

TUNBRIDGE WELLS

It had been a long day and I was looking forward to getting home. I found a seat on the train as it pulled out of the station, flipped open my laptop and put my headphones on. They were large, 1970s style headphones, the kind you used to see in recording studios, but I liked them. Sometimes I wouldn't even put music on or watch a film, just wear the headphones and that way stay one remove from the world.

Today I had a book I wanted to finish before I got home – the telltale compression of the pages told me there was just enough of the story left to fill my train journey – so I opened iTunes and found some suitable book-reading music, mostly unobtrusive bits of film soundtracks. When I was younger, I'd never understood the appeal of listening to soundtracks – they never seemed to make sense without the movie they had been created to accompany – but now I found them relaxing and, as I've said, unobtrusive.

The train pulled out in the dimness of early evening and I lost myself in my book.

When I looked up again an hour or so later, having finished a particularly exacting chapter, I was surprised to see that the carriage, which had been crammed full of commuters when I'd got on, was now almost empty. I don't know why this should have been surprising – I was, after all, on a commuter train, and people get off trains all the time, that's what they're supposed to do – it shook me slightly, as if the pattern of normal train travel had been disrupted in some unspecified way.

The brassy introduction of some forgotten 1980s James Bond title song filled my ears, and I realised that my soundtrack playlist had just become intrusive. I found something blander, and resumed my reading.

Half an hour later, I had finished the book. It had been quite an immersive experience, and I felt like I always did when I'd just completed a good book: reflective on its emotional highs and lows, slightly depressed that it was over (and that I'd probably read it too quickly, skimming pages being the reader's equivalent of bolting one's food), but already looking forward to the new book that was waiting for me on my bedside table.

I looked out of the window, movie music still playing in my ears. The night was, as somebody once said, starless and bible black. There were no clouds, no moon, no nearby houses or cars; in fact, no light at all. I felt hot, and realised I'd been wearing the large headphones for quite a long time now, so slipped them and put them on the table in front of me.

The train carriage was now completely empty and therefore quite silent, save for the deep whine of the engine and the uneven rattle of the tracks beneath. With no landmarks visible outside, in fact, it was only the occasional lurching of the train and the noises it made which gave any indication that it was moving at all. For a moment, I imagined it suspended beneath the waves of a deep dark sea, occasionally nudged by the wake of some unseen whale or giant sea beast. It was such a clear image in my mind that I actually blinked, to make it go away again.

And then the train did stop. Once more I peered out the window, straining to see past my own reflection and that of the carriage's interior. Once more I could see nothing at all, but this time instead of leaving it there and finding something else to do – I had the boxed set of some critically-acclaimed television series on my laptop that I'd been meaning to watch for at least two years – for some reason I got up out of my seat and walked down the carriage.

A train stopping in the middle of nowhere is not an uncommon thing on this line: it usually happens during the day, but it's not unknown for it to occur at night. What was unusual about this sudden stop was that there had been no announcement. Normally the train stops, the intercom stutters into life and some sort of incoherent and uninformative explanation issues from the speakers – a tree on the line, signals failure, a broken down train in front, that sort of thing. Apologies are given, promises of future progress are made, and everyone goes back to what they were doing.

Except there was no "everyone." The carriage was completely empty. Again, this was not that unusual: I live at the end of the line, and most of the passengers – commuters who lived in nice houses in dormitory towns and those villages which only exist for the benefit of people who work elsewhere – would have got off long before the train crawled into my station. But we were still some distance from the end of the line, and there was to my knowledge at least one large town to go before we started to encounter the stream of tiny stations with car parks full of SUVs and brand new German cars that led to my own, less prosperous destination. There should still, in short, be some people in my carriage.

But there were none. Feeling both intrepid and foolish, I put my laptop and headphones away, picked up my bag and coat, and went into the next carriage. That, too, was deserted: and the next, and the one after that. I walked the entire length of the train to make sure, but there was no doubt: the train was deserted. Still no announcement had been made. I stood there a moment, wondering what to do next. I had, needless to say, no mobile signal, and the train company did not provide wifi for its customers.

There was nothing to do but seek out the driver. I walked to the head of the train. The door to the driver's compartment was locked. After a very small moment of hesitation, I banged on it, several times. No reply came. I banged again, and after a minute, rained down a fusillade of blows. I believe I was beginning to feel a bit nervous now.

My fists hurt – I am not by nature a physical man – and the banging in the total silence had made my ears ring, so I sat down in the nearest seat (first class, like anybody cared) and got my phone out, hoping that there might be some signal at this end of the train. Needless to say, there wasn't any.

Feeling that I was running out of options, I got up and examined the carriage doors, the ones that normally opened out onto the station platform. The absence of a ring of green lights around the OPEN button indicated that I was stuck inside the carriage. For a moment, I considered looking for one of those tiny hammers in a box that passengers are supposed to use to smash open the windows in case of emergency, but this seemed overly dramatic. Not only that, but the train might begin moving again at any minute.

I went back to my old seat again, and tried to sleep. I had no choice but to hope that the driver would appear from wherever he had got to and the train would be repaired, or towed, or whatever happens in these situations.

I woke again some time later, feeling cold. I soon found out why: without my hearing it, the train doors had opened, letting the frosty night air in. I got up and walked to the end of the carriage; peering into it, I could see that the doors there had not opened. The same applied to the carriage at the opposite end, and I wondered if the only doors open on the train were those closest to my seat. There was no longer any reason to procrastinate. I stood at the open door, looking out into the darkness, which without the barrier of glass between inside and outside seemed even blacker than before. It was a blackness that could only be described in terms of itself: that is, comparing it to the night sky, or to being in a windowless room, or coffin, did not come near to the reality. It was blackness, nothing more and nothing less.

I could feel the cold of it much more now I was near it. It seemed to hover in the air, not waiting for me to step out exactly, but somehow filled with a blank expectation.

I stepped out of the train.

I had wondered, as I did so, if there would be a drop between the carriage and the ground below, and I would fall. I had wondered, or rather hoped, that my feet would meet the solid concrete of a platform. None of these things happened. I stepped out and found myself standing on what I can only describe as solid nothing. I could not feel anything below my feet, and yet I was not floating in mid air, but standing. I took another step, and then another, still apparently walking on something both present and absent. When I had gone a few meters, I turned round. The train was still there, not suspended, not moving, just *there*.

I continued walking for some time, and then, as if remembering something, stopped and turned. There was a thin sliver of light, far away, like a golden thread on dark cloth.

I kept on walking. After a while, I saw it.

Closer and closer, until it filled the black. The black sea.

The whale's eye.