

The Engine

A Short Story

By

Alexander Pitcher

I sat at the last table of the dining car and looked out the window, letting the rhythm of the train ease my stubborn headache. The train was rounding a bend. I fixated on the cars ahead and the steam that puffed out of the engine and into the snowy sky.

I heard the gangway connection open, followed by the lumbering step of a large man. I looked up, recognized him. The man's name was Rhys; we were college friends and hadn't spoken for some time. He hadn't noticed me yet, his eyes still glancing around the chairs and windows. I contemplated waving him over but instead watched him struggle with choosing where to sit a little while longer. Finally, his eyes fell on mine. He grinned and waved those broad waves that used his entire forearm. I smiled politely.

As he sat across from me, he punched my shoulder. "Lee! What the hell are you doing here?" Rhys asked.

I was not in a great mood to talk, and my headache continued to pulse through my brain. "I'm headed for the country," I replied.

Without prompting, he launched into discussing his own itinerary. During his ramblings about a lousy Vermont hotel, my attention began to drift to his already-receding hairline and the faint scars of bug bites on his hands.

Realizing that he had stopped talking, I replied again, "Exciting."

"How've you been?" Rhys asked.

The question caught me off guard. My mind scrambled to put together some answer that was meatier than "I've been well." Suddenly all of my business ventures, travel plans, and gossip felt trite and not worth forcing another human to listen to. There had to be some anecdote I could share, but I could not with all my strength find it at this moment.

“I--I’ve been well,” I said. I paused, hoping that Rhys would change the subject and talk about himself again, or that the waiter would walk in, spill a drink, and cause a scene, anything to get away from the torture of making small talk with this man.

“LEE!” a shrill voice exclaimed.

I spun around. I’d been called to dinner too many times to forget my mother’s voice. There she stood with my father behind her, both of them smiling at me like they had just struck gold. They looked so much older than I remember; their necks wiggled too much when they turned their heads. I thought back to the day where I waved goodbye to them last: me on a boat heading away, my parents on the dock sending me off. I pushed the image aside.

“Mom!” I said. Rhys shifted seats to make room for my parents. I introduced them to Rhys and Rhys to them.

“You didn’t tell us you were traveling!” my mother said.

I mumbled some apologies.

Settling in, my father looked me up and down; his eyes narrowed. “You look tired. What’ve you been up to?” he asked.

I wasn’t entirely sure what to say. I hated myself for instinctively looking to my mother.

“You’re starving!” my mom said, waving over a waiter. I sank in my chair. The waiter arrived.

I picked up my menu--I hadn’t looked at it yet--and was scanning it when the waiter asked, “Are you, by any chance, Lee Meyerson?”

The waiter was looking straight at me.

“Yes, he is,” my father said.

The waiter said, "I'm Cornelius August Finch! We were classmates in grade-school!" I squinted at the waiter. I did recognize him. I knew him when he was a scrawny boy who mildly annoyed me with his penchant for picking his nose.

"It's swell to see you!" he said.

A cacophony of voices sprang up. "Now, *this* is a coincidence." "It really is swell--darn swell." "You should've told us you knew such wonderful people," my mother exclaimed. My father joined in, "You're a popular one, Lee."

I was growing suspicious of this whole affair. Was this an elaborate intervention staged by my parents? I did owe my mother some money, but I could pay her back. I did not smoke or gamble. I drank modestly. My brain pounded against my skull. The waiter had run off somewhere. I stood up and crawled over my father to reach the aisle. I made some excuse to go to the restroom. In truth, I needed air. The waiter reappeared with a fellow waitress.

She squealed, "That *is* Lee! How've you been?"

I recognized her to be my grade-school crush, and suddenly, I was as dumb as a schoolboy. "I need to pee," I said. I stumbled backward, feeling for the exit. I entered the next carriage, colliding with another passenger. Making my apologies, I got a good look at them, and my eyes widened. It was one of my first cousins.

"Lee!" they said, spreading their arms for a hug.

I pushed past them, hearing whispers around me travel down the carriage. "Lee?" "Did someone say Lee?" "I knew a Lee long ago, is he the same?"

Scanning the seats, I found that I recognized each and every one of the passengers to some capacity. Family members were the first to catch sight of me. They were easy to spot.

Friends next. Then acquaintances, business associates, old professors and romantic partners. I covered my face.

The whispers became loud announcements, beckoning me over to greet them. “Are you on vacation?” “Where do you get off?” “Since you’re here, could you look over some documents for me?”

The noise must have caught the attention of my parents in the dining car because they entered as well. People clambered over each other to see me, getting up from their seats. I saw a small boy run into the next carriage, and soon, more passengers piled in, calling my name. I recognized them all as well. I could barely see through the crowd, worming my way to the connection. I felt hands grab for my arms. I shook them away. The voices blended together to form a chorus of chaos. Why did everyone I knew feel the need to speak to me? How did they all know I was here?

I broke away from the crowd, ran into the next carriage. Members of the animal rights group I was a part of years ago were standing at their seats, confusedly attempting to piece together what the ruckus was about.

One of them caught sight of me: “Oh hello, Lee, anything to report about the Canadian Water Vole?”

I ignored them and ran into the next carriage, the crowd storming after me. Carriage after carriage was the same. Word had spread all the way down the train. Lee Meyerson was on board, and everyone had some connection to him. Tossing off a couple of inquiring neighbors from back home, I entered another carriage, and there I saw the person I dreaded I’d see. The logic--or illogic--of the situation made it inevitable, but upon seeing them, I still nearly gagged.

Their name was [redacted], and I refused to speak it; I loathed them so intensely. This hatred transcended reason. I despised the very atoms that made up [redacted]'s body, and [redacted] felt the same about me. Ours was a deep rivalry perpetuated by escalating acts of revenge; to be perfectly honest, I had forgotten the origin of our rotten relationship, and I was unsure if [redacted] remembered either.

Wearing a smug grin and their arms crossed, [redacted] said, "I heard you were on board."

"Piss off," I responded. I pushed past [redacted], who gave way easily. The worst behind me, I reached my sleeper compartment, locked the door and collapsed onto the couch.

I heard the crowd reach my cabin, banging on the glass, their muffled voices leaking in. I closed my eyes. This had to be a scheme conjured by [redacted]. I was sure of it. It stunk of their deceit. However, the second the thought entered my brain, I pushed it away. There was no way they could have organized this gathering. Too many of these people came from a too-obscure part of my life. There was no way [redacted] could have found the acquaintance I made while drunk at a Hungarian bar--or that bar's bartender or that bar's bartender's assistant who cleaned up my vomit--and put them all on this train. No, [redacted] worked in smaller units of personal sabotage: theft, blackmail. We both had such an abundance of evidence of each other's misdeeds that one couldn't report the other without incriminating themselves.

The banging at my door had quieted down. The cacophony of voices had changed in nature as well: it contained less sharp exclamations of my name and more the soft chatter of conversation. The crowd was talking among themselves.

I sprang up from my seat. I disliked the idea of my social circles mixing. What would my business associates who wanted to build a dam in the middle of the wild, untouched country

think of my past activism for animal rights? I felt uncomfortable with the idea of my past romantic partners trading stories about me, corroborating their own mental pictures of my weaknesses with each others'. I felt embarrassed by some of my crass college friends who might strike up conversation with members of my family. And although I doubted [redacted] orchestrated this ordeal, they could easily take advantage of it, destroying my position in all of my social circles while I was locked away in my compartment unable to defend myself.

I had to take control of the situation.

I burst out of my compartment some moments later; the clamor for my attention started again. "Lee!" "He's back!" "Lee?" "Lee!"

"HEAR HEAR!" I announced.

The clamor died down.

"You all clearly have business you wish to resolve with me, and I will gladly meet with you one by one in my compartment, five minutes at a time."

The crowd murmured excitedly.

"On one condition! You all must return to your seats and not speak a single word."

The murmurs grew suspicious. My mother and father, who had worked their ways up to the front of the crowd, scowled in unison.

I continued, "And if you see someone violate my condition and report them to me, I will grant you extra time to speak with me--and refuse to speak with them."

The crowd began to stir.

I added, "I wish I could see all of you, and I wish to give all of you my undivided attention--but I can't in this chaos. Please, return to your seats. I will meet with my mother and father first."

Before the crowd could offer any sort of dissent, I guided my parents into my compartment, and the crowd slowly dispersed, silently returning to their seats.

Immediately after we all sat down, I felt incredibly fatigued. I had just committed myself to hours of continuous conversation. My mother and father began speaking, imploring me for where I had been and seeking to reconnect with me. I gave the best answers I could, but as each word left my lips so did a small part of my will to continue. Drowsiness set in. Their five minutes were up, and I slowly directed them out and allowed the next person in. They were a neighbor from my apartment complex, and they wanted to arrange a time when we were both back in town to play tennis. Even more exhausting than my interview with my parents. I nodded to my neighbor, my answers barely coherent, and marked down a day in my calendar. I can't remember which.

One by one, each passenger filed into my compartment and left, demanding a small favor or social interaction from me, draining me. Unresolved conflicts or empty promises I needed to fulfill--arranging that second drink with an acquaintance I never made time for.

The drowsiness I felt clung around my entire body; my eyelids felt like lead weights. As the interviews dragged on into the small hours of the night, I attempted to greet each guest graciously though I wanted only to curl up in a ball on the floor of my compartment and sleep through the winter. However, the orange light in my cabin, the train's soft rhythm: it all worked against my resolve. So easy to take a small nap while waiting for another passenger to come in, just a wink. I had only seen about half of the passengers now. I could see the rest of the passengers tomorrow morning. What a comforting notion. My eyes closed.

I awoke, and the morning sun broke through the clouds and spilled into my compartment. The train had gained altitude, climbing and traveling through a mountain range. I looked around

and felt sudden, irrevocable regret. My suitcases had been opened, their contents scattered all across my compartment.

I heard a calamity outside not directed towards me. It was the angry speech of a demagogue and the excited response of their rabble. I broke my way outside where I found a dense group of passengers shuffling into the next carriage. Of course, I recognized all of them: my math instructor, a colleague, a friend. They gave me sidelong, ugly glances. The gangway connection was open, and the angry voice carried in. I did not hear what the voice said, but the crowd around me jeered in response.

I grimaced, pushing my way into the next carriage. The crowd gathered around the center, where a clearing formed. The ring around the clearing consisted of my closest friends and family, and at the center of the clearing stood [redacted], toting a rifle. [redacted] spoke, “Lee, the man you thought you knew, instated an authoritarian rule of silence on all of you: family members, friends, colleagues.

“Lee then broke his promise to you.” [redacted] pointed to a man in glasses, my uncle. “How long did you wait in obedient silence to speak with your nephew?”

“Ten hours,” my uncle said with a huff.

“And how did you feel when he had fallen asleep long before then?”

My uncle huffed again.

“This is how Lee values all of you.”

My father retorted, “Lee would do no such thing. You don’t know my son!”

“Do *you* know your son? Did you know that he was on this train? Did you know that he owned this firearm?” [redacted] responded, lifting up the rifle. With some guilt, I realized the rifle was indeed mine.

A hush fell over the crowd.

“Lee’s a pacifist! That can’t be his,” Rhys shouted, albeit doubtfully.

“I found this in his compartment while he slept,” said [redacted].

I broke into the clearing. “It’s just a hunting rifle!” I said.

In unison, the members of my animal rights group shouted incredulously, “A what?”

“Just for small game. Nothing endangered,” I responded.

“Do you have a problem with killing endangered species?” my dam-building business associate asked, indignant.

“No. No, of course not,” I said.

[redacted] said, “You see, even now, Lee lies.”

I felt a heavy lump forming in my stomach. Even if I released the slew of evidence I had on [redacted]’s criminality, who was to say I didn’t fabricate it to frame them? The picture people had of me now as a duplicitous, unreliable figure was irreversible. My head was throbbing. I had to put an end to this before [redacted] caused any more damage.

The following happened in a blur. I lunged for [redacted], tackling them to the floor. I ripped the rifle out of their hands, aimed, and fired. I had defeated my lifelong enemy.

The crowd was silent, retracting from me. I looked around to the faces of horror on my mother, father, past lovers, colleagues. I dropped my gun. My hands shook. I pushed past a shocked third cousin into the next carriage. This time, the crowd did not make chase. I started into a run. My surroundings swirled; the edges of things wavered and broke, blending together like the paint of a watercolor with each pulse of blood through my skull.

I reached a door I could not open. As good as blind, I could only guess I was at the front of the train, but I did not have proper control of my body. Like a well-trained puppet, I opened

the side door and climbed out. Clinging to the side of the carriage, the freezing air whipped at my face. I climbed further and leaped forward. Somehow I knew that I wouldn't plummet to my death but land on the biting steel floor of the train engine.

My hands cramped from the cold, and I jammed them in my pockets. I saw the blurry form of fire in the furnace. The cramped space seemed deserted. I saw no form that broke the rigid vertices of the compartment. Sheer gray rock (I presumed it was rock) dropped below me, and the mountains (I presumed they were mountains) towered above me. Solitude at last.

Piercing through my mismatched senses, a sharp clinking behind me caught my attention. I turned on all fours, crawling towards the sound like a drowning sailor paddling for a distant buoy. I slumped forward off the back of the engine. I reached down, touching the rippled metal of the train coupling connecting myself to the rest of the carriages. I traced upwards until I found the source of the clinking: a loose iron latch. I smiled

I lifted the latch. Unburdened by the rest of the train, my engine sped forward. With my blurred vision, I watched the dark square that was the front carriage lose momentum, receding into the blurry past.

My headache wreaked havoc on my brain, tearing through the boundaries of my senses. Each sound I heard, each feeling I felt, compounded on the last. I doubled backward, twisting on the floor. *What's happening?* As if in answer, my very thoughts lost their meaning, my neurons shredding each other into oblivion. The blur of my vision became a soup of color until color itself became obsolete.

...

Days later, in a distant railway station, onlookers reported that a lone train engine slowly chugged into platform eleven. The man who stumbled out of it was heavily frostbitten and his eyes were glazed over. He could barely stand--with no bearing on his surroundings. His teeth chattered as if he were still in the snowy mountains, and he couldn't stop unintelligibly muttering to himself. People came to help, asking his name, but he looked at them, confused, for he had no memory of who he was.