

NIGHT-TIME EXPRESS

I couldn't get the image of her out of my mind. Tossing and turning in the darkness I could picture her naked body stretched across our linen sheets, another man's arms caressing her softly. How could she do this to me after seven years? Things have not been easy I know, working so far from home has put a strain on both of us. But am I right to abandon everything and jump on the first train back home and confront her? Should I not trust her? After all the only evidence I have is a snatch of whispered conversation related to me by a so-called 'friend'. Why should I believe them?

You would think the constant rocking of the carriage and the incessant clackety-clack of the track would send you to sleep. It doesn't. Maybe under different circumstances I would have found it relaxing, the steady swaying enticing my stubborn lids to close. But on this occasion, with the air hot and oppressive and the thin white sheets cocooning my sweating body like a second skin, I lay wide awake.

My mind was a whirl of thoughts as I clenched my eyes shut and tried desperately to clear my head. I pictured myself relying upon a long desolate stretch of golden sand, silent and alone. High above in the rich azure sky a solitary gull gently glided upon the warm air. Circling slowly it began to descend, I watched helplessly as I saw myself open my eyes and follow its line of flight, mesmerized by its oily black face. Down it spiraled, closer and closer until it was only yards from my face.

"Who is he?" Screamed the bird, opening its long curled beak. "Who is he?" Suddenly with a quick beat of its strong wings it flew toward me. Flailing an arm before my face I looked into its scarlet eyes and screamed.

Shrieking, I bolted upright in bed and allowed the familiar sound of the Aberdeen to London express to disperse the haunting image. My heart beat double-time as I turned on the bedside lamp, rubbed my bleary eyes and glanced at the clock - a few minutes to midnight, I wondered if the dining car would still be open. Dressing quickly I was soon making my way along the narrow corridor, struggling to keep my feet as I mimicked a drunkard's straight line home.

The carriage was empty apart from a bar steward busy polishing glasses, examining them for greasy smears against the light.

“Evening sir,” he said as I neared the bar. “Can’t sleep?” I shook my head. “In that case what can I get you, what’s your poison?”

“Scotch on the rocks.”

“That bad is it?”

“Worse,” I said before I could hold my tongue.

“Ah I’ve heard that a million times from here,” he said as he skillfully poured the whiskey from a height. The copper coloured liquid swam before my eyes as it crashed into the glass and a familiar burning sensation rose in my throat at the sight. Quickly snatching up the tumbler I swallowed the contents in one swift pull.

“Phew!” He exclaimed as I motioned for a refill with a mute nod. Minutes passed in silence, looking deeply into the amber tinted crystal my mind returned to the strange dream. ‘Who is he?’ the gull had said. Was that the real reason for racing back, morbid curiosity? Had I absolutely no intention of saving our failing marriage, only a deep rooted fascination to meet her lover?

“Do you think we should just walk away, wipe our hands clean before they blacken further?” I said as the strong spirit began to loosen my tongue.

“Sir?”

“Why do we insist upon dragging things out, can we never find the courage to simply sever the ties once and for all?” Glancing up I found the steward looking at me quizzically and was surprised by the bright youthful eyes that shone radiantly from his old face. The gaze melted my normal reluctance to speak and with a long deep breath I told him my story. Listening sympathetically, breaking concentration only to replenish my glass, he allowed me to rest my problems upon his shoulders. Why was I telling him all this, what was in those eyes that enticed me to bare my soul?

I was beginning to feel drowsy, the movement of the train and the heady effects of the whiskey lightening my head.

“Do you love her?” He asked suddenly, causing me to jolt up right.

“Well I er -,” I stumbled.

“If not then disregard all the other questions, nothing else matters,” he began. “You mustn’t let your pride get the better of you, if it is truly her lover you are going back to see then turn back now. Be humble, let her go. Only one thing is precious in this life, one thing to consider above all else.” His words flowed smoothly from his lips. Time seemed to stand still as the soft dulcet tones of his voice filled the air.

“One thing?” I prompted.

“One thing more precious than love, stronger than lust and more enduring than even passion itself.” He paused dramatically, causing me to lean across the bar expectantly, hanging on his next breath. “You,” he stated simply. “You are more important than anything or anyone, anywhere. If you love her then go back and work at it. If not then.....” He threw his hands in the air nonchalantly. “But you must never let them drag you down, never give in to jealousy, to the intense desire to restore your shattered ego. It doesn’t matter, if you have fallen out of love with her then do what’s right for you. If you can no longer feel her in here.” He tapped the left side of his chest with his fingertips, “then forget her before you do something you may not live to regret!” His words sounded almost prophetic as I let them sink in. My vision blurred as I attempted to focus on his face, dropping my sight I barely managed to read the typed word on the small badge pinned to his chest.

“Thanks Joe,” I whispered, letting my head drop to the highly polished wood.

I awoke with a start to find myself still slumped over the bar, a terrible throbbing pounding away at my temples. The carriage was in darkness and for a moment I wondered sourly why Joe had not woken me before turning in himself. Warily I stumbled to my feet and felt blindly for the door with my hands, painfully colliding with the chairs and tables that lay in the darkness before me. With a sigh of relief I eventually found myself in the brightly lit corridor, the dazzling light burning the backs of my eyes. Back inside my sleeper I threw myself on the soft mattress and, still fully dressed, gave myself to sweet sleep.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we shall be arriving in London in approximately 45 minutes. Breakfast is currently being served in the dining car, thank you.” I greeted the canned announcement with a groan before rising. Lifting the black roll blind I bathed the compartment in early morning sunlight and stretched my tired limbs like a cat, squeezing the final traces of sleep from my body. At first my memory of the previous night was vague, but a faint trace of a headache and the dryness of my tongue soon betrayed whiskey. Then I recollected the Steward’s words; ‘Did I love her?’ the question echoed around inside my sore head before I suddenly felt an invisible weight lift from my shoulders. Thanks to Joe, after all the searching and all the pain I had found an answer. It was no.

Gazing forlornly into the full-length mirror I studied my reflection with disdain. My smart new suit was covered in creases and hung like rags from my body. My hair stuck up

in tufts and my chin carried the heavy stain of a five o'clock shadow. I couldn't help myself, I threw back my head and filled the room with laughter.

After securing my top button and restoring my tie to its rightful place I pressed the Porters bell and sat down to wait.

"What time does the train leave for its return to Scotland?" I asked when a young lad knocked upon the door.

"Nine o'clock, sir," he replied.

"My business in London has been cancelled, would you kindly book me on it?" He nodded and closed the door behind him.

After washing away the last of the nights cobwebs from my eyes I quickly made my way to breakfast. I was surprised not to see Joe behind the bar and seating myself at an empty table I ordered bread rolls.

"Tea or coffee?" asked the waitress.

"Coffee please," I replied. "Is Joe not working this morning?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Joe, the bar steward. I thought perhaps he would be working this morning, I have to thank him for something."

"Well - I'm sorry sir," she said hesitantly, handing me the coffee. "But Joe's been dead for almost a year now and -"

"But that's impossible, I was only speaking to him last night!" Her eyes examined me closely.

"But he threw himself off the train just after his wife left him!"

"His wife?"

"I'm afraid so, he found out that she had been having an affair for years...."

Her words drifted into silence, the cup in my hand felt like lead pulling at my hand. The saucer slipped from my grasp and crashed to the floor, shattering across the carpet as Joe's words echoed through my mind: 'Forget her before you do something you may not live to regret....'



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