



Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:5:00

A Happy release

Author: Alan Goodchild

It's for the best, we both agree. Stiff upper lip man, don't weaken, use that army steel.

It was possibly the quickest train journey I've ever taken. Semi-fast from Farnham to Guildford, across London on the near-empty tube to the magnificent new St Pancras, where we sipped two glasses of champagne, nicely cooled, in the upper concourse cafe before taking our seats, rather luxurious seats, on the Eurostar.

We sat hand in hand, quiet, numb. I wanted to fill my head with other things, other times, other places. I tried reading, silently reciting the words in the American accent of the author. Nothing worked. But then, faster, as the scenery blurred to green and blue stripes through the window, the carriage began to rock, rhythmically, soothingly. I chanted under my breath to the beat of the swaying, and the memory of my childhood returned.

Reaching for the handle on the carriage door on a bright Sunday morning, early, across the huge gap between the train and the white painted edges of the platform, I can still feel the cool of the brass and the smoothness of the action as I twist it a half turn anti-clockwise. It unlocks and I pull back to bring the large heavy door open. It over-swings as I let go and biffs against the rubber stopper, the wooden

window surround shedding its varnish at the edges and the tartan carriage interior now on the outside, flat against the train.

My elder sister pushes past me, and I follow her in, foot on the wooden step, up I go as she pulls my arm. My father boards with the case and leans out of the doorway to catch hold of the chrome bar on top of the half-open window. He slams the door with a solid 'kerchunk', there's no other sound like it, there never will be again.

The ride to Portsmouth was exciting. The whole carriage was ours, all eight seats. My father lifted the large case up onto the netting above his place beside the opposite door and my sister and I both stood at the half-open window. He said we could lower it, but we mustn't lean out, so we both put our hands on the chrome bar, pushed it in towards the glass to unlock and we slid the window slowly down. I can feel the air rushing in and ruffling my hair even now, my sister's face disappeared behind her curly locks and we laughed.

Farncombe station flew by with a clatter and a whoosh. People with hats, lads on bicycles and one car waited behind the huge white double gates that guarded the level crossing. We looked up to wave at the man in the signal box as we sped past, he was smiling, and he waved back.

The walls and ceiling of this place are white. The muscles in my arm contract as the happy release goes in, my fist starts to clench. Concentrate now Wallace lad, concentrate. Think back.

The Eurostar was altogether different, comfortable, clean and sterile. Our seats were booked, and we purchased tea and sandwiches from a nice man in the dining car, who was a lot nicer than the sandwiches he sold, which after a valiant joint attempt at

consuming, my wife donated to the bin. I haven't tasted margarine in years, I guess it's the French influence. We arrived at Guard Du Nord all too quickly.

Not so to Portsmouth harbour back then. The journey was interrupted at Bedhampton halt by a sheep on the track. Father let us lean out of the window as the train had stopped but we saw nothing, just lots of men in the distance and an ambulance and some police cars I remember. While we waited, we ate the sandwiches he'd prepared for us. The guard walked past, so Father left the compartment to speak to him. He told us not to touch the doors and that he would just be a minute. We were alone, then Susan put her hand on the steel catch that opened the outer door.

I imagined her face again in the window of the high-speed train, the other side of the glass, as we sped away in the blackness across France. She was still eleven and wonderful. She would have been Eighty-one years old next week. I celebrated her birthday each year since.

The white of the room now burns in my eyes. My shoulder feels cold. Hold up that man, brace yourself lad. Don't let it show. Think back.

The time before we had a clear run to Portsmouth, but the train was quite full, so Susan and I stood in the corridor. We moved up and down popping up to look in each carriage, the people laughed, mostly, except one man, who opened the door quickly and told us to behave ourselves. Father said you never know what problems people have in their lives, so we must always be mindful of not bothering others. We said sorry and we moved back down the corridor. Susan poked her tongue out at him behind his back as he went in. The lady next to the window laughed and put her thumb up to us.

It's a four-hour journey from Paris to Basel, Switzerland, it felt like an hour, save the tragedy of the trip to the toilet. We think we have problems with accessibility.

The coldness covers me now, the tears have dried, I'm limp. The white coats move to the side and my wife kisses me goodbye. I try to smile. No, not yet, think man, think.

After reaching Portsmouth Harbour station, we got off and walked down to queue for the ferry. It was green and white and very big, and it smelled of oil, I can smell it now. The whole thing vibrated as we moved away from the dock, it made us laugh. We sat on the small slatted benches of the lower deck. It was raining, a clearing up shower father said. You couldn't see out of the windows, but we knew we were moving, as we both fell off the seat half way over.

Things have turned grey, I'm floating, all my pain has gone. Not yet, please, just let me think this last one, please!

Susan? Are you there? I didn't mean to push, I really didn't.

Hello, you, long time, can we play, please?