

IN THIS CORNER, PERFECT AND WARM

by Rob Sherman



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In this corner, perfect and warm, my back has plotted an angle that in 1979 was designed, along with the train that surrounds it, to be faultless. I have always cultivated my spine to be average, with just enough curvature so as not to appear too ascendant or too base. The angle into which I am slotted has been curved to communicate that it is acceptable to be a higher being. I had better start sleeping with one pillow at my parent's house, to prepare for when I come back this way in two weeks. I cannot worry about arrogance where my posture is concerned.

The angle is not only chiropractic; the blown plastic seat is a Sampson of effort, holding back a tank of human faeces behind it which contains more liquid than my entire family, waiting for me in Birmingham, possess in their bodies. Even now, near Christmas, with all that wine.

Whenever I travel from Euston, I play a game with myself as I descend the concrete ramp that leads out onto the platform. It will always be empty and faintly Soviet, marrowfat green much like a lake torrid with speedboats, the light full of bird-pap and pensioner's rain. The game is that I always try and spot the carriages with toilets before I reach the first door; they are slightly fatter, if you look, with a baked-in droop that comes with such a great responsibility.

I've been sitting here for twenty minutes, and am fairly certain that I was the first person to get on the train, apart from the cleaners. They have since finished banging their heads on the door-frames and are wallowing gently, eyes closed, under the heaters. These carriages are often empty at around this time of day, not only because of the atmosphere, which is not filthy but a little dead, deglazed with the smell of old heat escaping and the infinitesimal whispering that I imagine accompanies microbes at work, but because of the embarrassment that most people feel, just coming in and sitting down next to a toilet alone, being forced to pretend that it is not there, that the big, hilarious tank is not *right there*. Some of us don't seem to care so much about that. Apart from myself, there are the relieved elderly, who still try to connect all the patent tubes below their wattles to human machinery, and parents who seem to only use the cubicle to have stern conversations with their children, which we can all hear through the grates that were also designed in 1979 to vend our own inner chintz back to us.

And on a day like today, when there is floodwater turning the mash tun of the Midlands over and over, there are even fewer. I have been known to try yoga in these carriages, when girlfriends evangelised me, once and once more. But today I was reading. I've since let the book fall from my hand, trying to force a sense of relaxation down, and I'm sort of enjoying the smell of roasting paper as it lies against the radiator. It was maybe Ancient Greek, or something similar. I like to read books that nobody else reads on trains. You can't be afraid of what others will think of you.

There must have been a delay at Euston. Half the train was missing, having its teeth brushed in a depot somewhere near Reading, and as I descended the ramp I was alarmed to see that there was only one toilet carriage for the entire train. I could hear it relieving itself, getting rid of all the blackness leaked into its ear by those coming to London an hour before. There go the worries about interviews, pilgrim excitement and too many chocolate bars. The service is always better, and busier, inbound, the trollies faster, the cabin staff thinner and with less body hair. There is an ugly hush when you go west.

There's a *hwaamhwaam*, and the door *pisses* open and first one, then another, a young female student in an almond jumper hung about with glass beads, and one who walks the other way. The girl asks me if this train goes to Northampton. I tell her yes, and smile, secured in my position of making first landfall. There are grumbles behind me, the sippy-bird hop of those with full bladders, and, as I predicted, an angry Greek man and his son foxtrot past me. I want to tell them that the rumour that one cannot use a train's toilet when it is at a station is a popular fallacy, that there is no little hatch that opens like a garderobe and fertilises the gravel. Before I can stop him, however, I remember that I was the *first* onboard, and this, combined with my eagerness to quote specific facts about train toilets, might reveal a certain interest of which I am not ashamed, but which could cause a stockade label to come into hanging about my ears.

What is a bigger problem is that I really very much need to sniff my fingers, but again I am aware how I would come across to the almond student, bathed in a hermetic robe of flower gas. I know what I would find there, anyway; stale water from my bathroom towel, and chestnut stuffing mix.

When he first sits down opposite me, ten minutes later, I have just recovered from the two hundred travellers who have piled onto this magician's assistant of a carriage, surprisingly lithe and perfectly willing to be gutted. The train pulls away into a dark elevenish day. In my mind I project the word GENTLEMAN above his head, not drooping around his ears, and a little shining crown that bobs slightly as if he is just underwater. He is certainly dressed like a gentleman, for one. He has that grape/mint/marsala combination that is fashionable at the moment, like the colours of an occupied

country's flag. There are electronics here, there and here, purring at him like the crushed ashes of cats, and his skin, so black it's blue, gives him the impression of a fighting beetle. His blunt head is wedged into a cloth cap, and he wears trainers so white I forget the whiteness of his teeth. He is like a boiled washcloth stacked in a hospital; nothing about him could ever be dirty. I watch him in the window, the morning dark enough to make him out fully in the reflected lights, for longer than is strictly necessary. I bounce my angle into yet another, off the umber reflection and across to the toilet door. I can see that it has been forced open by the presence of a group standing around it, whispering, never letting the sensors rest. So *that* is where it came from! The little room's pipes and cream appliances are showing, its uvula hanging on a steel chain, and as always I cannot look at it. It's like seeing up a bride's skirt.

He is upset by something. The hairs on his knuckles are standing up, though most have been sheared off by his lozenged teeth. They have turned their attention to his lip, and now his thumb, testing each for ripeness before sheathing themselves in a malinging tongue. He pulls chewing gum out of his pocket, taps it against his wrist, and then puts it away. He spins his phone with that flourish that everybody has learnt without thinking nowadays, lights it with a press, and then puts it away. He taps his feet to some chartlequin who beseeches into one ear. I turn away from the window, past him in real life, though his eyes do not raise, and look at two businesspeople by the opposite window.

They have worked out, through murmured niceties, that they work for the same company, one branch in Birmingham, one in London, and that they pass each other every day, but never knew. This signals the start of a friendship that will last many years, they think; the way another man mopes up at them through the parted thighs of the seatbacks, I know that he is employed by the same company, but has missed his chance. He throws something between the thighs into the bin, seems to notice them, and smiles as he turns back.

When I look at the gentleman again, two hours later when the floodwater has reached the tracks, he has pulled out a little window, a new tablet. They are fairly common just after Christmas, when everybody on the trains are having frank conversations with their new friends, but he must be well-off to dare to flash one *now*. We've stopped five or six times, the magazines of cold air brought by the hundred or so new arrivals emptied into the general fug, and I can feel the heat from the tablet's vents on my shins, even though they aren't supposed to generate any at all. Either his nose is whistling or there's a fan in it working to keep him entertained. From the green pallor on his face, like oil, or actually oil, I think he is playing a football game, or watching a film on the Midlands into which we are diving. Though it is dark now, all the fields around us are flooded, and if there were a moon, the fields would shine like hammered helmets lowered against the rain. I think his fingers are moving, and I wonder if he is just nervous still.

Maybe he is ignoring his bladder.

It has been nearly three hours.

Though maybe the toilet is broken. Nobody seems to be using it, and the door hasn't shut in all this time.

I can hear that whining again, and I can't tell if it is him, the little Sisyphus in his hands, or another passenger.

Thought has slowed that much. All that, above, took nearly another hour to come up with. These trains do that, with their radiators half as old again as I am, and with far more complexity. They are perfect for cooking books, but they don't half make you drunk and sleepy. We're lucky, really, when we stop at a drowned regional station ten minutes later, and they bring a little of the flood in with them, waking up even the most cornered of us. It's been worse than we thought, say the country folk as if we had been worried, and their damp, flat feet and bad posture mortar into the cracks of floor still available. We are baking a cake of people and their breath, or a brick. The cooking has reached the centre; the gentleman and I are stuck together at the leg with an unhappy steam, and I don't have the space to move, with this taciturn police officer cantilevered over us. He's already crushed the almond student, and we're next, it seems. My caked walking boots are rubbing against his opalescent trainers, but he doesn't seem to mind, even though he notices me, and gives me a glance that seems to recognise our differing values and

at once dismiss them. He lets us crush closer together. A dome of people forms over us, and the corona from the open toilet door vanishes, as the journey whirls everyone into stiff peaks. The dome spreads down to the floor and the progressives who defiantly crouch there, and becomes an igloo. The corner is now altogether warmer and still perfect. I don't mind all these people. We are left in a personable sort of darkness, and I feel as if I have gotten into bed with him.

Somehow, I'm not sure how, he has managed to tip-top his tablet behind his head and into his bag, and has taken his phone out again. It's fairly unmatched to the strata of his outfit, an unbrilliant model, a clammy, clammed silver ingot, designed to light up his face for others. He starts to watch something, and does not realise the sound is turned up. One of the blocks of ice in the igloo resolves itself into the face of a woman, an older woman who looks like Liza Minelli, and she makes an effort to frown. I'm astounded when he notices this, and turns it down, and I know that I am looking at a man whose soul suits his trainers.

The train headbutts itself to a stop. He makes a phonecall, his ringtone default and five years old. He *pisses* in his speech, cutting out the vowels so all I hear are the intimate and absurd hisses that a furtive mouth makes. Like pheasants struggling to fly, similar, uglier hands go to their pockets. There are nearly one hundred false conversations happening around us. If I could pair all the severed halves, I would create fifty that make sense.

When he puts the phone down and takes up the tablet, twenty-nine conversations are shot out of the sky within seconds. He turns the sound up, not seeming to remember Liza Minnelli glaring at him like the ghost of a wife, and settles back to watch a video. The sound is tinny, but I can still make out what it is he can hear. I imagine it sounds even worse to him. The train has not moved in twenty minutes, and despite the black outdoors, accented by weals of his phonelight I can see the waves of the floodwaters coming impressionist over the tracks.

It is the sound of a woman. Not a voice, as such. She may be crying, or moaning, but she is certainly, horribly, begging.

I look at him, the crown abdicated instantly, and I want him to look up and see me looking. I am beginning to swallow the phlegm that has collected in my mouth from so much inactivity and ask him what the hell he is watching. The woman's screams, and they are screams, sound like her fingers are being held to a barbecue, and they rise and fall in octaves from a throat like a windsock, but to plot it they are getting louder. There is a terrible pressure on the rest of us, the igloo's walls and its other occupant. His face is that mask that comes from watching a screen so full of anything.

I will it to be pornography, and I am annoyed at myself when my gut wrenches in embarrassment for him.

All of a sudden I am appointed; a ripple passes through the igloo and nudges me forward. The rain is coursing down out there, the waves are rising, and two, three hundred bladders are filled and purpling with effort. I slip a hand from the flank of my book, the pages wrinkled and sore from nearly three hours against the radiator, and move it towards him. Suddenly his eyes raise, so full of apology that I make a gargle in my own throat. His hands are tensed like an angle, all screaming physics.

TURN IT DOWN

I say.

All of a sudden I see myself from outside the window, perfect and warm in this cutaway of an igloo, like a museum diorama, talking to this man in redolent tones, reassuring and authoritative and leaderful. I look at myself as a man from the deep past. He nods with deference, but even as he clicks the sound down the voice grows louder, no longer foetal and whispering but with a bass that spreads over my back.

Where is she?

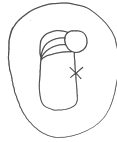
He repairs his hands to smoothness, glosses over his teeth, and stares at me with tears in his mottled eyes. The screaming stops. With the squeak of one hundred oily faces running over each other like gears, the blocks of our igloo turn outwards, towards the toilet. The gentleman stands, reaching over me, and slaps the wall twice. Where there should have been a sleepy slosh of two hundred people's burden, there is only a clean, hollow thud. With a shudder and a cry, the train begins to move again.

"My daughter was just born behind your head."

He picks up his tablet again, and waves into the light. There is a muffled roar from outside the igloo that may be cheering, but I am too warm to care. It is getting darker and darker. It is too dark to see when the woman who looks like Liza Minelli rolls the stone of her bust away and presents a passageway, offers the man her hand. I glimpse shades of lax faces, gently reading, snuffling into their briefcases, kicking restlessly at the walls, or curled like jasmine into balls, rocking gently as we spark across the new-made sea into evening.

He shakes his head, and turns back to his tablet.

"I wouldn't want to trouble anyone."



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