"What about the villain in a play?" said the man.

Peter tried not to listen.

“What about t’ villain? The actor who takes the part is an ordinary man – but he has to look like a villain and sound like one. Or nobody will listen to him. And if he looks like one and sounds like one, then he may feel like one. What if he *likes* feeling like one? What if he takes t’ blanks out of his gun and puts live bullets in it? What if he shoots t’ hero with them? What if the villain says, ‘Every night I go on t’ stage and every night I’m beaten. This night I’ll win.’ Then ’tis not a play. ’Tis real life. What of *Macbeth*? What if one night Macbeth won?”

This speech came out very quickly, and by the time it had finished, Peter had forgotten all about his watch and the speed of the train. He stared at the man in amazement.

“Who are you?” he said.

The man didn’t answer for a moment. Then he said, “I hope I’ve not frightened thee.”

“No,” said Peter faintly. But his heart was thumping strangely.

There was no doubt – for a moment he had been frightened. Something in the man’s peculiar, deep voice had riveted him – a strange urgency. But the fright passed. Peter felt that if he could have a proper conversation he would end up by liking him very much.

He looked again at the man. Yes, his eyes were dark, deep, and gentle. He was balding considerably. Afterwards, Peter could never remember what the man was wearing – but it seemed like some sort of long cloak, not unlike the cassock worn by the Vicar at home, but, instead of black, a darkish brown, and made of very much rougher material.

“Yes,” said the man. “I were important once. I were important in Dunfield. That’s where thou’rt going, isn’t it?”

“What did you do in Dunfield?” asked Peter.

“I wrote part of a cycle.”

“You don’t write cycles: you ride them,” said Peter.

“What dost tha think a cycle is?” asked the man.

“It’s a bike, of course,” said Peter.

“No. A cycle is a series of plays. I thought that was what tha called them now. And I wrote some of them. I see I shall have to start again.”

Peter wondered if in fact he was very stupid.

The next question the man asked nearly rocked him out of his seat.

“Dost tha believe people can come back out of the past?”

“I don’t know,” was all Peter could say. “How do you mean?”

“Dost tha believe that a man can really be living at one time but can go into another century if he wants to – or if he has to?”

Peter thought he had better try to treat the question sensibly.

“They do it in space-fiction – in time machines and things,” he said.

“Ah,” said the man, smiling. “Now it is thee that is puzzling me.”

“You must be living at some other time if you’ve never heard of that,” said Peter.

“Yes,” said the man.

Peter’s mind was in a whirl. The man obviously meant it.

“You mean . . .” he started. That would explain a lot – the reason for having no ticket; the reason for not being seen by the ticket-collector; the reason for appearing so strangely in the corner seat at all. Yet the man had heard of “On Ilkley Moor baht ’at” and knew about pantomimes, guns, and bullets.

The metallic, grinding roar of the train’s brakes being applied sounded through the coach. They were coming into Peterborough.

“Say no more for a while,” said the man.

Peter was dazed. The train stopped with a squeal of brakes. The dull clatter of the diesel engine ticking over, the sound of footsteps and voices of people on the platform, the muffled indecipherable boom of the station announcer’s voice – all the things he would normally have taken such delight in – might as well not have existed for Peter as his mind tried to grapple with this new and shocking idea. He was sitting opposite and had been talking with a man who did not live in his world; who was not real; who could not be a human being: who must be dead; who thus must be – and this hammered through Peter’s head – *must be*, MUST BE a ghost.

“Nay, I’m no ghost,” murmured the man – and once again Peter wondered if he were somehow answering his thoughts. “I am still living my own life of many years ago, and before this day is out I will be back in my rightful time.”

Although the platform was crowded and although many people boarded the train, nobody tried to enter the front coach. Even when the train had started again and was clacking busily over the pointwork at the north end of Peterborough Station, Peter and the man were still alone.

“And now I shall tell thee why,” said the man.

Peter felt a curious thrill in his stomach. It was the feeling he had when his father took him to Stamford Bridge to watch Chelsea – when the buzz of the crowd stopped; little hazes of tobacco smoke would drift across the bare pitch in the autumn air; everybody would crane forward and a tension would pass through them all as the two teams ran out of the players’ tunnel, crossed the greyhound track, and walked on to the grass for an afternoon of glorious uncertainty.