

When Trains Had Wheels

It is the summer of the One Hundred and Twelfth Year of the Tribunate. Gone is Anno Domini—the Year of our Lord.

A train is waiting at the Tong Terminus. It is purring with air-conditioning, has plush seats, and is littered with polished menials who will offer a distinct and tendentious service. Its destination is unknown, except the passengers have been advised to place in their luggage clothing suitable for pleasure grounds by the sea.

Bagh and Ala are sitting opposite each other. They have not met before, yet they understand they have one thing in common—they have both borne witness beside bed *Number 23*. The other two seats in their compartment are empty, and they have yet to adjust themselves, and their baggage, to accommodate the extra spaces.

They smile, glance out of the window, and admire the marbled atrium of the terminus. Both are in awe at the achievements of the New Dominion.

They smile again.

‘I’m Bagh.’ The man introduced himself, lowered his head in respect.

‘I’m Ala.’ The woman replied, also lowering her head in respect, whilst keeping a steady, upturned gaze on the man opposite. She has a journey to spend in his company, and she is watchful in a furtive, yet kindly manner. Yes, they are appraising each other, waiting. They are in their sixties, are dressed in summer light-weight and are expectant of a vacation befitting citizens whose elderly kin have made the ultimate sacrifice. They feel a slight lifting sensation as the cushion of air beneath the train is activated—and then the train is gliding forward silently with steadily increasing speed.

‘I remember my grandmother telling me about the old trains that ran on wheels,’ commented Bagh, casually.

‘And what a noise they must have made!’ exclaimed Ala.

‘I suppose all of this carriage is reserved for *Number 23s*,’ said Bagh. He raised his eyebrows suggesting the slightest degree of inconsequence, whilst accepting the honour of the ride and the patrician responsibility towards his family.

‘And on the next carriage I saw *Number 874*,’ said Ala.

‘Really random, then.’

‘They say the numbers are chosen by lottery,’ she replied.

‘As we are ... so I believe.’ Ala sensed this comment from Bagh was to get a reaction from her about the New Dominion, and its control over the lives, and deaths, of its citizens. He glanced quizzically at her. She did not respond. ‘Well, our tickets had our seat numbers on them. Whatever, I’m certain we shall get on just fine,’ continued Bagh who wanted to portray himself as a man of easy disposition, a man of the world, and a subservient man if need be. He pulled out of his pocket a tube of peppermint sweets. ‘Would you like one?’

‘Thanks, but no. I gave up sweets after our Leader’s intervention on behalf of our dentists.’

Bagh eyed his tube of peppermints, gave a twinkle at Ala, and with the slightest wisp of provocation popped one of the peppermints into his mouth.

‘Don’t tell him then,’ he said, mischievously.

They spread themselves placing on the empty seats pieces of hand baggage, which appeared shabby and out of character with their surroundings.

‘Tell me, Bagh, who did you accompany at bed *Number 23*?’

‘My dear mother. She had taken the name Afon. And you?’

‘My mother, also. She took the name Clere.’

‘Of course, in our mothers’ time there was a huge interest in the Northern Territories, and their histories. I understand that Afon came from the Welsh culture and means a river. I’m flowing, my mother use to say, and giggle.’

‘You’re right. My mother chose Clere because it meant a hill. She did have this attitude of looking down on the less fortunate, but when it came to giving consent she hardly hesitated.’

‘I found the whole thing beautiful, wistful, and intensely natural. A cushioned departure ... rather like this train,’ sighed Bagh.

‘Oh, goodness me! I don’t think it was quite like that. But it must have been quite barbaric in the old days, and without any choice. They did it so beautifully at bed *Number 23*,’ she added thoughtfully.

The train was now travelling at a considerable speed.

Ala thought Bagh insincere.

Bagh thought Ala could have been quite attractive in her youth.

Both had chosen names with Turkish origins.

Historical Note

The New Dominion encouraged self-immolation in order to create death-rates consistent with sustainability of definitive resources. Consent at eighty-five (variable) endowed a family with privileges, the very best medical facilities, and afterwards a kinship’s chance of a vacation. Across all the territories of the New Dominion every hospital had designated beds, called Repatriation Beds, with their own numbers and their own private spaces enabling consenting citizens a blessed, comfortable, and as Bagh put it, an ‘intensely natural’ departure surrounded by the presential bosoms of their dearest. The New Dominion hailed this demographic strategy a success, and the universal population was no longer on the increase.

‘I never liked the *Visas for KingdomCome* poster, which I saw on a wall outside one of those consenting chambers,’ said Bagh.

‘Chambers were what solicitors called their offices ... when trains had wheels!’ Ala gave a smile. She was touchingly proud of knowing this historical fact.

‘And when trains had wheels we had the clergy who did God!’ exclaimed Bagh.

‘So they say, so they say. Anyway, it was the convenience and welcome given to my mother when she went to our local chamber that persuaded her of the benefits of giving consent. And it is much better now, isn’t it? Life, I mean. At least you know where you are and when you are going ... and how you are going to get there. Nothing wishy-washy about reaching KingdomCome. Our Leaders have seen to all that.’

Bagh was going to say: They would, wouldn’t they? They do God now, and are the guardians at the gateway to KingdomCome. But Bagh sensed his travelling

companion had deep convictions in the majesty of life as orchestrated by the leaders of the New Dominion—and a belief in the after-life now available to, and bestowed auspiciously on, every deserving citizen. As they had a journey to travel together he kept this thought to himself. Ancient, tribal religions were for the history books, and were discouraged topics. So he changed the subject, and settled back to enjoy the benefits awarded to him for being at a Repatriation Bed for his late and beloved mother's farewell. The train sped forwards at a determined and resolute speed smoothly and silently through stations whose names flashed passed too quickly to be read.

‘Would you join me in tea?’ he asked Ala.

‘Why not!’ she replied breezily.

He pressed the service bell. A menial appeared instantly.

‘We should like some tea,’ said Bagh.

The menial disappeared, and was soon back carrying a samovar, of polished brass gilt—with a plug, which he plugged into a socket. A second menial followed carrying a tray with two glass tumblers, and a plate of corn crackers.

‘Would you like me to pour the tea when the samovar is ready, or would you prefer to serve yourselves?’ the first menial asked.

Bagh looked at Ala.

‘We can manage, thank you,’ she said.

They studied the samovar in silence, grateful for the diversion. It bubbled gently. Samovars continued to hold the affections of the human race in spite of the epoch of heroic change.

‘So we both chose Turkish names. Were your ancestors Turkish, like mine? I chose Bagh ... because I was a gardener and it seemed appropriate.’

‘My ancestors worked with mosaics for the Ottoman sultan in Constantinople. That's what I was told. My mother chose the name Ala for me. She said I was so beautiful, and everybody should be reminded of it.’

Bagh looked again at his travelling companion and reassessed his earlier opinion that Ala had been attractive in her youth. Now, he saw she could have been beautiful—Caucasian white and beautiful with a narrow nose and small mouth. That is what he thought. Her hair, though greying, was lush and wavy.

‘Your mother must have been right. And your beauty has not deserted you.’

Ala blushed.

‘You men!’ she exclaimed.

‘Would you serve the tea then?’ suggested Bagh.

‘Yes. Why ever not!’

‘Now, this *is* cosy. Tell me, did you know your father?’ asked Bagh kindly.

‘No. He arrived, impregnated my mother and left. Not like the wicked old days when marriage was a lifetime’s burden. And now our Leaders have taken replacement birth to a higher and healthier level, haven’t they? Gone are the old physical shenanigans and orchestrated sex. So much better now the wonderful concept of fusing agreeable male donors to female donors in a laboratory, and presto! All nice and clean, no pain ... just healthy replacement babies. Mine were conceived in a laboratory and cocoon-reared. Of course, now they are out in the New Dominion working somewhere at the frontiers. We keep in contact, and that is nice.’

‘I understand there are still a few places where the benefits of the New Dominion have yet to be felt, and where ancient sexual practices continue,’ said Bagh, thoughtfully, mischievously.

‘I heard these places are being kept in their original pre-epoch state to become visitor attractions,’ said Ala.

‘And for anthropological study ... so I’m informed. We could be going there,’ said Bagh.

‘Definitely not! I reckon it’s the tropics. Otherwise, why pack clothes for pleasure-grounds by the sea?’

‘I suppose if we were going to where pre-epochal sexual practices still continue we would be told not to bring any clothes at all!’

‘My word! I do believe you have an atavistic nature. Yes, yes. I wager you belong to one of those unlawful associations that hanker after a reversion to ancestral type. And there was I thinking what a nice travelling companion you were turning out to be!’

‘Well, I enjoyed my shenanigans. No laboratory for me. It was in a potting shed with a girl called Ingen who was a gardener just like me. That was the first time. After she became pregnant we shared an apartment for a while ... until the baby was born and then I never saw her, or the baby, again.’

‘You were punished, and rightly so. Shenanigans in a potting shed! How retro is that? And decadent! Clinically perverse, I should say, and does absolutely nothing to control population growth.’

‘We were happy.’

‘You were bestial,’

‘We were like-minded.’

‘You were selfish.’

‘We were cheerfully unguarded about our opinions.’

‘You were unpatriotic.’

‘We talked about the past.’

‘You should have talked about the future.’

‘We dreamed of what might have been.’

‘You contradicted the aspirations of our Leader.’

‘We were in love.’

‘In love! That went out when trains lost their wheels!’

They stared at each other for a while, and then burst out laughing. Scenery rushed passed outside the tinted windows. The sun was hesitating, and ready to begin its downward flight. The train glided, softly and speedily, yet without obvious effort. For all their assertive words a pleasant silence descended. They thought. And their thoughts were comfortable thoughts. They had found their tongues, and they were travelling in luxury. They were remembering, together, distant thoughts—and no doubt these thoughts soft-pedalled when they remembered their mothers without whose self-sacrifices in bed *Number 23* they would not have been entitled to this trip, and would have lost the chance of this positive experience of unregulated communion—this man and woman talk.

He thought he saw the beginnings of a tear in Ala’s eye. Bagh cleared his vision, looked more closely, and yes, a tear was sliding ever so slowly down the cheek of his travelling companion. He leant forward, and offered his handkerchief.

‘Is it your mother ... for whom you feel deeply?’

‘She often wanted to talk to me about the old ways, and I refused to listen. I said they were gone for good ... and good riddance to them! I think she only gave her consent to prove to me she was a good citizen. And there, in bed *Number 23*, I held her hand, I tried to comfort her, I did my best, but my best was not good enough, did

not obliterate all the hurt I had done her. I could read it in her eyes. I was a disappointment to her. Do you know the last thing she said to me? She said: Pray for me like they did in the old days. And do you know what I replied? I said: I didn't know the words. Then she closed her eyes and was gone.'

Bagh rested a hand on her shoulder. She did not object. She just closed her eyes against the tears and accepted the reassurance given by Bagh's comforting hand. When she had recovered a little she asked:

'Can you remember the last words your mother said to you?'

'Yes ... yes, I can. She said that I had been a good son to her. I can still see her pale, frightened face when I looked at her for the last time. I said to her: Mother, you were the very best. I had more to say, but it was too late.'

'Both our mothers were repatriated with plenty of warning, and yet both of us left it too late,' said Ala.

'I know. That is one of the flaws in all of this.'

A menial knocked on the carriage door to announce five minutes to the destination. Bagh and Ala sat close to each other, holding hands. The sun was setting. Half its sphere of brilliant orange danced on the sea's horizon. The train was running beside a shoreline that was sandy, tropical, palmed. The sea was flat, motionless, with a mirror-glass reflection.

The train began to slow down.

The cushion beneath the train was deactivated, and the train came to a silent halt at the Arcanum Terminal.

'And now it is us who have left it too late ... like it was with our own dear mothers,' said Bagh.

'Will we ever learn?' Ala asked.

Bagh slowly shook his head.

And, like that, they waited.

All rights reserved
© Julian Thomas 2012