



# Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:9:00

## The Last Train – Round Midnight

By Jac Slim

London's South Bank is never truly dark. On a winter's night, light comes from a plethora of point sources and constantly changes as you move along its walkways lit with streetlights or bright swathes of light donated by restaurants and performance venues.

I push and dodge through shoals of the uncouth going to and from Waterloo station via the railway arch from Festival Hall. It is winter and dark, spotting with snowflakes that are broad but feeble: yielding their shape to the warmer pavement.

I'm desperate to get the last train back to Farnham - time of departure 12:05. Up the steps two at a time onto the concourse which receives me with a barrage of light. Here coming at me, a platoon of girls with high volume shrieking and low volume clothing. No doubt fuelled by a session of what I understand is termed pre-drinks, this assortment of exposed legs and faux fur jackets swerves off to my right and is mercifully swallowed up by the escalator descending into the all night, all fright tube.

I run, head cocked up and sideways to scan the departure boards. There it is, Alton - Platform 11. Race to the gate. Where's my ticket? Coat pocket left, coat pocket right, coat inside pocket, repeat for jacket, repeat for trousers; people queueing behind me,

muttering. I stand aside. The platform attendant looks on in a detached manner; perhaps wondering whether he should let me go through or have some amusement annoying a middle-aged man in a bow tie.

The guard's whistle blows. There it is in my wallet. I try to smile coolly and triumphantly to the attendant - God knows how that comes out. He remains impassive.

I run to the third carriage. The first two are generally filled by families with invariably ill-behaved and over-excited, post-show children or people too large to wheeze their way up the train. A trifle cruel, but I cut a slight figure and large people make a bee line for the seat next to me - reckoning they can encroach upon a portion of my precious personal space.

Southwest Trains have carriages with rows of 5 seats: one bank of two on one side of the central aisle and one bank of three on the other. The 3 seaters face each other, some of the two seaters do not. As a rule, I choose the non-facing seats because 1) I only have one fellow passenger to endure and 2) unlike the facing seats no-one has been able to put their dirty shoes on them. I confess I am a shade fussy about this, but you don't know where those shoes have been, do you?

On this occasion all such seats have been taken so I sit on the aisle-side of a bench of two, take out my copy of the London Evening Standard and bury my head in it to pre-empt any attempt to strike up a conversation; it is highly improbable that I should ever encounter anyone on the last train with whom I would share a shred of common interest. The paper also gives some rudimentary protection from coughs and sneezes. I am very particular about this.

Opposite and across from me, next to the window, a man in a crumpled suit is deep in slumber. By his stubble, I surmise that his working day has just ended having commenced at a very early hour. I am ambivalent about such city workers. On the one hand, their continual striving for status and rewards, if not obscene, is certainly unseemly. However, their contribution to the economy is significant and it behoves one to concede that they are a necessary inconvenience: like railway toilets and children.

In the aisle-seat along from him and opposite me sits a middle-aged lady of utter insignificance; she is reading *Hello* which is to literature what a smear of marmite is to a Japanese character on a silk screen.

Across the aisle from me, sits a young girl who is listening to music on her smartphone. She wears pink earphones but the volume must be so high that there escapes a noise like a pump trying to suck silage up from an empty tank. She shivers and fidgets. I assume that she is “coming down” following ingestion of some illegal substance.

The last train: “Round Midnight”. But unlike the mellow Davis-Coltrane version the mood is the broken, convulsive dissonance of Thelonius Monk.

It’s all Esme’s fault.

‘Oh Francis we must stay and listen to the encore.’

‘If I know this conductor, he’ll do several and I have to get from here to Waterloo.’

‘You could stay over at my place.’

Well I wasn't going to start that business again. Embarrassing to say the very least. She is desperate to find a husband. She doesn't realise that this is the one thing we have in common.

Then, the most odious of nightmares! At Clapham, into the carriage slouch three youths. They have all the accoutrements of the modern yob: sporting haircuts that look like they are bald but for a small rug stuck to the top of their heads. Each tattooed hand holds a six-pack of lager. The quiet canvas of the carriage is slashed by their shouted discourse.

'Come on Curtis, let's go to the next carriage, everyone in this one mings.'

'No I doh wanna go any further - fuck'em all. Me and Wayne is staying here.'

'OK, fuck you then.'

So they slump down further up on facing benches of 3, offset from each other so that each is able to exert his inalienable right to rest his feet on the opposite seat.

'Disgusting behaviour sitting with their feet on the seats,' this is delivered in a stage whisper by the Hello woman. She also looks pointedly at me as if I'm a six-foot three paratrooper and it's my duty to sort them out. 'Never been brought up properly. Shouldn't be allowed on trains.'

Luckily this only provokes sniggers from the trio. In fact, they work each other up until they're theatrically bent double pretending to stifle laughter. The woman gets up; picks up her bag; reverently folds away her copy of Hello and moves off towards the centre of the train. For the first time in my life, I am glued to George Osborne's editorial.

‘Silly old cow,’ is the terse verdict and there is a quiet interlude broken only by the snapping of tabs from the tops of lager cans.

I am diverted from the words of wisdom penned by the ousted and resentful ex-Chancellor by the sound of retching coming from across the aisle. The young girl is clearly unwell in the next bay. Bent double in pain, face of wax: “Moaning” - Art Blakey comes to mind. *Stop this game Francis and do something*, I chide myself. But what?

I am not good with human waste. Perforce, I have to deal with the business of my cat, Scarpia (a present from Esme) whose aim with respect to the litter tray is imperfect (the cat’s, not Esme’s). Fortunately, this poor girl can only retch bile – by the looks of her she hasn’t eaten for a good while. I try to get her to stand and put her head between her knees but her moans only increase. I realise that this is yet another situation for which a literary reviewer is ill-prepared.

Suddenly at my side, one of the rug heads. He has snatched a water bottle from another passenger and is making her drink. He makes her lie down in the three quarters prone position.

‘Go and fetch the guard,’ he points at me. I go. A few carriages down I find the guard locked into his little cubicle. I knock. He looks at me as if I have sneezed over his sandwiches.

‘Guard, you have to come, there’s a girl in carriage 10 who is extremely ill.’

‘Can’t you help her?’ This is said with such a mixture of incredulity and affront that I almost say: “Sorry I can’t think what I was doing to disturb you so.” However something tells me that there is an element of role reversal about all this.

‘You may need to call ahead to the next station for assistance, she has been retching blood.’ This invention may have indeed sprung from a life spent trying to make literate a conveyor belt of detective pulp. ‘We don’t want a fatality on your hands.’ I add ominously.

I can almost hear his cognitive sprockets slowly making a calculation: weighing up sandwiches in a nice warm cubicle against future attendance at an enquiry. He gets out of his cab and walks briskly towards the back of the train.

‘Aren’t you going to take the first aid kit?’

‘Been empty, 3 months.’

We reach the sick girl. The carer is receiving what passes for encouragement by his companions.

‘It’s like an episode of bleedin’ Casualty ain’t it. You must look great in your nurse’s uniform Wayne.’

‘Paramedic, I’m training to be a paramedic.’

‘Why don’t you screw her? A warm corpse is the only chance you’re ever likely to get.’

The guard is on the intercom to the driver. ‘Ben we have a passenger incident here. Please can you radio ahead for an ambulance to meet us at Woking? ... right.’

The guard then makes a general announcement that a passenger has been taken ill and, as the guard cannot leave the passenger before the ambulance arrives, there may be a delay at Woking.

‘We ain’t gonna wait for no fuckin ambulance. Dump her on the platform. Grab him Tyler.’

The third rug head pins the guard's arms behind his back and, from his jacket, Curtis draws a flick-knife.

'See 'ere? At Woking you're going to put 'er out and signal for the train to leave, right?'

I am ashamed at not intervening; it doesn't matter that no one else in the carriage intercedes.

'L-leave him.' I mumble.'

Curtis turns with a grin. 'What did ya say, weasel?'

I look for something with which to defend myself. The Evening Standard does not afford a great deal of protection. I don't think Osborne's editorial will distract him.

What does distract him is a huge hand gripping his wrist. One that twists it until it cracks and drops the knife. I stoop, pick it up and wave it in the general direction of Tyler who releases the guard. Curtis's arm is sent right up behind his back, he is then launched down the aisle face first. When he rolls over his nose is bleeding.

'Make that two ambulances, please guard' the sonorous voice comes from the crumpled suited city gent. Uncrumpled, he is quite a size.

Luckily, at Woking, the ambulance is there, so everyone can continue their journey after ten minutes. Everyone, that is, except Curtis and Tyler abandoned into the care of the Transport Police. Wayne has gone off with the girl in the ambulance. The man in the crumpled suit has also alighted. Echoes of the Lone Ranger: "Who was that masked man?"

All is quiet. The only sound from the gently swaying carriage comes from its air conditioning and the occasional rattle as the train

speeds over track points. The only reminder of the journey's unpleasantness is the taping off around the girl's seat.

I've abandoned my newspaper and temporarily forget its world of stabbings and back-stabbings, thuggery and skulduggery or, for that matter, fraud and embezzlement. I sit back and reflect on this interval of peace on the last miles to Farnham. I think about Wayne who remembered his vocation and went to help the girl regardless of his mates' scorn. I realise that I must come clean with Esme and everyone else for that matter.

The 12:05 from Waterloo. You never know what will happen. You never know, I might even get to smile at small children – as long as they're sleeping.

The mood is Miles Davis: "Blue in Green".

THE END

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