

The Last One to Know

As usual, I've left everything until the last minute, and I jump on the London train only just before they close the doors. I'm not in the mood to trawl up and down the carriages looking for the perfect seat, so I make my way to the centre of the carriage, looking for the first available seat that is forward facing. A table seat would be perfect for doing some revision work on my laptop, and I'm in luck. I start to shuffle into the inside seat when the girl opposite me catches my eye. If looks could kill, the Mafia would sign her up tomorrow.

"I'm sorry, is someone sitting here?" I try to sound confident, but I know I have failed miserably.

The guy in the seat next to hers lowers his copy of Reading Evening Post and slowly eyes me up and down, then grunts something which I guess means he doesn't care one way or the other. The girl with attitude picks up her book, pointedly tucks her legs in, making sure there is no chance of any physical contact, and commences reading.

She's dressed in a severe black business suit – probably a lawyer? She's reading a well-thumbed paperback. I sort of know the cover but cannot quite put a name on the book. Something safe, but reasonably challenging? Her eyes lift from the page and she catches me studying her. I feel like screaming at her, "It's the book – I was only looking at the book."

A large woman armed with numerous bags bumps her way into the seat next to me. My glance toward her is met by a look that silently challenges me to question her seat selection. She squeezes into her place and I lose any sense of freedom I once owned. I catch the girl opposite smirking. I should have stayed in bed.

It doesn't take too long to travel between Bristol and Reading, so I put my head down and decide I will try to offend no one for the next hour. The other three are well occupied with reading, so unfortunately my attention drifts back to the girl opposite. A first impression makes her appear older, but she is in her early thirties. Her face is not beautiful but I find it magnetic; somehow her stubby little nose goes perfectly with her sharp cheekbones. Her eyes are hazel brown and stunning. They mesmerise me. I can tell she knows I am studying her, but I take the risk and continue for a few more seconds, before she drops her book on the table. Sod it, what have I got to lose?

"Are you going to London?"

"This is the London train."

"Yes. Yes, of course it is," I manage to mumble.

The fat lady smiles at me with some sort of empathy, and I feel exonerated in asking the girl such a feeble question. I have not spoken to the lady, but now she offers me further moral support.

"I'm getting off at Reading," she says.

"Oh, good." I realise that does not sound generous of me. "I'm sorry. I don't mean I'm glad you're getting off, I meant..." My words trail off. I can tell the fat lady is embarrassed; she makes some pretence of turning back to read her magazine. The girl opposite delights in flashing a big smile my way, which I gather is her way of saying, "What a prat."

I definitely should have stayed in bed.

As soon as we reach Reading station the fat lady gets off, so I stretch out and enjoy my freedom once again before the train refills to capacity. However, for some strange reason far more people leave the train then actually get on, a fact which I mention out loud to the people opposite me.

“That’s because it’s Ascot week.” The man, who is now reading *Sporting Life*, seems astonished at this lapse in my sporting knowledge and I feel compelled to ask him why the bloody hell he is studying the runners and riders if he is not going to Ascot himself. But the day is not going that well to risk another conversation, so my mind drifts into other thoughts which centre on the girl opposite.

She’s got a nice body and I want to see her legs, hidden from me under the table. I nudge my pen onto the floor and bend down and quickly study her legs. I hate how people misuse the English language, it really bugs me, but her legs are perfect. Long and shapely, covered in sheer black nylon. Something inside stirs and I feel a blush come to my cheeks, so I grab my laptop, open it up and start typing away. Anything to keep me busy.

“Is that a business report?”

She speaks! I look like many things, but a business man – no. Never! She is obviously enjoying my discomfort and has put her book away.

“No, not at all. I’m a freelance writer and I’m just upgrading some notes.”

“Notes on a story?”

“Just an outline of an idea I’ve been working on.”

“A love story?”

“No.”

“A thriller then... or a gangster novel?”

Even the *Sporting Life* man’s interest is piqued, and he is now looking at me.

“It’s a short story about a crippled guy and his dog and how they support each other. Channel Four have expressed some interest in producing a short TV play based on it.” I’m exhausted; that’s my longest speech for days.

The man is unimpressed but the girl is still looking at me, and her look is not quite so mocking.

“Is it a sad story?”

“I suppose it could be – I think it’s rather positive, but the writer is always the last one to know.” It’s a bad choice of words, but they’ve been said, so I let them lie in place. There’s an awkward silence which I need to break.

I make eye contact for the first time and ask, “Are you working in London?”

“Yes. I’ve got a lunchtime meeting in the City, and then I’m going to visit my mother.”

I don’t feel like making any more small talk, so I close my laptop and close my eyes until the train pulls into Paddington, by which time I have this uncontrollable emptiness rolling around inside of me. The Sporting Life man jumps out of his seat with amazing agility and rushes to be first in the queue for the train doors to open. The girl gets up before me and I can feel her looking down on me, but I decide to ignore her. I’m safer here, hidden inside my cocoon.

We alight from the train and I follow several steps behind her, unashamedly studying her body from behind.

Just before we reach the barrier, she stops suddenly and waits for me to reach her. “Do you fancy a coffee?”

My first instinct is to say no and keep walking, but I have been craving coffee for the last hour or so. But I’m in no hurry and I almost say no. “Sure. Why not?”

I offer to buy the coffee, so she finds a table whilst I queue up. I bring two cappuccinos back to the table and sit down. She does not look happy, so I feel it is my role in this situation to start talking. “How is your mother?”

“She’s well, very well. She’s always asking me about you, Gareth. It’s the first thing she ever asks when I see her.”