



THE COMMUTER

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Departure

Another packed morning train; no different from the one I caught yesterday, last week, or every other time before that. It's standing room only and I'm crammed into the area near the doors with ten or so other passengers. The 'engaged' light above the toilet door informs me that it's currently in use. The warning isn't needed. The heavy, acrid smell that drifts through the carriage forces its way through my nose and mouth and coats my throat.

A man with a perfectly sculpted beard to my right is openly watching pornography on his mobile. He at least has the decency to keep the sound muted. The woman standing next to him is yapping into her own phone, punctuating her conversation with hand gestures that are far too broad and animated for the confined space. Gathered in front of us, a huddle of school children giggle as they compare phone screens with one another, and two Japanese students wait to disembark, having shoved down the packed aisle a few moments earlier. To my left, a short, middle-aged woman has been sneezing into my shoulder continuously since she boarded. The tip of her nose glistens and the skin around her nostrils is inflamed and peeling from excessive wiping.

Taking a break from her germ spreading, she squirms one of her arms free and retrieves a piece of balled-up toilet tissue from her coat pocket. It crumbles in her hands as she ruffles through it. With a dry patch eventually found, she spits the contents of her throat into it.

I lean back against the doors and close my eyes, hoping that the music playing through my headphones can take me somewhere else. Anywhere. For the briefest moment I'm in an open-topped car, racing along country roads as the early evening sun beats down upon me. Then I'm dragged back to reality when air turbulence from a train running in the opposite direction rattles the doors in their housing.

I shift my weight from one leg to the other, easing the ache in my calves gained from bracing against every stop, and shove my headphones deeper into my ears. They're doing nothing to mask the noise of the clattering train or the drone of passengers hammering at my temples.

Metal bites into metal as the train brakes. The carriage judders and squeals in pain, protesting against the need to stop. We all jerk forward. Despite our closeness, we avoid eye contact as we crash into one another by staring off into the middle distance.

A swarm of passengers, waiting impatiently to board in our place, greets us on the platform. In their eagerness

to secure a seat, they surge forward and crowd the doors, making it impossible for us to alight. Bodies collide and cause an impasse in the doorway.

‘How the hell are you gonna get on if we can’t get off?’ the bearded man shouts over the crowd.

His words do nothing to ease the crush. It’s as if those joining the train resent our break for freedom and want to keep us penned in for one more journey.

I close my eyes and wait for the crush to ease.

At this rate, I’ll be stuck on this train forever.

Coffee to Go

Without taking a break from his phone call, the heavysset man in the coffee shop queue ahead of me places his order and then tosses his money onto the counter. The seam running down his spine wrestles to hold the two halves of his suit jacket together. He turns his back to the counter and stares through me as he continues barking into his phone. Thankfully, my headphones muffle the details of his conversation but I can hear the gruff tone via his posture. I'm overcome with the urge to spit in his face.

From behind the counter, Gareth (his handwritten name tag doesn't reveal his surname) holds out the man's change. The man doesn't turn to collect his money. Instead, he reaches back and holds out his empty hand, beckoning with sausage fingers for his money to be placed there. When he leaves with his drink, he shoves back through the waiting queue, his mobile wedged between his cheek and shoulder, rather than taking the slightly longer, clearer route out of the shop. It would have only taken him a few extra steps, but they obviously make all the difference to him.

Like the other commuters in the queue, I'm here for a morning caffeine fix. It's the only thing that can prepare me

for the monotony that awaits. I stop off at this same coffee shop every morning. Gareth knows my regular order. When I reach the counter my drink is always waiting for me. And I'm grateful. A familiar face is as good as a friend. And friends know what their friends like to drink.

As I'm paying, the heavy-set man returns and snarls that he needs a receipt. His prehistoric brow remains lined even after the slip of paper has been produced for him. He snatches it with a grunt and then leaves, pushing back through the queue. I wonder if he makes his mother proud.

By way of acknowledging the man's behaviour, I shrug and roll my eyes. Gareth smiles as I take my drink. I can tell that it's sincere, nothing like his interactions with the ape. When I turn to leave, Gareth wishes me a good day and I hope that he means it.

'Same time tomorrow?' he adds as I head back to the platform.

Missed Connection

Clearing condensation from the train window with the sleeve of my jacket, I take in the train's progress as it passes through a valley of industrial estates.

Outside, the early morning sun is forcing its way between endless rows of factories and abandoned buildings, creating a strobing effect against the rust-coloured brickwork. The warm light coats them in a halo of amber and maroon. The scene is almost picturesque. Almost. A priceless work of art on display, encased by the train window. A masterpiece outside while I peer from within, enclosed in a steel frame.

The abandoned buildings that line the route have succumbed to the onslaught of time but their dull walls have been re-invigorated with bright stencil artwork, transforming them into giant canvases. Approaching the city, this graffiti gets more prolific, elaborate and vibrant. A defiant splash of colour against its surroundings.

As the train enters the gloom of the station tunnel, I notice the phrase "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" sprayed on the wall in bold lettering. Trundling past, I catch a glimpse of what appears to be someone standing in front of it. Is it a homeless man using the tunnel as temporary shelter? Or

could it be the artist, putting the finishing touches to his work? I crane my neck to get a better look into the dark, but I'm too late. The train is absorbed by the darkness, and all I see is my own distorted reflection looking back at me.

Tunnel Vision

The man sitting in the row of seats opposite me is agitated, maybe even crying, and I hadn't even noticed for the first half of my journey. As I steal glances at him over my paperback, I get a flash of *déjà vu*; as if I've seen him before. I shake off the feeling. We're a train carriage of familiar strangers, thrown together while doing our best to keep as much distance from one another as we can; of course I've seen him before.

Intrigued, I watch the man as he jabs at his phone screen. While waiting for a reply, or whatever information he's searching for to display, a frown etches into his features. And then the information comes back, his hand goes limp, and he drops his phone into his lap. He drags his other hand across his head and pulls his fingers down around his neck, reddening the skin.

All the other passengers in the carriage are staring at everything but him.

Despite myself, I'm overcome with the urge to say something, to reassure him. I imagine moving forward to tap his knee. He'll wince, unsure of my intentions, and stare back at me, but I'll offer an expression that I hope says, *it'll be okay*. His face will soften and then he'll half smile and

mouth: *thanks*, before returning to his phone.

But that's not what I do.

I join the rest of the carriage and concentrate on anything but him. I hope that he gets off soon, because feigning ignorance can be hard to maintain on the longer journeys.

Can We Have Your Attention?

There are twenty-two pieces of information or advertisements throughout the train carriage. I've counted them. The bold headlines and garish colours each reveal something more important than the next, while at the same time cancelling each other out. They're the visual equivalent of background noise. A blank sheet of paper would do a better job of catching my eye.

A woman a few seats over has posters stuck to the wall either side of her head. One is a matrix of lines that reveal the routes the network covers. Lines spread out from the city, illustrated as a red circle at the centre, and mark the various stations as they go. At the points where trains don't travel to a particular area, the lines are cut off. Anything beyond these points is clearly irrelevant to the operator, and to us. That's if there's anything there at all. The second poster promotes the train company's service. It's mostly obscured by the woman's head and shoulder, but I can just make out the headline: GETTING YOU WHERE YOU NEED TO BE. From memory, the accompanying photographs are of three 'typical' passengers, illustrated by stock imagery of a female businesswoman, a student, and a pensioner. Each of

the models is of a different age and ethnicity, although they display the same broad, vacant smile.

We emerge from the murk of the main station tunnel and the change in light draws my attention to the window. The graffiti that had covered the walls of the tunnel has been cleared away. Crude blocks of dark paint, which don't match the colour of the surrounding walls, have been used to mask the artwork from view.

I mutter in annoyance. The graffiti has just as much right to my attention as an advert for breakfast cereal, perfume or a theatre show, and in many ways, it's much less offensive.

When the woman gets up from her seat and clears my view of the promotional poster, I notice that the photographs of the 'passengers' have been defaced. Their eyes, mouths and ears have been scratched out, rendering them as identical, faceless forms.

Platform, Ringside

There are two passengers rolling around on the wet platform, fighting. Their muffled grunts and fragmented insults pepper the stunned silence of the carriage. I'm genuinely surprised that this hasn't happened before.

The two previous trains had been cancelled and so, when this train eventually arrived, there was a baying mob waiting to board it. Inside the carriage, there are enough passengers to fill several trains. We're like cows en route to market. Cattle class.

'Could everyone please move down the aisles to allow your fellow passengers to board?' the conductor had requested, shifting the responsibility for our safety and comfort, from the shelter of his cabin.

We were shuffling to create space that didn't exist for the boarding passengers when the fight started. In the door space, a middle-aged man (I assume he's a history teacher given the various shades of beige that he's dressed in) barges into a younger man. The younger man (an estate agent, with chiselled hair and a fitted suit) shoves back. He sends the teacher crashing into the passengers around them. Luckily, everyone is so tightly packed together that the teacher is

cushioned from falling to the floor. An elderly woman caught up in the tussle screams and several people yell for the men to stop, but it's too late. The teacher launches himself at the estate agent, sending them both tumbling out of the train. The passengers waiting on the platform disperse and allow them to flail about on the ground. Some take out their phones and begin filming and taking pictures rather than intervening. Though they're hardly capturing the fight of the century, just a flurry of mistimed swings and face grabbing. It's the pugilistic equivalent of dad-dancing.

The men are separated now, restrained by a handful of passengers, and soaked in muddy rainwater. The estate agent's face is covered in scratches, and although the teacher appears better off physically, his shirt is ripped open and his tie is pulled into a knot that looks like it will take a week to loosen.

I'm not entirely sure if they were fighting to get on or to get off the train.

Family Ticket

I see my family in the passengers around me on board the train. I've gathered their history and relationship details from snippets of overheard conversations, or fabricated it from their appearance and behaviour. The human resources officer is my brother. He hires and fires via his laptop and ends every call with, *bye, bye, bye*, whatever news he's delivered. My sister is the klutzy woman who stumbles whenever the train stops, apologising to anyone that she's bumped into, as if she is somehow responsible. The man-spreaders, the builders with their muddy boots resting on seats and the people who want everyone else to hear their telephone conversations, are my extended family – the relatives I only ever see at weddings or funerals. My father is the man who eats his breakfast on board every morning: two slices of lightly toasted bread, cut into perfect triangles and neatly wrapped in foil. My mother is the woman herding small children off to nursery before she can continue her journey to work. Her three children fit snugly into one seat, their legs dangling over the lip.

And then there's my wife...

She's the woman with the brown bobbed hair, sitting

across the table from me. She rests her head against one hand as she reads from a dog-eared paperback. It's a book I've read several times myself, and it's comforting to see someone else losing themselves in the same world.

My wife pauses between chapters and gazes out of the window, her eyes flicking back and forth as she watches the world streaking by. The angle of her reflection allows me to look over her face, taking in every curve and line, without staring directly at her, and without drawing attention to myself. It's as though we're looking out at each other. There's a dimple on her left cheek when she smiles, and whenever she's thinking, she absently runs her index finger across her bottom lip. I mirror her actions, keen to experience the same sensation that she does. We travel together like this for several stops. My wife lost to the repetitive blur of the world outside, while inside, I'm lost to her.

All too soon the train begins to slow, and she gathers up her things to get off at the next stop.

Watching my wife leave, I vow to find the same seat on the same train tomorrow. And, when I sit down opposite her, I'll start up a conversation, just like I'd planned to do today.

No Access Beyond this Point

The station tannoy wails, cutting through the bustle on the platform, followed by the sterile announcement: *All trains are currently suspended. Staff are dealing with a trespasser on the tracks. Please remain in the station and await further instructions.*

There is silence on the platform as the details of the message are digested, quickly followed by an explosion of movement as everybody rushes for the exit.

The handful of people who've chosen to remain on the platform alongside me glare up at the crackling tannoy as if their attention will somehow spring it back to life. I look over at the steps that lead from the platform to the exit; they're overflowing with people. Even if I wanted to get out now, I couldn't. But there are other exits. Because trains are suspended, it would be easy enough to follow the web of tracks that filter in and out of the station and leave via one of the three tunnels.

If I had to guess, I'd say that each tunnel couldn't be more than a few hundred metres long. I could cover that distance in a minute or two. As I'm scanning the darkness, assessing my escape plan, a light in the nearest tunnel flickers. It's as

if someone or something has moved across the tunnel and broken a beam of light that is working its way in from the other end. I squint into the darkness and step forward to get a better look, moving past the sign that warns me against trespassing on the tracks.

Light flashes again, accompanied by the sound of crunching ballast.

‘Hey! You shouldn’t be in there,’ I call out.

In my attempt to get a better look, I edge off the platform. I glance down at my feet and then over my shoulder to check if anyone has noticed what I’ve done. The passengers on the platform continue to gape up at the tannoy, and before I have time to question what I’m doing, I start running.

‘Who’s there?’ I shout as I head towards the tunnel. The question echoes back at me.

When I reach the tunnel, there’s nobody there. Whoever it was must be heading outside too. My eyes adjust to the gloom and I can make out a dim circle of light that is the tunnel exit ahead of me. I pick up my pace, expanding the light with each stride, desperate to catch up with them, while also hiding myself from anyone who might have seen me leave the platform.

‘Hey!’ I call out again. But my voice is drowned out by the clattering of metal. The light isn’t the exit but the headlight

beam of a train making its way through the tunnel towards me.

I dart left, stepping from the tracks, and pin myself to the tunnel wall. Light floods the space, pushing back the darkness and unveiling the graffiti that coats the tunnel walls. Sprayed above me, in bold lettering, is the phrase, 'THIS IS NOT AN EXIT'.

I pause for a second and then run on as the train trundles past, half ducking to avoid being seen by anyone on board. As I do, stones slip beneath my feet and I stumble forward. Instinctively, I throw my hands out to protect my face. My elbows crumple, unable to absorb the weight of the impact, and my head slams against the ground.

Pain flashes blinding white and I feel the cold, jagged ballast against the side of my face. The light of the tunnel slips away and I lose consciousness.

Darkness. Silence.

The faintest noise breaks through. A vibration at my chest. It grows into a low rumble, getting louder and louder until it rattles my body and face. The train is reversing back towards me until there is nothing but the deafening roar of the engine in the darkness.

Single Return

I'm not sure how long it took me to figure things out: days, weeks, months or even years, but I've finally discovered what a train actually is. It's a cell. It's a metal box that drags me from one place to the next, and while I'm on board I'm neither where I was, where I'm going or where I want to be. I'm somewhere in between. Penned in and waiting.

I'm aboard another packed train. No different to the one I caught yesterday, the day before, last week, or every other time before that. Somehow I've managed to secure myself a seat. I check my phone for the train timetable but I can't get a signal. I try again and again, impatiently prodding the screen each time nothing is displayed. It's futile. There's no signal. No timetable. No trains. Nothing.

I drag my fingers across my head and down the back of my neck in frustration.

And that's when he reaches forward and taps me on the knee. I frown at him and then glance around the carriage but all the other passengers are staring elsewhere, busying themselves with anything they can. I wince, not from the physical contact, but because of the desperate look of hope on his face. His pitiful expression attempts to convey that

everything is going to be okay. But who exactly is he trying to convince?

I half smile, mouth *thanks*, and turn my attention back to my phone, despite it not working, because feigning ignorance can be hard to maintain on the longer journeys.

The kindest thing I could do is tell him the truth. To explain that none of us are going anywhere, not really.

But I don't.

He'll get here eventually. We always do.

