

A death on the line

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November's grey murk hung over the birthplace of the railways. Hurrying, tripping nearly, I dodged the outgoing tide of passengers crowding over the bridge between the platforms and just made it to a southbound train revving its engines on Platform Four. I found a seat at a table facing backwards and squeezed into it, threw my bag on the empty seat beside me. I always tried to face backwards. If the train was going to crash I reckoned it gave me a better chance of getting out alive, and after recent disasters who knew when that might happen?

I won't say it was a regular trip this, down to London. I did it three or four times a year for one reason or another. This time it was mostly for business. I was going to see a man about some work. While I was there I would catch up with a few friends, maybe take in a show, that kind of thing. Not that London held any fascination for me. I was born and raised there and glad to get out at eighteen. The further north I got the better I liked it. Newcastle looks like it might turn out to be the last stop. It's a lively city if you find drunks lively and small enough to get out of quickly if you have a mind to get out. The sea-ripped Northumbrian coast is a half-hour drive away and to the north-west lies the last great wilderness of England, the Cheviot Hills, a volcanic whaleback cutting us off from the Scots. In those green-remembered hills, the ancient haunt of saints and shamans, boisterous clouds come barging in at head-height from the west so that you feel you ought to duck your head to avoid them. The light changes minute by minute. You might walk for a whole day without seeing another soul, just buzzards and flocks of overtaking shadows for company.

You can't be alone on a train any more than you can in London - or Newcastle for that matter: Protocols of personal space break down. Couples air their linen, children scrap as if the carriage were their front room at home. Today it looked like I might be lucky, at least noise-wise. Opposite me sat a man in his mid-thirties who looked like he'd travelled many a mile but didn't want to tell

anyone his life story. His face had more lines on it than was right, his fingers were orange from smoking and he had a tattoo. Not MUM, backed by a heart; nor TRACY4ME... no: it was a single strand of dark ink-blue barbed-wire that wound itself round his arm from his bare shoulder all the way down to his wrist. He's done time, I said to myself. I wondered what for. The idiotic thought crossed my mind that maybe he was a fence.

He noticed me sit down and pulled the tab on a fresh can of lager; took a slug from it and turned stiffly to look out of the window, his eyes flicking lazily from one passing image to another. We were crossing one of the Tyne bridges, dead slow ahead. The incoming tide a hundred feet below us was running fast against a westerly breeze that blew down the valley, ruffling the dun water: two opposing forces with a working relationship as old as the hills.

The Customer Service Manager intoned a few meaningless words across the tannoy, words read awkwardly off a card. A young dyed-blonde girl and her boyfriend who must also have got on at Newcastle came and sat loudly at the table across the aisle. She wore pink. Pink and gold. He wore a shellsuit and a bumfluff beard and headphones that leaked hip-hop. They chewed gum furiously and the girl began to play obsessively with a strand of hair that had defied the straighteners.

Opposite them a man filled both seats. He was huge and smelly and had greasy grey hair that fell over piggy eyes. He wore a dirty anorak zipped all the way up to his neck. He hadn't shaved for days. On the table in front of him were two collecting-bottles for an animal charity, and a tupperware lunchbox. 'I'm getting off at York,' he announced to anyone who would listen, 'next stop, York.' The couple giggled. I got a book out and a plastic bottle that had once held Coke but which I'd refilled with tap water before leaving that morning. The man who'd done time carried on looking out of the window.

At Durham, where in the autumn drizzle sodium floodlights already glowed faintly against the walls of the monstrous medieval castle, a woman walked down the aisle with a suitcase in tow, thought about asking Anorak to make room for her to sit down, thought better of it, and moved on towards the rear of the train. The man who had done time got his mobile phone out and checked it for messages, or to see if there was a signal. Then he got up and went to the end of the carriage, towards the toilet. When he came back he was speaking to someone. 'Hello, is that Louise? Hello Louise, it's Darren, Chris's

bruwer; I was just wondering if you knew what was goin' on.' The accent was London: south London. Darren's voice had a nervous tic in it, so it actually came out more like 'I was, I was just wondering if you, if you knew what was goin', goin' on.'

I tried to bury myself in my book. Anorak was hoping to start a conversation with the scrawny couple and they were having none of it, so he looked over to see what was going on on our table and I made the mistake of catching his eye. 'Funny-coloured Coke, that,' he said. I ignored him and got out a pen and notebook to make it as clear as I could that I was concentrating on my book. 'You're writing things down,' he said. I smiled thinly and tried to look like I was concentrating very hard. What I was thinking was, maybe I should have headed for the hills this morning.

Darren's phone went. I resisted the temptation to tut. 'Hello, Mick, yeah, I was, I was just tryin' to get hold of me bruwer...!' There was a pause while Mick said something long and complicated which had Darren looking for enlightenment towards the low hills flashing past. Then, 'Yeah, I'm on the train now, we've just passed, we've just passed Durham. I won't be in London 'til about four and I just, I just want to know what's goin' on cos I've not heard nuffin since this mornin'!' Some dodgy family deal going down, I thought, and wondered why people on trains wanted to share their lives with strangers. Maybe it was to make themselves sound interesting, I don't know. I didn't want to look or sound interesting. I wanted to be left alone. If this was a train in Africa or Eastern Europe I'd be trying to look as boring as possible, to sink anonymously into my seat. Maybe I'd brought that habit home with me. Maybe that was why I travelled.

While I subconsciously tried to work out what Darren was talking to Mick about, the ticket inspector arrived. Anorak had his ticket and his concessionary railcard out already, displayed in a worn but neat wallet containing transparent plastic sleeves. You could tell he was going to ensnare the inspector in conversation, possibly to do with the chassis number of the carriage we were in or somesuch. But the inspector was more interested in the couple. The girl, it appeared, had an armed forces discount ticket and the inspector wanted to see her army pass. She didn't have it with her like, she was saying, left it at wor Mam's house, like. But she'd picked the wrong inspector to pull that one on. He was ex-services himself and was having none of it. In my day, he was saying, you never went anywhere without your pass. And this gave Anorak his opening. 'I always carry identification

wherever I go,' he announced, waving his pass in front of the chavette. 'I always carry identification. You should always carry identification.' It was a pet word, identification. He probably had thousands of them. You could tell he knew the number of his card off by heart too, he was that sort.

We pulled into Darlington and the inspector went off towards the front of the train, promising to return and charge the girl full whack for the ride to London. It was all go, this journey on a train that swished silently south while its occupants lived out their lives. I thought, well at least we'll be shot of Anorak at York, another forty minutes away. I tried again to concentrate on my book but Darren was on the mobile again and it was impossible not to listen. 'Me mum's in hospital wiv cancer, and now this,' he was saying. 'I just want a number... I'd be grateful if you, if you could, yeah, fanks..'. I began to want to finish his sentences for him, to lean over, take the phone and say, 'Allow me.' Darren put the phone down and ran a hand through his hair. It was just short of shoulder length, rather fine, light brown. In fact, when it came to it Darren was a good-looking man. Or had been. There was kindness in his eyes. I pictured an upbringing on a hard estate, Stockwell Park or somewhere, a place where a career in petty theft or crack-dealing was the smart option even for bright boys with good manners like Darren. Now he looked like he was going to cry. Maybe he was remembering, or maybe he hadn't had much sleep, what with the family business and all.

Darren downed the rest of his can of beer and got up. When he came back he had a clear plastic cup and a bottle of over-priced white wine with him. He half-filled the cup, took a sip from it, then folded his arms and shut his eyes like he wanted to sleep but had too much on his mind. We were through York now. Anorak had got off and taken his bottles and his smell with him. It was a relief all round. I thought about trying to have a snooze myself, then Darren's phone went again. This time someone had information for him: a number to call. Darren looked up and asked me with his eyes if he could use my pen. I nodded, pushing it across the table towards him and he took it and wrote down a number on the back of his hand. 'Much appreciated,' he was saying to whoever it was. He passed the pen back to me and said 'Fank you,' and I nodded again.

Darren dialled the number on the back of his hand and waited while it rang. I was hooked by now, wishing I could hear both sides of the conversation. 'Hello,' he said, 'I was wondering if you, if you might be able to give me some information regarding my farver, Christopher John Wilkes.' It was a formal voice,

the one he'd been trained to use in front of magistrates from an early age, no doubt. Very polite. Very deferential. You felt he was a deferential kind of man all round. 'Yes,' he went on, 'I am his son, Darren Christopher Wilkes.' That's how it must have sounded like in court, I thought. Darren Christopher Wilkes, you are charged that on the 17th of ... etc. Then I thought, I suppose his old man has been done for something and is in the nick. Like son, like father.

I was wrong. After what seemed like a long wait Darren said, 'Is that Doctor Gonzalez? Fank you for sparing the time Doctor, I was just wondering if you could tell me, could tell me how my farver is?' There was a pause while he listened to a long explanation and during that pause the look of intensity left Darren's face. In fact everything left his face, life, blood and all. He looked down at his watch, then out of the window, like he was counting. He looked at the watch again, hoping it would say something different. But it didn't. Then he said to the doctor, 'Yes, I'm on the train, I'm on the train now. I fink it gets, it gets in at about four. I won't be able to get to Lewisham before five o'clock. Do you fink he'll... Yes, I see, yes, fank you Doctor you've been very, you've been very kind. I'm sorry to have taken up your time.'

Darren's eyes filled as he put the phone down. He took a slug from the plastic cup, wrapped himself in a jacket that was too small and tried to bury himself in a hole that he couldn't dig because he was on the one o'clock from Newcastle to King's Cross. I wanted to cry too. Not just because I was watching a man whose father would be dead before he could see him again. Not just because you couldn't stay out of a story that was happening two feet away. It was also because the same thing had happened to me.

Almost the same thing. Two years before, I had driven south along more or less the same route towards a hospital where my mother was dying. And every half-hour or so the phone would go and a voice would ask how soon I thought I could be at the hospital because they didn't know how long she could last. And I kept driving faster and faster, almost hoping the police would pull me over so I could tell them why I was doing a ton down the A1. But they never did, and I had got there in time. Or rather, my mother had decided to hang on until I was there. And so I had held her hand for the last fifteen minutes while it was still warm and I could say some sort of goodbye before they flicked the switch to the 'Off' position and the little orange light went out.

It didn't look like Darren's father was going to wait for him to get to Lewisham. Maybe he thought he'd hung on long enough. Maybe seeing Darren one last time was not worth waiting for. But I didn't think so. Why hadn't Darren taken an earlier train? Then again, why hadn't I left earlier to see my mother? I couldn't answer that one. Darren's eyes looked like he didn't have any answers either. I wanted to tell him he didn't have to feel guilty but I couldn't. Guilt might have been his only comfort. Hunched up in the corner with his wine and his tears for company, he fell asleep somewhere between Grantham and Peterborough in the flat, damp peaty plains of eastern England. Flecks of rain silently spattered the outside of the windows. Now and then an exquisite gothic church spire would stab through the flat line of the horizon like a stuttering heartbeat on a monitor. I would have fallen asleep myself but the inspector had come back for another argument with the girl, whose false address he'd gone to check. She didn't seem bowered, nor did the boyfriend.

I was close to drifting off at last when the train passed another one heading north and lurched violently sideways with a sound like a blow to the head. From further down the carriage came the noise of plastic cups and bottles crashing to the floor and a small child screeched. A disturbing thought rose to the front of my mind, then I lost it as Darren's phone rang again. It woke him up, and this time he got up and went to answer it where no-one could hear him. He was away for about five minutes. When he came back I knew his father had gone. Darren wore a look that said nothing mattered any more. He sat down, finished his bottle of wine and watched the day fade under filthy black clouds as we drew nearer and nearer to the city. A minute or two later there was one last call and this time it was his bruvver. Darren didn't say much, he just listened and cried and I had to go to the toilet and shed a few tears too. I wanted to go back and give Darren a hug but you don't do that sort of thing to a stranger on a train. So when I sat down again I kept my eyes on my book and it was then that realised I was still reading the page I had opened at Newcastle.

Somewhere around Hatfield the train shook again as we rattled over a ragged set of points and this time I thought, it would be ironic if our train was derailed now. I would be alright because I was facing backwards. Darren might get thrown over the table and crack his head against the partition behind me. Not that it would matter, because Darren didn't really need to get to London now.