The Willesden Herald

New Short Stories

Story of the Month
December 2024

THE MAN ON THE TRAIN

by Sarah Turner

THE MAN ON THE TRAIN

I'D SPECULATED ABOUT THE man even before we spoke; he interested me as soon as I saw him on the station platform that afternoon, in his long tweed coat and beaten-down, once-formal shoes. He caught my eye and paced towards me with a focused look that made me think he was about to ask me something. I thought he might need help, and that I should do what I could for him. I was confident at that age, perhaps more so than I should have been, old enough for the adult world to have started to seem straightforward, and too young to have really understood the complication in it, and I assumed I could solve most of the problems other people had, but now that we were on the train and he was sitting across the aisle from me, with his legs crossed at the knee, exposing his thin, sockless ankles, I suspected that there hadn't been a specific issue. He just seemed anxious. He was holding a small glass and he kept glancing over his shoulder and swinging his foot. His nervy manner, combined with an unusual expressiveness in his face, made me think he must be especially intelligent – a retired academic, perhaps, or a poet, and I watched from the corner of

my eye as he glanced round, leant forward to pour a glass of wine from the bottle he'd hidden in his bag, and sat back to sip it.

By the time he spoke to me, I'd been watching him for almost half an hour. I'd decided by then that he might not be a professor, or not a current one, anyway. He might have abandoned a PhD years before because he couldn't meet his own high standards. He might have travelled for decades in distant, unknowable countries, reporting on conflict in beautifully written articles that never quite satisfied him. He might be an artist or composer who'd lost faith in himself but still had the capacity to create a work of extraordinary significance. He refilled his glass more than once, always with the same surreptitious glance round the carriage to see whether he was being observed, and each time the train stopped he emptied his glass and leant forward to hide it in his bag, as though he was keen to preserve a veneer of respectability in front of new passengers. Then, as we set off again, he would make the same quick checks and pour a little more wine. There was a moment, sitting back after one of these refills, when he caught my eye and looked away, but then he ran his hand through his thin grey hair and leant across the aisle.

'Have you read much Proust?'

I hesitated, then said, ‘Some. In translation, I mean.’

‘Oh, of course in translation.’ He laughed. ‘Nowadays that’s normal.’ We were both quiet for a moment, then he said, ‘I was just asking because I was seized on the platform with a very particular kind of nostalgic melancholy, thinking of my mother and I thought – well, I thought you looked as though you might understand.’

I wondered how to respond. It was December and already getting dark. Drizzle slanted across the wide, dirt-streaked windows. He topped up his wine and sipped it, turning to watch two horses lift their heads as we passed their field in the dusk, and light flash across the raindrops on the glass as we slowed by houses at the edge of a village.

‘Proust evokes nostalgia so well,’ he said. ‘The lost world, the last traces of those we held close – the echo of them through our minds.’

‘But it always seems strange to me that he’s so nostalgic for something he never quite had,’ I said. ‘There’s so much about wanting his mother and not having enough access to her, even as a child.’

He nodded slowly and smiled, and I waited for him to say something else, but then he looked away and I assumed the conversation was over and turned back to my book. After another few minutes, leaning back with the same air of confidentiality, he said, ‘Do you have children?’

‘No.’ I looked up, with my hand bookmarking my page, slightly thrown by the non-sequitur and trying to make this new question fit with his ideas about Proust.

‘Of course not,’ he said. ‘What was I thinking, a young girl like you?’

I didn’t answer. I was twenty-two and found his comment patronising, even though the idea of children only existed in my mind as a hazy, slightly unnerving possibility.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘Everyone seems young to me. I’ve got two daughters. Both older than you.’

‘Do they live in the north?’ I was revising my assessment of him, deciding now that he was a half-successful musician who was taking time from touring in Eastern Europe to visit his daughters.

He gave a thin smile. ‘Perhaps. Perhaps.’ He was speaking in a slow, considered way, but his eyes were anxious again, moving fast across my face.

‘To be honest, I don’t know. I haven’t seen either of them for years. But they exist, you know, and that gives me satisfaction. They might even have children of their own by now.’

‘Why haven’t you seen them?’

I watched him carefully. It was a new thing for me to ask a question

like that. I was deliberately trying to develop the capacity to accept awkwardness in conversation, but I was fighting discomfort and the urge to speak again as I waited for him to reply. There had been a time not long before when I would have gone to great lengths to avoid any kind of uneasiness in myself or in others. I felt now that I'd been trained for that from childhood. I'd been the family peacekeeper, often intervening between my father and my brother, and I knew how to spot early signs of hostility and smooth over any situation with a subtle change of subject or a torrent of new words, but I didn't want to do that anymore. It had started to seem more interesting to welcome embarrassment, as I was doing now with this question, just to see where it would lead. If this man had abandoned his children and was inclined to discuss that fact casually with a stranger on a train, I was interested in that. If he'd brought up a topic he had no intention of explaining fully and might thrust my question away with evasion or anger, I was interested in that, as well.

He didn't answer immediately. He uncrossed and recrossed his legs, poured another centimetre of wine, pursed his lips as he sipped it, and twisted to face me directly.

'I don't quite know,' he said in the end. 'I wasn't a good father, I

suppose. I was distant and depressed and I should have fought harder to see them, but as it is – well, you know, it isn't easy for them to forgive an absence like that. I did try for a while, but – if your self-confidence is shattered you can't – well, in any case, I gave up too easily. But I think about them a lot. I wonder, especially, whether either of them has struggled emotionally, because it's something I could have understood and helped them with.'

He looked out into the twilight, where floodwater had almost covered a field. I could see the glint of the train's light on its surface and then his eyes scanning mine as he turned back towards me.

'It's later in life that you feel the loss more.'

I thought about that. I was on my way to see my sister and meet her new baby and just at that moment, I felt caught up in life, in the joy and the busy-ness and excitement of it, and he seemed excluded, as though he was standing on a hill outside a village, bottle in hand, looking down through the shadows at the bright bustling lives of other people. The train slowed down, then stopped altogether.

I hadn't been able to read since he'd last spoken. I was wondering what I

could say that might help and I was thinking about his daughters, and how keenly they must have felt his absence throughout their lives. The train shuddered and the engine ticked and hummed, then cut out suddenly to a silence that seemed more complete because it replaced a noise I'd grown used to. I looked through the window, but could see very little now. Minutes passed. No one spoke, then the intercom crackled and settled and the train manager made an announcement. There had been a serious incident on the line further north. Emergency services were attending. The people around me looked up from their phones and sighed and muttered. Someone swore. There was a fast, frustrated conversation at the other end of the carriage about the timing of a connection. 'Selfish bastard,' someone said loudly. 'I bet it takes hours.'

It was completely dark now. I could see the carriage clearly reflected in the window, an alternate version of the patterned upholstery and the passengers' faces trembling ghostlike in the darkness outside. A train on the next track shot by fast in the opposite direction. I imagined it hitting us with that force, and shivered, pulling my coat closer.

'It's that,' the man said suddenly. 'Someone standing by the track on a dark, drizzly evening, deciding they can't go on. It makes me think about

my girls.' The other passengers' outbursts had finished now, and I had the sense that all of us had heard him and were thinking in our own ways about what he'd said. 'I should have been more present in their lives,' he said. 'I shouldn't have let myself be pushed away. My biggest worry is that whatever darkness they've inherited from me might have surfaced by now and I can't stand the idea that either of them feels entirely alone.' I kept looking at him as I nodded, and I saw his eyes fill with tears in the moment before he turned away and started to rummage through his bag. He pulled out a wallet. A card fell out and when he picked it up, he dropped something else. His movements were awkward and uncoordinated, but he took everything out, found a photo, and held it out to me. I looked at it closely. It was creased and the colours were faded, but I saw the girls' smiles and their long hair, and the way they tilted their heads and squinted into the sun. I told him they were beautiful, and he smiled and looked at the photo for a long time when I handed it back.

'Do you have a phone?'

I nodded cautiously, because I thought he was going to ask to use it. If he did, I was planning to say no. I felt sorry for him, of course, but there had been times in the past when I'd been too accepting of people, too gullible, and I'd trained myself to think some moves ahead in every

conversation I had now. I could imagine him smiling and saying thank you, and I could also imagine him pushing my phone deep into the pocket of his shabby overcoat and insisting, perhaps really believing, that it was his. He'd emptied most of the bottle and the quick glances he was shooting around the carriage were furtive now, almost as though he was afraid of someone nearby.

He handed me a piece of blue card. 'Could you call this number?' It had been folded twice and was torn at one side, but a number was still clearly visible, written across it in black ink. It was a landline, with an area code I didn't recognise. 'Would you do that for me?' he asked. I'd been preparing myself to be as rude as was necessary if he tried to insist on taking my phone, so I felt relieved by the modesty of this request and said that I would. I assumed it was someone who needed to know about the delay – perhaps a partner or friend who was meeting him at the station.

'Who is it?' I asked. I felt efficient, full of energy, and glad to be helpful.

'My daughter. Kim. The younger one.'

I hesitated. 'When did you last see her?'

'I don't know.' He looked at me, steadily.

'I mean, will she talk to me?'

His face changed then, as though he'd woken suddenly and found himself alone in the dark, surrounded by strangers. 'I don't know. But would you try?' He looked older than he had before. The lines seemed more deeply imprinted on his brow.

'Don't you have a phone?'

'No. I've never had one.'

I met his eye as it rang. It took her a while to answer. I knew it would be awkward, and I thought about handing him the phone despite everything, but I still didn't want to risk him taking it and after all, it was only a call. As I've said, I was hardening myself to manage discomfort. Besides, I felt our fragility out there, a little box of light in the vast darkness that could be shunted off the line or lose its power at any moment and I thought that perhaps I could do some good in that package of suspended time, while we were held apart from our destination and the resumption of our lives.

It rang for several seconds and then a woman answered. She sounded put out, as though she resented her phone for having rung at all, and when I heard her abrupt 'Yes?' and the sharp suspiciousness it seemed to contain, I felt self-conscious immediately. I was aware, too, of the other people who

might be listening from parts of the carriage I couldn't see. It was probably that knowledge that made me so formal.

'I'm calling on behalf of your father,' I said.

'Who is this?'

I had a strong instinctive reaction against giving her my name.

'I'm on a train with your dad,' I said. 'He gave me your number.' The silence stretched taut between us, and I wondered whether she'd already hung up. Then she said, 'Is something wrong? Is he dying?'

I was taken aback, but then I understood what she must have been imagining: an accident or a heart attack, his hand clasping mine as he lay on a stretcher.

'No,' I said. 'No. I mean, the train's delayed. We've stopped, but he's OK. He just asked me to call. He hasn't got a phone.'

She drew a sharp breath in. 'OK. Well, I don't know who you are, or why you agreed to do this, but you need to tell him to just leave me alone.'

'Don't you want to talk to him at all?' I still assumed the eventual outcome of the call would be positive. Even if it was difficult, I thought that by the end of it, they'd have arranged to meet and that I'd feel the warm glow of having facilitated it. But she laughed down the line. There was a rasping echo to it that made me realise she was older than I'd

thought. ‘Is this Kim?’ I asked.

‘Yes. And who are you? A new lover who thinks she can solve all his problems?’

I thought of the little girl in the photo with the long hair and the dark, hopeful eyes.

‘No, just another passenger. We got talking and –’

‘Oh my God. Why is he like this? I bet he’s drinking, isn’t he?’

I didn’t answer. I looked past him, at the window behind him and his reflection in profile, with his eyes shifting nervously and the glass at his lips.

‘So he is drinking,’ she said. ‘And he’ll have been doing that steadily since he woke up this morning and by this time of day, it makes him nostalgic. In another hour he’ll be angry, though, so be careful.’

‘He wants to see you,’ I said. ‘He wants to help you.’

‘Help?’ she said and laughed incredulously.

I wanted to tell her about the incident on the line and about the intensity of his fear for her, but I didn’t know how to explain it. I glanced at him, and he caught my eye and nodded encouragingly, but when I pointed at the phone and held it towards him, he looked back blankly.

‘He wants to be there for you,’ I said. ‘He thinks you might need him.’

There was a long silence. I listened to her breathe and a siren get louder somewhere near her and then start to fade away. ‘This is ridiculous,’ she said in the end. ‘Look, he does this sometimes. He gets a stranger to call, and it’s always a young woman and always at this time of day. He doesn’t dare call himself anymore.’

His eyes were still on me. I looked away, uncomfortably.

‘He walked out on us when I was eight,’ she said. ‘He isn’t part of our lives.’

‘He regrets it. He’s been talking about you. He –’

‘No,’ she said. ‘You don’t understand. I’ve tried and tried to have a relationship with him, but it just doesn’t work.’

I didn’t want her to go. I tried to find something that would keep her on the line. ‘But are you OK? Can I at least tell him that?’

‘Yes.’ She said it reluctantly, after a moment had passed. ‘Listen, how did he give you my number? Does he know it by heart?’

‘I mean, it’s on a piece of card. It looks quite old.’

‘Can you tear it up?’ She softened her voice.’ Please?’

‘I don’t know.’ I thought about hanging up, blocking her number, giving him the card back, and smoothing things over as though I’d never been there, but I was tired of doing that. I kept listening, instead.

‘Because my life would be better if he didn’t do this. Honestly, you’ve got no idea how manipulative he can be. Just don’t give it back to him. By this time of night, he won’t even notice.’

‘It’s such a big step. It would be so – final.’

‘Exactly. No more contact. It’s what I want. He’s doing this a lot more now and if I can’t stop him, I’ll have to change my number, but I use it for my business and my whole family uses it, so if you could just do this for me, I’d really appreciate it.’

He was watching me again, twisting his fingers together and throwing me quick glances as though to gauge how it was going.

‘Will she talk to me?’ he asked suddenly, pleading against rejection as a child might, fearfully.

‘No, I won’t,’ she said firmly. ‘Tell him that. Look, put him on speaker phone, can you? God he’s a bastard when he’s drunk. He’s been like that my whole life. He starts off charming, but every time I’ve agreed to see him, he’s been abusive in the end and this brings it all right back. I can’t keep doing it. I can’t keep getting these calls. I can’t keep living that trauma over and over again.’

I put her on speaker phone. I felt bad about the other passengers, but

it didn’t seem right to refuse.

‘Can you hear me?’ she asked. ‘Dad?’

His face brightened when he heard her voice. His eyes rested on me and he looked younger for a moment, and hopeful.

‘Stop doing this. Leave me alone. You’ve caused me enough pain to last a lifetime already.’

‘I’m sorry.’ He slumped down in his overcoat, so the collar covered his jaw. ‘I’m really very dreadfully sorry.’

‘So leave me alone. OK?’

She hung up. I stared at the blank screen. When I’d made the call, I’d thought she’d take him in, that she’d nurse him back to health.

‘Are you still there?’ he asked. ‘Kim?’

I put the phone away and explained that she’d gone. He nodded slowly, clasping his hands more tightly round his glass.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. I wanted to say more, but didn’t know what. He’d finally lost forever what he’d been losing all these years, and it seemed momentous to me, but he just nodded once, and poured himself more wine.

‘I’ll try again,’ he said. ‘Another time. I know she’s alive. She sounded alright. That’s the main thing, eh? That she’s alright?’

He didn't ask for the card back and I didn't offer it to him. I pushed it down into my coat pocket, trying to weigh it all up. He sat without moving, and then I saw him take out the photo again. He kept trying to smooth it, as though if he could just get rid of the thick creases where he'd folded it, he could put right everything between him and his daughters. He lifted a hand and turned his face to the window, and I saw that he was wiping a tear away, and for a moment I felt overcome by pity for him, but then I thought of him calling her like this, repeatedly and through strangers, and of her having to explain her childhood again and again, and I felt something tighten inside me. He'd chosen me because he thought I looked malleable. I saw that now, and I understood the role he'd wanted me to play, but my peacekeeping days were over. I was harder than he'd thought, not the person he'd assumed I was at all. I noticed that with a cold, detached interest and crushed the card hard inside my fist.

He was asleep when the train started to move again and when the last station was announced, I didn't wake him up. I glanced back at him from the end of the aisle and it occurred to me that I could still go back and put the card in his bag, or drop it on the floor here, where he might well find it. I almost did, but then I thought of Kim and stepped down onto the

platform instead, leaving him behind as I walked quickly out of the station and through the rain towards my sister's car.

Sarah Turner's short stories have been/are due to be published by Shooter Literary Magazine, The Sonora Review, J Journal, The London Magazine, Epoque Press, Fictive Dream, Litro, LEON, The Phare, and others, and in 2023 one of her stories was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize Short Story Award. Some of her published work can be read at https://www.scturnerfiction.com/.