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Setting Off

Hope all OK with Em and Derek and train on time.

Meeting at 7 but shouldn't be too late.

Took ragu out of freezer xx

It was a Tuesday morning and every car, van, tram and bus in the Greater Manchester area seemed to have decided that the city centre was the place to be. Crawling our way through the traffic, conversation had been awkward. I was anxious about missing the train and preoccupied by what Derek had let slip. He was embarrassed. When we finally reached Piccadilly station, Derek stopped on a double yellow and, after hasty farewells, I ran through the busy, red-brick Victorian entrance, past the shops and onto the concourse. I'd already checked the platform number, and as I pushed through the crowds, caught a glimpse of my train under the pigeon-netted glass roof. I was childishly pleased to see it was one of the upgraded models, sleek and shiny. A new company had recently taken over the franchise and their gleaming livery – all silver and black, with *NorthRail* on the side in a traditional-looking font – looked

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classy. I hoped the interior would be clean and comfortable to match.

But the platform gates were closed. An announcement that the 10:12 to London was delayed due to an electrical fault explained the presence of hundreds of people milling around the concourse. With a sinking heart, I came to a halt, almost tripping as something wrapped around my legs. Looking down I saw a small wiry excitable dog, some kind of Jack Russell cross, bouncing around as if on springs, ears flapping at every jump. It started to yap. The owner, an elderly woman neatly turned out in a tweed coat, was holding a lead with one hand, while struggling to carry a large old-fashioned brown leather handbag, plus a copy of the *Telegraph*, in the other. 'Monty, Monty, sit!' she commanded, with little success.

Moving away from the mutt, I navigated around stationary people, their eyes on the electronic noticeboard, heads raised as if in supplication to the god of the railway timetable. It was the usual snapshot of the British population, albeit with fewer children as it was a school day. I ended up beside a pretty woman with long dark hair and a backpack, trying to manage a baby in a buggy and a large case while talking on the phone. She looked anxious, scanning the crowd, and I heard her say, 'Stop worrying, Dad, it'll be fine,' just as she stepped back and knocked the case over. I went to help, but a young, slight man with glasses beat me to it, lifting the case back up, and nodding in response to her flustered 'Thank you'.

There was a young couple, seemingly unconcerned about anything else but each other, a painful reminder to me of the simple joy of being in love. A woman, mid-fifties, with blue hair and cat eye diamante frames, moved gently to the music that I assumed was coming through her earbuds. *A character*, I thought dryly.

Now I see that crowd differently: all of us setting out on a journey, randomly thrown together, and shortly to be enclosed in what are effectively metal cylinders. None of us could imagine how important we would become to each other, for good or bad. Or that among us were people who would not live to see their destination.

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Sudden movement among the waiting crowd indicated the display had changed and before any announcements were made, passengers were surging towards the ticket barriers, with the usual chaos ensuing until the staff conceded and the gates opened for people to scurry through. I held back to avoid the stampede; with a booked seat, I had no need to fight to the front.

My carriage, J, was the last but one. The carriage behind, K, appeared to be shut off, and there was a handwritten sign on the connecting door saying it was closed due to electrical problems. I presumed that was the cause of the delay. So much for upgraded models. As I passed the large disabled toilet at the back of my carriage, the door slid open and a skinny young man came out, sniffing. He bumped into me, and I muttered 'sorry' as Brits often do, automatically apologising for something that's the other person's fault. He briefly stopped and looked at me but said nothing. It was long enough for me to notice the traces of white powder round his nostrils and the acne on his pale skin. But it was the look he gave me that made me step back. Disdain? Hatred, even? It shook me but I wasn't going to let a cokehead have a reason to go off on one, so I let him push past me, and was relieved to see his seat wasn't close to mine.

First class means wider seats, more space and better fittings. The seating was upholstered in smart dark grey leather, the lighting expensive and subdued, with grey and muted red carpeting throughout. It looked elegant and relaxing, the polished overhead parcel shelves of dark grey glass with a slick silver metal trim reflecting the seats and passengers beneath them. It was just what I needed in order to sit and consider what my next steps should be, and how I would confront Jim when I got home.

I was right at the back, by a window. There was a magazine on every seat with the beaming face of the new MD of NorthRail, May Leung, pictured in the driver's cab of a train. I remembered there had been something of a media fuss when she was appointed: the first woman, the first British Asian to run a British railway service. The daughter of Hong Kong migrants, she'd grown up in a Chinese takeaway in Liverpool. But I wasn't

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in the mood to read puff pieces. I settled into the plush seat and hoped the one beside me would remain vacant.

I like travelling by train. You can get up and move around, watch cities and countryside pass by through the window and they're usually dependable, largely running to schedule. Planes have lost their glamour, not least because of the fuss involved before you even board. On the train, I could relax and think in comfort. And did I need to think.

I'd been visiting my sister-in-law, who I'll call Em, as she was recovering at home from breast cancer surgery. I'd been through it myself a few years earlier and wanted to offer support, I knew how easy it can be to catastrophise. Jim, my husband, had recently called in on his sister when he'd had a meeting in Manchester and agreed she'd welcome a visit. I'd packed a small heart-shaped cushion for her – he didn't think she had one – and I knew from personal experience how they can help make post-surgery more comfortable.

Resting at home, my sister-in-law was tired but optimistic, and Derek, her husband, was trying to give the same impression. I could tell Em was on the mend when she commented on my grey hair, which I'd stopped cutting and dyeing in the pandemic and then decided I preferred it that way.

'Brave,' she said. 'Still rocking the granny look.'

She stroked the sleek blonde wig she had decided to wear before she even started chemo in order to get used to it. 'I might go all Joan Collins and stick with the wig. It will save on salon prices.'

Em is one of those elegant Northern women who are always beautifully turned out: perfect make-up, smart outfits with high heels. I knew she'd thought her brother had made an odd choice when we first met many years before. I was introduced to the family wearing a leather bomber jacket, jeans and Converse trainers. She probably still thinks I'm a scruff, but over the years we have developed a warm friendship, discussing our children and the different challenges life has thrown at us, usually over a bottle of wine. But I was still surprised when an arm was suddenly around my shoulders, encasing me in a warm hug as

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she asked how I was. Just fine, I said, a little bemused. She was the one who was sick.

Derek ambled off to do something in his workroom – after he burnt out in a stressful career he turned to hand-making axes and knives. He's the first to admit it was an unusual path, but to be fair to him, they are objects of surprising practical beauty. Em and I sat across from each other at the table in her gleaming kitchen, nursing mugs of tea. We talked about our kids for a while; theirs are older than mine and long gone from home, when suddenly she said: 'I keep on trying to think of a reason. Have I drunk too much, eaten the wrong things, not done the right exercise? I know it's stupid, but I want to know, why me?'

[I've removed more identifying details re 'Derek'. I assume that's not his real name but thought he actually might be a burnt-out social worker? – Loretta]

[You're right. Glad you picked it up. – Claire]

I took her hand. 'Em, you've done nothing wrong. Unless it's inherited, you know it's random. And common. One in seven women in the UK. We're just the unlucky ones. But also lucky. Because we got it older, our hormones aren't up to supercharging it, so we have good survival rates. And we live in a time where there's great treatment available.'

She didn't seem completely convinced. I tried again.

'It's a bastard, and the cure's not pleasant, but you've got every reason to be optimistic. You didn't ask for it, you didn't cause it. We always look for reasons, but most shit things that happen are just random. Wrong cell, wrong place. Wrong place, wrong time.' She looked at me for a moment, and I could see she was tearing up, then she nodded, chinked her mug to mine: 'Bollocks to cancer.'

I chinked back with a smile.

A pre-ordered dinner delivery from a local posh restaurant, my treat, went down well. Afterwards, I was delighted when Derek presented me with a kitchen knife, about 20 cm long,

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a dark green resin and olive wood handle anchoring a strong, well-honed blade. Less delighted when he explained why. I slept badly that night.

The usual hustle and bustle occurred at the last minute as passengers wrestled with luggage, finding the right carriage and the correct seat. A strong odour of unwashed clothes suddenly hit me, a smell I imagine everyone was used to a hundred years ago, but which is jarring nowadays in our ultra-hygienic society. Before I had time to discover the source, I was hit on the head by a supermarket 'bag for life', apparently full of tinned food.

It wasn't a major incident, but the cans hurt. I turned and looked up angrily, prepared to remonstrate, however, the culprit appeared more in need of help than a telling off. He was a big anxious man, perhaps in his early thirties, gold-framed glasses with smeared lenses perched on his nose, patchy stubble on his chin and beneath that, zipped up to the top, a grubby high-vis yellow vest over a grey jumper. An incongruous pair of pink trainers completed the look, along with a mauve backpack, threads spooling from the seams, strapped to his shoulder. He was clutching a ticket in one hand and the shopping bag full of tins in the other.

'Which carriage is your seat in?' I asked, selfishly hoping he wasn't going to be my neighbour.

His eyes darted, as if he didn't know what to do. I smiled, and he relaxed a little then handed me his phone with his ticket displayed. He was in a seat a few carriages ahead and, relieved, I explained carefully how many carriages he needed to walk through, while trying not to breathe too deeply. If I was a better person I would have taken him to his seat, but I desperately wanted some peace and quiet to consider my future after Derek's accidental revelation. It hadn't come as a complete surprise, but I knew I had to think carefully about my next steps.

I ducked as the anxious man swung the shopping bag and lumbered away up the carriage. People were settling down, moving the last bits of luggage out of the aisle and onto the parcel shelf, when a middle-aged man appeared at my side; tall, red-headed, he was swaying before the train had even moved.

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It just wasn't my day. He shoved a backpack onto the overhead shelf then sat down beside me and spread his leg into my space. Booze, sweat and cigarettes; he looked like he'd been up all night. A crumpled shirt pulled tight across his substantial stomach was topped by an expensive wool jacket. He leant across.

'You're in my seat,' he slurred, Scots-accented.

I showed him my ticket and the numbers on the seats. 'I booked the window seat,' he said emphatically. He clearly hadn't, but at the thought of how uncomfortable the journey would be, trapped by his manspreading for a couple of hours, I offered to swap. At least then I could escape into the aisle, and he might face the window which could minimise the alcohol fumes wafting in my direction. He was muttering, and a few people glanced our way. We exchanged seats, but instead of thanking me, he just said: 'This was my seat anyway, woman.' I let it go. Funny how the factual word 'woman' can sound like an insult, said in a certain way. But a man who is drunk at ten o'clock in the morning is not a man to argue with in an enclosed space.

The carriage wasn't full, and I considered moving, but if I sat somewhere that turned out to have a last-minute booking, it would mean even more disruption. The seat I assumed should have been my neighbour's wasn't reserved, so with any luck he wouldn't be on the train for long. There were two quick stops after we left Manchester – Stockport and Wilmslow – and with any luck he'd stagger off at one of those. On a day when I really needed peace and quiet, I'd only been on the train a matter of minutes and already suffered aggression from a coke-addled arsehole and a soused seat-stealer – and been banged on the head by a bagful of baked beans. People say bad things come in threes. Perhaps now I could have a peaceful journey. What else could go wrong?

The train hissed softly and set off with a light whoosh, creating the sensation we had been hermetically sealed in the carriage. The sounds were hushed, the swaying movement gentle. There was a brief and friendly announcement and apology for the delay from the train manager. A low hum of conversation from a few passengers didn't pause for the security announcement that

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starts 'If you see something that doesn't look right' and ends with 'See it. Say it. Sorted.' and a number to text. The usual routine. Most people were silent, watching out the window, looking at phones or other devices. There was the occasional rustle of a paperback and, more rare, a newspaper.

At last, I could turn my thoughts to what Derek had accidentally revealed the previous night. I remembered how my stomach had lurched when he had produced that beautiful kitchen knife and said that he'd made it for me because he thought Jim would take his when he moved out. He had patted my hand sympathetically, assuming I knew. And was deeply embarrassed when he realised I didn't.

Sitting on the train, I tried to imagine how the next conversation with my husband would go and how I'd manage to control my fury with him for not talking to me first. Of course, I knew things weren't right between us. But to just walk away after all those years, and two children? I could feel my heart starting to thump and decided to try not to think about it for a while and let the possible end of my marriage percolate somewhere in the background instead.

My neighbour, who I later learned was Patrick Harbour, 48, a Glaswegian businessman and divorced father of two, continued to be unsettled and unsettling. He fell asleep shortly after the train pulled out of Manchester Piccadilly and his leg sprawled further into my space, pressing against me.

My phone vibrated. It was Jim. I rejected the call. Then I saw there were three texts from him. The last one:

please please ring, we need to talk.

I felt my heart rate going up again, caught my breath and deleted them all. He could wait. Let him find out what it's like to not know what's going to hit him. It would do him good to sweat while I decided what to do.

I put the phone on silent and tucked it away in my bag. I had to find a way of reducing the tension throbbing through my

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system. Taking a few deep breaths, I looked across the aisle and out of the window at a wet Manchester and studied the grey clouds overhead. I focused on the quiet thrum of the train. Sleep had been elusive at my in-laws, and I was hoping for a snooze to refresh me. But, inevitably, Charlie came to mind, which he did whenever I was facing a dilemma. What would he do?

We weren't very similar, my twin and me. He was fair, I was mousy brown, although we were alike in other ways: tall, brown-eyed and both with a penchant for arguing, particularly with each other. Having my own children had brought back memories of our battles. They bickered too as kids, but it lacked the ferocity that Charlie and I brought to our fights. No wonder our parents, who were surprised by our arrival in their late thirties, were exhausted by us. But when we weren't fighting, we got on well. We understood each other in a way no one else could. Together, up against anyone else, we were united and implacable. I wished he could help me work out what to do. Maybe punch my husband in the face? Not really his style. Or mine.

The drunk's knee pressed into my thigh, pulling me away from thoughts of my twin. I attempted to gently move him back to his side by pushing with my left leg. He woke, confused, then angry. 'No, thanks. I don't screw oldies.'

His blue bloodshot eyes were like marbles that had failed the quality check. Two angry misogynists in one carriage – what were the odds. I told him that if he carried on being offensive, I'd fetch the train manager and have him thrown off at the next stop. I sounded calm: my teacher voice. I'd been a university lecturer for years and knew how to project, and I wanted other passengers to hear in case I needed support. He muttered something unintelligible and turned back to face the window, moving his legs and freeing up the space between us. People had turned to look, and I caught the eye of one young woman, brown-skinned with a pierced nose. I rolled my eyes, and she shook her head in sympathy.

Outside, the hinterland of Manchester passed by, bearing the marks of industry from a previous age, the occasional Victorian

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brick mill chimney still standing proud among all the new-build apartment blocks. The drifting grey clouds and sporadic rain seemed entirely appropriate for the outskirts of the city where spring had not yet sprung. It looked almost dark: the light played differently with the red brick of the area, compared to the warm yellows of the London stock brick with which I was more familiar. We steadily moved from the post-industrial landscape to suburban rows of houses backing onto the railway line with their strips of gardens; as ever, some neat, clipped and planted – who knew so many families had trampolines – others just a dumping ground.

The ‘oldies’ comment stung a little, I admit. I smoothed my navy-blue Margaret Howell jacket, enjoying the feel of the material. I don’t go for glamour, but I like to wear well-made clothes. Underneath, I was wearing a blue- and white-striped shirt with a grey jumper, topping tapered dark grey trousers. I’d never taken to wearing heels and had fully embraced the trainer revolution, although today I was in black brogues. I remembered Em that morning, looking me up and down as I was leaving, and saying that my look was ‘very arty’; that she could imagine Grayson Perry wearing it, which I thought was odd as he’s most famous for ornate takes on dresses. But ‘arty’ was fine.

A friendly young woman in a red uniform came through with a trolley of drinks and croissants. I took a coffee, then checked my phone. I couldn’t help myself. Another call from Jim. I contemplated texting something to wind him up, but decided silence was better. I noticed a new email from my daughter, recently moved abroad to study, and read it, my heart sinking. She was anxious, not sure she’d made the right decision. I replied quickly, with love and sympathy and encouragement. Pressing send, I hoped my message would work. It was tough to be in a new country without any friends, but if she stuck with it for a couple of months, I was sure she’d come to enjoy her new life. If she returned now, I was just as sure she’d feel a failure.

The cokehead was standing and fiddling with a bag on the parcel shelf. He turned and looked round the carriage, and I ducked my head. Perhaps I’m a snob, but I wondered what he

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was doing in first class. Maybe he was a successful dealer who was developing a taste for the product. He looked restless, wired, and I didn't like the way his eyes prowled round. And why take a hit when you're going to be sitting on a train for a couple of hours? He put a phone to his ear then sat down. My neighbour belched, more stale whisky fumes, but at least he stayed asleep.

We had been moving for less than ten minutes, when, suddenly, the train lurched, and then slowed. A bag fell off the parcel shelf onto a man beneath, who, startled, gave a surprisingly high-pitched yelp. Passengers turned to each other with questioning looks or peered out of the windows in case an obstruction could be seen. People in Britain have lived with terrorist attacks for decades, and the monochrome posters on public transport with the mantra we'd heard on the recorded announcement, '*See it. Say it. Sorted.*', are a reminder to stay alert. But people aren't that bothered. The man hit by the bag made a joke of it – 'leaves on the line'. Within moments any slight tension had dissipated, and the train's speed picked up, rather slower than before it seemed, but smoothly.

I was just beginning to doze off, when another unpleasant odour hit my nostrils. I've a more sensitive sense of smell than most people, but it really was olfactory hell in coach J that morning. Now I was assaulted by a sharp chemical odour caused, I quickly discovered, by a woman across the aisle doing her nails. She had an open bottle of remover on the table, a few cotton wool pads, plus a pot of varnish and what looked like a bunch of miniature torture tools. A full mani was in progress and I hate the smell of acetone. I would have taken a deep breath to try to calm down – but that would have meant filling my lungs with the toxic fumes. The train pulled into Stockport station.

It was a short stop, a few people joined the train, a few left, but none from our carriage. We were just pulling out from the platform when the Scotsman's leg shot out again, kicking my ankle. This time I decided to avoid confrontation and take the opportunity to use the loo and stretch my legs, so I grabbed my navy leather tote bag – a present from Jim, I suddenly remembered, a catch in my throat.

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The manicurist was facing the window, texting. As I passed, I swept the bottle of nail polish remover into my tote, pushing the click top closed. Childish, I know. If she is reading this, I apologise. I suppose it was a reaction to all the inconveniences I'd already experienced in the brief time since we left Manchester. But no excuse, it was petty behaviour.

The disabled toilet was spacious and clean, and I took my time, brushing my hair in front of the mirror and wondering if I should start dyeing it again. It felt thick and healthy in a way it never did in the years it was dyed various shades of brown. I suddenly wondered what Jim thought of it. When I was recovering from cancer, he'd often tell me how much better I was looking, until I retorted, 'I must have looked really crap last week, because apparently I've improved every day since.' He hadn't mentioned my appearance again. But he was now looking at someone else, apparently. It was so humiliating. I was distracted for a moment by a noise; was it a shout? I wasn't sure, it could have been a squeal of brakes or just the scraping of wheels on a worn piece of line. But the train was still moving smoothly, taking me home, to what?

Lost in thought, I emerged from the toilet and stopped suddenly as I heard a man shout aggressively: 'Shut up and sit down!' The anger in his voice made me freeze and then, instinctively, I tucked myself behind the heavily laden luggage rack.

It took a few moments for me to understand what I was seeing. The cokehead was in the aisle not far from my seat, with his back to me. He was the one shouting, and now, I could see, also waving a gun. My heart missed a beat. Was it real? Someone said, 'Calm down, young man. It'll be OK,' with misplaced optimism. It didn't work. He shouted louder, his accent Liverpudlian, sounding like a petulant child unleashing a tantrum.

'Do as I say. Put ya phones, ya laptops on the floor in the aisle. Nobody speak. Do as I say, and I won't have to shoot ya, OK. And shut the fuckin' blinds. Now!'

Armed robbery? On a train? How did he think he would get away with it? Or was he off his head on whatever he'd put up his nose? There was a stunned silence; someone choked a

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sob. The woman with the nose ring was standing beside her seat in the act of putting her bag back up and looked straight at him. Then things happened very quickly. The gunman yelled at her to sit down, and a middle-aged Black woman stood up and approached with her arms held out, saying something like, 'I am a pastor, god is watching us...' at which point Cokehead advanced towards her, pointing the gun.

'Stupid bitch. Shut up.'

She backed away, head still held righteously high. As Cokehead reached her, he raised his gun. With unexpected speed, my red-headed neighbour launched himself down the aisle at the gunman. There was a tussle. The pastor sat down hurriedly, out of the way. Others stood and tentatively moved to help – I particularly noticed a wiry man with a shaven head – and then a gunshot rang out. It was deafening. Shocking. Who knew they were so loud? Blood and human tissue exploded out of Mr Harbour's back, spraying across the carriage as he fell to the floor.