

CROSS PURPOSES

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The guard had already inhaled to blow the whistle when he spotted the old lady. Removing the whistle, he exhaled wearily. Blasting the final whistle was always a special moment. In his mind he was starting the World Cup Final. He started it several times each day, imagining different teams each time: Spain, Brazil, Argentina, Korea. It never palled. That electric silence – and then the release, the excitement, as the train launched forward like a striker prowling towards goal.

But he was not a hard man. The old woman, out of breath, had put down her suitcase and was struggling to open the carriage door. He stepped forward to swing it open for her.

'Thank you so much, stationmaster. Oh dear, the taxi was stuck in terrible traffic. I thought I would miss the train'.

He liked that. 'Stationmaster'. After all, this was Victoria Station, London. He brushed a speck off his jacket as she clambered in. Then he slammed the door, drew himself up to his full height and blew the whistle.

The train was already in motion when she found her seat. Her heart was palpitating with the rush. She had made her seat reservation a few days before, with an Advance ticket which was only valid for this train. She sank into the seat, happy to let her body go limp at last. A young man was occupying the seat facing hers. He was wearing a personal stereo which looked like the wishbone of a chicken straddling his head. Out of it seeped what sounded to her like faint chicken squawks and falling dustbin lids. Although his eyes were closed, his hand tapped up and down on the armrest and at intervals he would jerk his chin out and pout his lips. Once, he even punched the air with his fist, but by then she was too drowsy to worry.

She was woken up by the ticket collector and a waft of musky aftershave. She groped in her bag for her ticket. 'Here we are, inspector. Am I right for Ramsgate? My sister is meeting me there'.

'Certainly, madam. Enjoy your journey'.

Pleasant young man, she thought. She watched him moving along the carriage, checking tickets, exchanging conversation. Relaxing, she began to look forward to the few days she was going to spend in Ramsgate with her sister and niece, strolling around the marina and inhaling the fresh sea air. She didn't often travel by train, and was struck again by the informality of the open-plan layout, which she preferred to the claustrophobic compartments of her youth.

She stood up to take a paperback from her tartan suitcase. Though retired for several years from schoolteaching, she still read detective stories with furtive pleasure, as if the wobbling piles of unmarked essays awaiting her attention had not long since disappeared. She liked having her curiosity and analytical skills tested by the search for the fictional culprit. While replacing her suitcase, however, something distracted her. A certain oddness in her surroundings. It took her a while to realise what it was.

What was unusual was that all the other passengers along the length of the carriage appeared to be facing towards her. She couldn't see any facing the same way as herself. She told herself that it must be because of the height of the seats. From the vantage point of her aisle seat, she told herself, the others must simply be invisible.

But when she set off a few minutes later for the buffet car, she discovered that every passenger in the carriage was indeed facing one way, away from the engine. How curious, she thought. Especially since she had been under the impression that it was generally thought nicer to be facing the engine. Perhaps it was just coincidence.

She was halfway along the next carriage when she realised that the same phenomenon was repeating itself. Every single passenger in the compartment was facing the same way, towards her. The odds against this happening twice over must be quite high, she thought cheerfully to herself. She no longer felt quite so cheerful when the third carriage proved to be no exception. As she passed through the automatic doors into the fourth carriage, she was beginning to find the sea of faces oppressive. It began to seem more important to find just one person seated facing the other direction. None was to be found.

The next carriage turned out to be the buffet car. It was empty. She reached the counter.

'A cup of tea, please', she said, 'and a packet of biscuits'. The attendant, a young man with dreadlocks, handed over her change and two plastic portions of milk. She carried them over to a small table by the window. The walk to the buffet car had left her strangely tired. She sat down, facing the engine, and sipped the tea. It was watery, but it revived her. How absurd to get so preoccupied with where people are sitting. She took off her silver-framed spectacles and wiped them with her paper napkin. It must be my eyes, she thought.

When she got up, she noticed that two other passengers had arrived. They had sat down at separate tables. Both were facing her. On impulse, she approached the bar attendant.

'Excuse me', she said, trying to sound casual. 'I'm probably imagining this, but it seems to me that everyone on this train is sitting facing in one direction. Am I right?'

He looked puzzled. 'Search me, love', he replied. 'I'm stuck here and people come to me. Sometimes they sit one way, sometimes they sit the other'. Seeing her face fall, he added, 'But it doesn't really matter, 'cos we're all going the same way, aren't we?'

'Yes, I suppose we are'.

She set off back to her own carriage. The return transit did nothing for her peace of mind. Her eyes had not deceived her. It really was most peculiar. When she reached her seat, the young man opposite her was still wearing the wishbone. Timidly, she reached over and tapped his arm. His eyes opened and seemed to roll before focusing on her. Reluctantly, he detached an ear from his headset.

'Could you tell me something?' she asked. 'Why is everyone facing the way you're facing?'

'Sorry?' His face registered bemused irritation.

'I mean, is there any special reason for not facing the engine?'

'I don't get you. I just sat here because the seat was free'.

'Oh, I see', she said listlessly while he wired himself up again to the chicken squawks.

She picked up her book and began to read, but found it hard to concentrate. The story she was reading was built upon the assumption that everything had a cause, or a motive. After five minutes she got up again. She'd had an idea. Simply walking along to the other end of the train would settle the matter. There was no point in being distracted by something so ridiculous. She set off, walking in the other direction now. But reassurance was elusive. The next carriage did not, to her dismay, disturb the pattern. Everyone faced away from the engine. She was aware of her pace increasing. With each carriage she entered her hopes rose and then fell again. In one carriage there were two young schoolboys in uniform. They seemed to be travelling on their own. Her head was pounding by now and she slumped down in the seat opposite them. They glanced at her briefly before going back to their playstations. What did all these people know that she didn't? Or was it some mysterious magnetic or solar force which she was for some reason immune to?

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Come on now, pull yourself together, she told herself, just as she used to tell her young charges at school. I'll get this straight. There must be a logical explanation. She set off again. The next compartment was no different, nor the one after. She was walking faster and faster. She had begun to bump into people's shoulders as she blundered by. At one point she jogged someone's elbow as he typed on his laptop, but she hardly stopped to apologise. All she could think of was the next automatic door. Perhaps on the other side of it the pattern would break. And then she found herself bumping into someone. Her heart was pounding and she had broken into a cold sweat.

'Are you all right, madam? Have you lost your way?'

She was glad to see that it was the guard, but then her knees buckled.

'Come on, madam, just sit down here for a moment until you've got your breath back'. His voice was kindly and she let herself be led to a seat.

'I do feel most peculiar', she admitted.

'Some people do come over funny if they're not used to trains', he said, soothingly.

She pondered for a moment before enquiring: 'Do people ever die on trains?'

'It can be done', he pronounced. 'But it's very rare'.

She suddenly wanted to talk and talk, about anything that came into her head, to restore normality. 'My great great grandfather died at Waterloo, you know'.

'Is that so?' he said. 'Which platform?'

She looked at him scathingly. 'Really', she said, 'I hardly think it matters which platform it was'.

'True', he replied apologetically. In his mind, he ran through his Customer Service manual, wondering what tips it might offer for this situation.

She was about to ask him about the mystery disturbing her when the train juddered to a halt.

'Excuse me, madam', he said. 'I'll have to go and see what's up. You sit there until you feel better'.

But she could not bear to sit still until the matter had been cleared up. She got up and walked towards the first-class carriages. Her misery increased. The occupants were all facing the same way, away from the engine. She attacked a second. The train had started again. It was as though she was in some dreadful nightmare, trying to reach a destination which was always out of reach. Was it a joke? It wasn't the first of April. And why should they have singled her out as a target?

As she stumbled towards the middle of the carriage, she stopped suddenly. She hardly dared look. She had the distinct impression that there was a passenger sitting in contrary direction to all the others. A man. She advanced cautiously. So far so good. She began to walk faster, her excitement mounting. He was quite definitely facing the other way. The only man on the whole train to be doing so. Relief surged through her. There was no conspiracy. Life came back into focus again. Humanity had regained its randomness. She didn't know him from Adam, but she could have hugged him. She sat down opposite him, beaming. He looked up in surprise. As an extra bonus, he was extremely handsome, a Clark Gable lookalike.

'I can't tell you', she said breathlessly, 'how very good it is to see you'.

A corresponding expression of delight spread over his features. He seemed to understand. She didn't need to explain. They stared in wonder at one another.

'I was beginning to think I was having a nightmare', he said.

She nodded, understandingly. 'Me too', she replied. 'They all follow one another like sheep, don't they? Why do they all have to face the same way?'

He looked puzzled. 'You've lost me there'.

'You know, why can't they face the engine?', she prompted, anxiety rekindling.

'Face the engine?', he echoed. 'Frankly, I couldn't give a damn which way they face. I was beginning to think there was a conspiracy. You're the only woman on the whole bloody train!'