

DAG GADOL

It had been a long day and I was looking forward to getting back to my flat. 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. If Laura could have seen me, reading a book with my headphones on, I have no doubt she would have been amused, or at least would have something to say, because when we were married the fact that she was always wearing headphones was a standing joke between us. She wore headphones all the time: she wore them when she was running, she wore them when she was working out, she wore them to cook meals, and she wore them in bed, either to listen to music when reading on her tablet or to listen to the sound from a TV show. It's true that this was something she had always done, right from the start of our relationship, but she did it so much that from time to time I couldn't help but comment on this habit of hers.

"What's it like in there?" I once asked, when we were sitting in bed reading and she was engrossed in some book or show on her tablet.

At first Laura didn't react, because of course she was wearing headphones, the little in-ear kind with no wires that looked so odd until people got used to them. I repeated my words a little more loudly, perhaps too loudly, and this time she did take out one of her buds and look at me.

"I said what's it like in - "

"I'm reading some spreadsheets for work," Laura replied. "I don't want to be working when I'm in bed, but I don't have any other time."

"I was just making a joke," I said. She smiled weakly and put the bud back in.

I think it was around that time that I got the habit of reading more frequently. I had always been a keen reader but not what you might call an avid one, but as our relationship continued and the novelty of being with another human being wore off, I became more and more interested in reading. People say that the advent of the internet and the constant demands of social media have made it harder for traditional pastimes like book-reading to thrive, but I disagree. Now that books can be delivered to our house in a matter of hours or to our reading devices in a few seconds, it's never been easier for someone who loves books to read: and also to read a more wide-ranging selection.

This evening for example on my train journey I was reading a book by Jane Austen. It was called *Northanger Abbey* and, to be honest, it was not one of hers that I had previously been familiar with, perhaps because it had not been the subject of a TV or movie adaptation. But it was easy to understand and at times even funny, which is not always the case with old books, and I was getting on with it quite well. Also, and this is my point, it was the third or fourth Jane Austen novel that I had read. Before the invention of the world wide web, I would have had to painstakingly assemble a collection of Jane Austen novels one by one, or bought a collected edition, which would have been time-consuming and might have ended in disappointment.

But here I was, sitting on a train, with a copy of *Northanger Abbey* in front of me, which had cost me next to nothing, and I was enjoying it – so much so that I was keen to hurry up and find out how it ended. 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.

This was an area, interestingly, where Laura and I were of the same mind. Like me, she believed that music could be functional as well as entertaining: she had her running playlists and her housework playlists, and like me, she would read books to the accompaniment of soundtrack albums. But where we differed was this: I took great care in choosing suitable music, and would always select something that went well with the book I was reading. For example, to go with my reading of *Northanger Abbey* I had chosen the soundtrack to the movie *Barry Lyndon* that, while not exactly contemporaneous with the Austen novel, was at least from the same period and created a suitable atmosphere for reading.

Laura, however, was far less precise in her choices. She would simply put on the first soundtrack on her playlist, no matter how well- or ill-suited it was to the book she was reading. She thought nothing of playing, for example, the music from *The Godfather* while reading a novel by Doris Lessing, and I once found her engrossed in *Nicholas Nickleby* whilst listening to the soundtrack from *Terminator II*. For her, the music was just a way of keeping the world out by providing a background noise.

"Besides," she once said to me, perhaps on the occasion that I had found her listening to the *Terminator II* soundtrack while reading Charles Dickens, "The book should be immersive enough, shouldn't it? I mean, when you read Charles Dickens, do you dress up as Little Nell?"

I looked at her for a moment, then realized she was joking, and I laughed.

"I would for you," I said, and Laura gave me a look. Then she realized that now I was joking.

She gave me a different kind of look.

"Turn the light out."

The train pulled out in the dimness of early evening and I tried to lose myself in my book. I was not entirely successful in doing so, because there was something wrong with the music player, and it kept playing *Lilibulero* over and over again, adding a slightly menacing tone to the lightly ironic prose of the novel. In the end I turned the music off and just read. Truth be told, I found the reading experience much pleasanter like this, as the headphones entirely covered my ears and created a kind of noiseless zone around me. I became blissfully unaware of my fellow passengers and the constant train announcements, and completely immersed myself in my book.

Trains are strange places, if "place" is the right word for a thing that moves. Hundreds of people forced together in close proximity, sharing tables like they're in some sort of weird mobile restaurant where the food never arrives (there used to be a food trolley on this train but it was cancelled, possibly for health reasons). Nobody catches anyone else's eye in case they're sitting with a psychopath or, worse, somebody who wants to chat. Trains could be wonderful places to meet new friends, start discussions or just get on with your fellow humans, but everyone just hunkers down with their book or their tablet or their

music and hopes that the journey will end sooner rather than when it actually ends, which is nearly always later.

Hunkering down was certainly what I was doing. With my headphones on and my book in front of me, I had made sure that at least two of my senses were not just safely occupied in a pleasant activity but were also giving out a clear signal that I did not want to be disturbed – and, with my train ticket sticking out of my phone case, there was no reason for even the ticket collector to speak to me.

And so time passed, as time will.

“We’ve been married for a year,” Laura said.

“I know,” I replied, trying to be witty, “And that’s why we’re having this dinner.”

“I haven’t finished my sentence yet, please don’t interrupt,” Laura replied, “We’ve been married for a year and we still haven’t had a honeymoon.”

I frowned.

“We went to Dartmoor,” I said.

Laura fixed me with a flinty eye.

“Yes,” she said. “*Dartmoor.*”

“Dartmoor’s lovely,” I said.

“It’s not exactly a honeymoon destination, though, is it?”

“It is if you go there on your honeymoon.”

Laura put her champagne glass down.

“Andrew,” she said, “I want a proper honeymoon.”

“Walking on the beach at sunset?” I asked. “Hotel in the Mediterranean?”

Laura shook her head.

“Nothing as boring as that,” she replied.

When I looked up from my book 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.

I’m not a man who likes change, if I’m honest, and today had been a day with enough change in it for my liking. Arriving at work that morning, I sensed at once that something was off, and this was confirmed when James, my boss, came out of his office, pulled a chair over from the next desk, and sat down next to me. I took off my headphones and turned my chair to face him.

“Andrew,” he said.

“James,” I replied, trying to be witty.

“How long have you been with us?” he asked.

I knew then what he was going to say and I felt my spirits plummet. In fact, I felt *myself* plummet, like a sky diver who, moments after leaping from a plane, realizes that he has left his parachute at home. But I said nothing: after all, I might be wrong. I wasn’t wrong, though.

“Andrew,” said James. “I’m worried about you. I think, to be honest, we all are.”

"It's just the - " I began, but James spoke over me, quietly and firmly.
"I know you've had a tough time," he said. "But it's been a year."
"Eleven months," I corrected.
"Whatever," James said, "The point is, we all have to move on. And you've not moved on, and it shows in your work."
"Is it the whale thing?" I asked.
He looked pained.
"It's not just the whale thing," he said. "It's - all of it."
I began to sweat.
"You can't sack me," I said, more in hope than accuracy.
"I'm not going to," James replied, and there was something in my voice that suggested that he'd considered that option. "But I am going to insist that you take some time off. Recharge your batteries."
I laughed at that, and James looked annoyed. Then he said:
"I'm not getting rid of you, Andrew. Far from it. But if you could just - not come in tomorrow, that would be amazing. For you and for all of us."
"What am I supposed to do?" I asked.
James shrugged.
"See friends," he said. "Read some good books. Take a foreign holiday."
This last comment nearly made me laugh (in fact, it may actually have made me laugh, judging by the odd expression on James' face as he walked back to his office). I had taken one foreign holiday only in the last three years, and that had been my honeymoon.

"I don't know," I said to Laura.
"I suppose you'd like to go to Dartmoor again," she said. "Or how about Butlins?"
"I don't like holiday camps," I replied, then realized she was teasing me. "At least we'd get a chalet," I said.
"This is something I've always wanted to do," Laura said.
"Is it on your bucket list?"
She gave me a look.
"That's when you're going to die. This is our honeymoon. They're two very different things."
"Unless one of us dies from extreme pleasure," I said, stroking her arm. She moved my hand back from under the duvet.
"I really want you to agree to this," she said. "I didn't say anything about going to your mum and dad's."
"It was handy for Dartmoor," I said, "And we were only there for two nights."
She looked innocent.
"Really? I thought it was like a month. Please, Andrew," she said, touching my face.
"All right," I said, touching hers.
We smiled at one another. Then we dived under the duvet.

A month later we were at Heathrow Airport, checking in on a flight to Canada.
"How is Canada romantic and Dartmoor not?" I asked Laura.

“That all depends on what you call romantic,” said Laura. She was in a very good mood and determined not to be annoyed by my grumpiness.

We took our seats in the business class lounge, conspicuous in our all-weather clothes amongst the suits and ties.

“We look like fishermen,” I said.

“Good,” Laura replied. “Now stop moaning and get me some champagne.”

Laura was able to sleep anywhere whereas I was not. As she snored gently beside me I looked out of the tiny aeroplane window at the sky. The sun was coming or going down, I wasn’t entirely sure which, and I gazed in mild awe at the colours streaking the sky, as though God had dipped his hand in a paint box and smeared the air with fiery reds and blues and golds. The plane began its descent. We fell through clouds towards the ocean. Below us waves billowed into tiny mountains and ships like insects crawled across the water.

As we flew lower, I saw there was something else in the sea, growing larger and larger the more we descended: dotted in groups of three and four, they exploded into clouds of spray like miniature volcanoes.

I woke Laura.

“Look,” I said.

She was about to say something grumpy about being woken but when I insisted for the second time that she look out of the window, she did.

“Oh!” she said. “Aren’t they beautiful?”

The next day Laura and I found ourselves on the deck of a boat off the coast of Vancouver, which until three days ago I had not even known had a coast.

“There’s one!” shouted Laura, as a few hundred meters away something broke the surface of the ocean in a burst of waves and foam. The noise and sheer bulk of it made me nervous. More nervous, I should say: I am not a natural sailor.

“Don’t stand so close to the edge,” I said to her, “You’re making me fear for your safety.”

For the boat seemed to me to be bucking alarmingly and Laura wasn’t holding on to the guardrail.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Lifejacket, remember?”

“That won’t save you,” I said. “Those waves would knock you out and you’d be underwater in seconds.”

I realised how gloomy I sounded and was about to apologise to Laura when she shouted, “We’re missing it!” and ran towards the others.

I didn’t move.

“Come on!” Laura said. “This is why we’re here.”

She had an enticing mixture of pleading and excitement in her eyes.

I hesitated.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It doesn’t seem very safe to me.”

“Safe?” she said, “Andrew, this is what they do. They’ve been doing it for years. Do you,” she asked, turning to a crew member, “ever have any casualties?”

“Very few,” the crew woman replied.

“Exactly,” I said. “Very few means some.”

“Laura!” someone called. My wife had a serious gift for making new friends, one for which I envied her. “They’re going to dive!”

“Andrew, please come with me.”

“What if I slip?” I asked.

“If you slip, just get up again!” she shouted.

I had never seen Laura angry before. It was a powerful incentive to do as she asked and, after all, there was nothing unreasonable about her request. She was only asking me to do what we had come here to do: and yet, when it came to it, I couldn't. I didn't really know why, either: I wasn't that afraid of slipping or even falling overboard. If anything, the problem was that I had the opposite feeling.

I'd read that for some people it isn't a fear of being high up that triggers an attack of vertigo, but a desire to jump. People with vertigo cling to the wall not because they're scared of falling, but because they are terrified that they might suddenly leap into the void. And it was the same for me. The heaving waves didn't weren't frightening, but rather seemed to beckon to me. It was -

My thoughts were interrupted when I realised that Laura was staring at me, with a look that I'd never seen on her face before. It was a mixture of rage and resignation.

“Oh, just go back inside,” she said then, turning to the people further up the ship: “I'm coming!”

As I made my way cautiously across the wet floor, I could hear cheers from Laura's new friends greeting her arrival. I was about to turn around and wave in a self-deprecating manner at the group when a huge wave hit the side of the boat and I was forced to grab onto the nearest railing. As I did so I heard the others shout in excitement – Laura's voice loudest of all - and I turned to see something huge land like a bomb in the water. The spray not only drenched me but its force caused me to lose my footing and sent me sprawling on the wet deck.

I looked up to see if Laura had noticed, but she was huddled with her friends, laughing and looking exhilarated, so I made my way back to the cabin, where I put on dry clothes.

That night back at our hotel, Laura's new friends joined us for dinner – we were all staying in the same place, as part of the package deal - and the conversation, naturally enough, was all about the experiences of the day. As I had chosen not to participate in those experiences, it was quite understandable that I would not be able to join in with the enthusiastic conversation, and, equally understandable, I began to feel left out. So much so that, after the second or third sharing of phone videos and photos, I said to Laura that I was going to bed.

“I'll be up in a minute,” she replied, not looking up from her phone where she had zoomed in on a video of everyone shrieking as a huge tail smashed the water behind them.

An hour later, when she had still not returned, I turned the light out and fell asleep. I dreamed that I swam through black caves under the sea, and then dived further and further down through unspeakable depths until in the end there was nothing in the fathomless deep but darkness itself. And there there was something in the darkness with me. I swam closer to see what it was and became aware of something looking back at me.

The door opened softly, but not so softly that I didn't wake up. I pretended to be asleep as Laura got undressed and a few minutes later, I really was asleep.

The dark surrounding the carriage was so deep (with no lights outside to provide landmarks) that, some slight rocking aside, it was almost impossible to tell if the train was moving or not. That said, I was scarcely conscious of the journey at all and only looked up to see what was happened when, perhaps forty-five minutes since we had left the station, I finished the book that I had been reading. It had been an immersive experience, to say the least, 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 am, I suppose, a man of solitary pleasures.

"What makes you say that?" said Doctor Winterton.

"Well, because I am," I said. When I started seeing Doctor Winterton, I was surprised that she was always asking me questions. I had thought that the whole point of therapists was that they made you do all the talking: but with Doctor Winterton it was all why this and why that.

"And why do you think you are?" she asked. "That way, I mean?"

"I don't know," I said. "Aren't you supposed to tell me?"

Doctor Winterton sighed. She sighed a lot and I wondered if she did this with her other patients.

"I'm not here to tell you anything," she said.

"I thought you were," I replied.

"All right," she said. "I'm going to ask you one more question and" – she held her hand up to shush me – "if you can answer it truthfully, I'll see what I can tell you."

"Fire away," I said.

Doctor Winterton took off her glasses, rubbed them on her sleeves, and put them back on again.

"What do the words 'emotional baggage' mean to you?" she asked.

I blinked.

"Is that it?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Goodness," I said. "Well... I suppose I've always thought it was a funny expression. I mean, 'baggage' is stuff you carry around with you, I mean," I said, making a joke of it, "unless you're on holiday and you can find a trolley."

At the airport, Laura took her bags off the cart.

"I can carry those," I said.

"I'm not coming," she replied.

"So when I think of "baggage," I think of luggage," I said. "Something heavy that you carry around with you, I guess that's the idea."

Doctor Winterton made a note on her pad.

“What about ‘emotional?’ she asked.

“But this is our honeymoon.”

“It’s over, Andrew.”

“You mean the honeymoon, right? The honeymoon’s over.”

“Do you remember the couple we met on the tour? Ellis and Pip? They’ve said I can stay with them for a few days.”

“What?”

I thought for a moment.

“Emotional is sort of the opposite of baggage, isn’t it?” I said.

“Is it?” asked Doctor Winterton. “In what way?” She sounded slightly surprised.

“Yes,” I explained. “Because ‘baggage’ is solid and reliable, it’s just there, whereas ‘emotional’ is all over the shop.”

“All over the shop? I don’t know that expression, I’m afraid.”

“I mean, it’s up and down, it’s unreliable, it’s - ” I searched for the right word. “It’s chaotic,” I said.”

“This is very interesting,” Doctor Winterton said.

She looked at me over the top of her glasses, and said:

“What about the two words together?”

I followed Laura outside to the cab rank.

“Is this about the boat?” I asked.

Laura looked at me. Her face was hard to read, it was full of so many different emotions. She took her phone out.

“You’re checking your emails?” I asked.

“I’m texting you Ellis and Pip’s number,” she said. “Call me in a few days.”

“Well,” I said. “OK. ‘Emotional baggage.’ I suppose we all have it. I mean, otherwise, people like you would be out of a job.”

I laughed. Doctor Winterton didn’t.

“But it’s an interesting phrase, don’t you think?”

“You tell me.”

“What I mean is,” I said, “that the idea that we’re all carrying round these bags of emotion, these suitcases full of feelings, it just suggests to me that the problem isn’t just with us, with me, that is, it’s the other person.”

Doctor Winterton gave me an odd look.

“The other person?” she said.

“Yes,” I said, warming to my theme. “You see, if you’re carrying this emotional baggage around with you, which is probably not even your fault, then it’s your business, isn’t it? Not anyone else’s.”

“What do you think of the idea that we need to unpack that baggage?” asked Doctor Winterton.

“Sure,” I agreed. “But all in good time.”

“What does that mean?”

“It seems to me,” I said, “that some people don’t mind if you unpack your baggage over a long period of time. You get to know each other, you get to

establish a level of trust, and one day, maybe, you both sit down and unpack it together.”

“Maybe?”

“All right, definitely. Probably,” I replied hastily, wanting to get to my point, “But there are other kinds of people and they’re like customs officers.”

Doctor Winterton put down her notepad and looked at me over the top of her glasses.

“I don’t quite follow you.”

“Like a bag search,” I said. “There you are with your baggage, it’s been a long day, you’ve just arrived in Canada or wherever, and the customs officers want you to open your suitcases, your baggage, right there on the table, and go through item by item on the fucking *spot*.”

I stopped.

“I’m sorry I swore,” I said.

“Not at all,” said Doctor Winterton. “I think we’re finally getting somewhere.”

“I don’t,” I said, and I got up and left.

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 creature of the waves. It was such a clear image in my mind that I actually blinked to make it go away again.

Perhaps it was some desire to compensate for how badly the boat trip had gone. Maybe it had just awakened in me some latent interest in the creatures. Maybe even at the back of my mind I had a vague idea that if I showed some interest in the topic I’d have something to talk to Laura about when I finally did call her up. Whatever the reason was, in the weeks after she left, I became interested in whales. Or books about whales, anyway. I mean, it’s not as though you can visit a whale at the zoo (orcas don’t count, they’re just attack dolphins in my book) or hop on a ship and go find some. I tried watching documentaries about whales, but they just made me fall asleep, while the one whale movie I attempted was gooey and sentimental (and really about an orca). So books it was.

I learned a lot about the diet of whales, the movements of whales (it turns out the coast of Vancouver is one of the best places in the world to see cetaceans), the habits of whales, the different kinds of whales, the hunting and killing of whales, and pretty much everything there is to know about whales. After a while, I sensed that I was becoming something of a whale bore. People

would move away when they saw me coming, and once when I came back from lunch my computer had been plastered with cartoon whale stickers.

I decided to move away from my obsession, because that's what it was. I threw out all my whale books, apart from one. You probably know it. It's one of those books everyone says they've read and nobody ever has. You mostly see it mentioned in those questionnaires in the Saturday papers where someone is asked what book they wished they'd read, and they always name the same book. Well, I had read it, and I liked it. Not so much the story, or the characters, but the parts that were about – you're ahead of me – whales. The scenes describing whales were beautiful. I won't bore you with a precis of the whole book, but I'll just say there's one part where they come across a patch of ocean so full of life that the whales are swimming above and below one another, like three dimensional traffic, layer upon layer of whales. I think about that scene a lot. It makes me sweat, just the thought of that city of whales, but I can't help thinking about it. And what that same patch of ocean would be like now, in a world where the whaling ships aren't lone sailing craft crewed by men with wooden harpoons, but huge factories cruising the oceans to kill and process on a giant scale.

I imagined, not schools of whales crowding the seas, but one whale on its own, lying far below the sight of men and their devices, concealed in the blackest depths of the ocean. A solitary whale in the endless ocean dark, somehow not part of the great cetacean mass, making its own way through underground channels in dark solitude.

The train stopped, a sudden silent shunt that broke my reverie. 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: for some reason 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" as the carriage was completely empty.

I let out a sudden gasp. Not because the carriage was empty: that wasn't a particularly unusual occurrence. I lived 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. No, what had caused me to make an involuntary noise was the fact that my headphones were plugged into my tablet and I was still wearing them. The gasp was because when I walked off, the headphones were pulled out of the socket and the tablet had fallen off the table. I picked up the tablet and, after a moment's thought, all my other possessions, placed them in my small backpack which I then slung over my

shoulder. Even though the carriage was empty, this didn't mean that there weren't thieves aboard, working their way up and down the train looking for unattended baggage.

At the end of the carriage, I squinted through the glass of the connecting door and saw that the next carriage seemed to be empty too. I was about to open the door when for some reason a fancy took me and I dug into my pocket for my iPod. I decided that if I was going for a walk, some music might be pleasant; more, it might lift me out of the slightly peculiar mood I was in. There is something about a train carriage at night which, if I'm honest, is a bit spooky: and not just train carriages. Offices, schools, empty flats: anywhere which is busy in the day and silent at night has this atmosphere, which is if anything enhanced by bright lights.

I once mentioned this to Laura, who said:

"Being scared of daylight? Are you an owl?"

"I didn't say daylight," I replied. "I meant the thing you get with strip lights and fluorescent lighting. That weird thing where the light never seems to stop. It's just unblinking brightness."

"Call me old-fashioned," said Laura, "But I'm only scared of the dark. Shadows and blackness, that's all."

Now I was walking down a carriage with bright lights all along it, and there was nobody here, and I was very much on edge, so it seemed like a good idea to put on something cheerful. I selected Bad Manners' Greatest Hits – how had *that* got on my iPod – but a few second later I had to turn it off again as their deranged version of the Can-Can filled my ears. I stopped, set the iPod to shuffle, and Help Me Rhonda by the Beach Boys came on. It was so far away in mood and spirit from the gloomy stillness of the train that I almost laughed: even Laura would have found it difficult to read *Wuthering Heights* with this on in the background.

I stopped in the middle of the carriage. Why had I thought of *Wuthering Heights*? It wasn't a book I particularly associated with Laura: quite the opposite in fact, as she had told me on several occasions that she disliked the Brontes intensely, having studied them for exams at school.

"Do not," she once warned me, not even half-mockingly, "ever bring one of their books into this house."

"But they're classics!" I mock-complained.

"I can still remember what I wrote in my exams," Laura replied. "'Jane Eyre just made me depressed,' she said, 'They should have kicked Tenant Of Wildfell Hall out on the street. And *Wuthering Heights* should have been called *Wuthering Depths*.'"

"Did you really write that?" I asked.

"Dur," she replied.

And now I remembered. It wasn't in fact Laura who I'd seen with *Wuthering Heights*, it was me. When I had returned from Canada without Laura, I was in a limbo state of mind: that is, I didn't know what to do about our relationship (I found it hard at this point to call it "our marriage", because we had been married for such a short period of time). I hadn't told anyone what had happened between us, perhaps because I was in denial about it (see, Doctor Winterton? I can unpack my own baggage) and, although I was certain that I

wanted to be with Laura, I didn't know how to go about it. She had been so angry with me that I thought I might upset her further if I called.

Instead, she called me. I was reading at the time and took a moment to find a bookmark before I picked up.

"Andrew?" she said.

"Laura," I replied. "You sound far away."

"I'm on my mobile," she said, her voice fading in and out as though she were underwater. "And I'm still in Canada."

"You're still very quiet," I said.

"Ellis and Pip are having a bit of a barney in the next room," she explained.

"Oh," I said, trying to remember which one was Ellis and which was Pip, not that I could see that it mattered much either way. Then, because the thought had just occurred to me, I said:

"This must be costing you a fortune."

After a short pause, Laura said:

"Why haven't you called me, Andrew?"

"I don't know."

"Pardon?"

"I keep reaching for the phone and then - "

"And then what?"

"Losing my nerve."

"Andrew, it's me. Laura. Your - "

"I know."

"Then why haven't you called?"

"I will call, Laura."

"What?"

"I said I will call. We'll talk."

"But we're talking now."

"Laura, I just need time."

She rang off.

I looked down at the book I had in in my hand. It was *Wuthering Heights*.

The next carriage was also empty. I was beginning to wonder how long the train was when the music in my iPod changed from the Beach Boys to – what *was* this? A low keening sound, like a recording of a wolf howling that had been slowed down to a quarter of its normal speed. It was otherworldly, part reassuring and part terrifying. I was about to look at the track listing on the iPod when I remembered: it was from an album of whale song that I had bought at the high of my obsession. I'd got rid of all the DVDs and books but clearly had forgotten about the album.

If the Can-Can had been wildly unsuitable for my train walk, and Help Me Rhonda cheering, then the whale song had a completely different effect. Every corner of the carriage seemed to echo and howl with the sound, and it felt that the empty seats – I know this sounds silly – the seats were somehow occupied by unseen ghosts. But it was the act of looking at the windows that produced the strangest collusion of sound and vision. Somehow those blank, dark, unseeing slabs of glass, revealing nothing of the outside world and reflecting only the contents of the carriage, were given eeriness by the keening of the sounds in my headphones.

I stopped for a moment, catching sight of my own reflection in the glass, shaded in black and grey. I saw a man looking back at me, his eyes tired, his face drawn. The whale song yawned and stretched and only made the expression of seeing my own face seem stranger. I took the headphones off and carried on walking.

The train was, I discovered as I walked, unusually long and I remembered that an announcement had been made when I was getting on that because of an incident early the train company had put extra carriages on the commuter special, to allow for the fact that there would inevitably be more passengers that evening. And when I had got on the train, I now recalled, there were so many passengers that not only were people standing in the aisles (I had been lucky enough to get a seat) but also they had taken the unusual step of opening the first class section to all passengers. This never went down well with the people who had bought (or, more likely, whose company had bought) more expensive tickets so that they could sit in a slightly cleaner part of the train, but the alternative was leaving people on the platform.

I had looked up only once or twice as the train pulled out of the station, and on each occasion the carriage had been full to near bursting point, with the aisles crammed, each seat taken, and even the spaces between carriages filled with people leaning against the doors or trying to sit on their own suitcases. But now all of these people were gone. I was surprised, because most of the passengers at this time of day were commuters returning home to Tunbridge Wells, the largest town in the area, and as we had not yet arrived at Tunbridge Wells, but were still some distance away (I guessed) the train should still be at least fairly full.

I tried to recall if an announcement had been made – after all, I had had my headphones on – but nothing came to mind, and besides if the guard had announced that everybody had to get off the train, I was sure that if I hadn't heard the announcement, then another passenger would have tapped me on the arm and told me. If there is one thing people like doing, it's using whatever tiny bit of knowledge or power they have to make themselves feel good (I'm no exception to this, by the way: I love to wake up sleeping passengers because it gives me both a warm feeling and a sense that I am a good person).

But no announcement, I was fairly sure, had been made and nobody had told me it was time to get off. I looked back the way I had come, and then towards the front of the train. With my iPod safely turned off, I stood and listened for a moment. There were no sounds, no movement, nothing.

"Welcome to the Mary Celeste," I said to myself, and my voice sounded artificial in the dead air of the silent carriage.

"Bye then," I said to the empty flat. I felt silly saying it, but I was also gripped by the need to say something to mark the end of my time in the flat, even though Laura and I had spent a very short time together there: in fact, most of Laura's things had still been in boxes, which at least made it easier for her to move out. And now I had taken everything of mine to my new, smaller flat, and all that remained was to say goodbye to the old place even though, as I said, I hardly knew it.

The estate agent came back into the room after what I presumed was a quick check to make sure I hadn't stolen the bath or undermined any supporting walls.

"Lovely place, this," she said. "Can I ask why you're moving? New job?"

"Divorce," I explained, and she looked mildly guilty.

"Sorry," she replied.

There was a short pause. She seemed anxious about something. I wondered if she wanted to ask me whose fault the divorce was.

"I'm going to need the keys," she said. "The buyers want to move in right away."

"Sure," I said. I was about to hand them over but instead I frowned and said:

"I've left them at home. I'll mail them to you tomorrow."

Before she could say anything, I walked out of the door and down the steps to the street.

"They want to move in today!" I heard her call after me.

As soon as I was out of sight, I dropped the keys down a drain.

I began to walk 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 began to feel nervous. I banged again, and after a minute, rained down a fusillade of blows.

And then the door slowly opened.

The next day I went into the office. James was talking to Liam and Pam over by the coffee machine when I came in, but as soon as he saw me he started to walk over.

"I've been waiting for you," he said.

"Am I late?" I replied.

"No," said James. "It's just - "

He looked around, as if he were being spied on.

"Laura called," he said. "Several times."

"Oh," I said. "I'm sorry about that."

"No, it's fine," James replied. "I just - is everything all right?"

"Well," I said, "We're getting divorced, so I guess not."

James frowned, sympathy giving way to irritation.

"Look, Andrew," he said. "I like you. And I like Laura. So - I know things have gone wrong, but I'm concerned."

"I'll be fine," I said.

James let out a long sigh, as though the dead air of years was trapped inside him.

"I'm really sorry," it said. "It must be really hard for someone in your situation."

I nodded.

"It must," I said.

After the door had swung open I stood there for a moment, my fists aching from the battering I had given the door. I waited for whoever was inside

to speak, but when the silence continued, I stepped around the door and went inside the driver's compartment. It was empty.

I turned right around, as though expecting the driver to jump out at me, but there was still nobody there. I looked about the space, hoping to see a coat hanging up or a still-warm mug perched on a suitable surface, or anything that indicated some kind of human occupancy. But there was nothing: as far as could be seen, the train might as well have driven itself here.

I remembered the passenger announcements and the friendly tone of the guard's voice through the train's PA and I thought about walking all the way to the back of the train. And then I reasoned that if the driver wasn't on the train, and all of the passengers were also gone, then it was likely that the guard was also no longer here, 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. I stared at the black screen of my phone for a moment, then put it back in my pocket.

I walked back the way I came and tried to look out of the window. There was no indication from outside in the form of either light or movement that we were at a station and – I now noticed – the small ring of lights by the doors of the train were red, not green, confirming that even if I was at a station, there was no way I could get off without smashing my way out.

There seemed to be nothing else for it but to return to my seat.

It was lunchtime in the office and most of my co-workers had taken the opportunity to leave the building. I could see James in his glass-walled office eating a sandwich: he waved at me and made a face. Just then my landline rang. I stared at it for a moment, then picked the receiver up.

"Andrew," Laura's voice said.

"Hello, Laura," I replied.

"I really need to see you," she said. She sounded, to say the least, tense.

I thought for a moment. My heart seemed to have sped up and I could feel it beating hard against my ribs like something trying to get out of a –

"Andrew?" Laura said again and I realise I must have drifted somehow.

"Yes," I said. "Sorry." I collected my thoughts. Instead of being worried that she had called, I found that I was pleased, excited even.

"I'd love to meet," I said, "How about the Italian restaurant on -"

"I meant now," she said.

We met at the nearest coffee place to my office. It was crowded but Laura was already seated near the window on a tall stool by a narrow ledge. I went over to her, pulled up a stool with a metallic scrape and sit down.

"You look well," I said.

She was about to say something then stopped.

"It's good to see you, Andrew," she said. "Thank you for coming out as such short notice."

"I've got nothing else to," I answered. My reply was meant to be light and cheerful, but as it left my mouth, it sounded resentful, bitter even.

"Really?" she said, and it was clear to me that she too was trying to sound light and cheerful. "I would have thought you'd be out all the, dancing the night away."

“Actually, I’ve been reading a lot.”

“Nothing new there.”

“The Bible.”

She gave me a look. It was one of my favourite looks of hers, part mocking, part curious.

“Have you got religion?” she asked.

“Just the Book of Jonah,” I replied.

“Oh. That’s... specific.”

“Yes, well, you can see why I’m - ”

“Andrew,” said Laura suddenly. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

I stopped talking.

“I’ve met someone,” she said.

I was silent for a moment

“That’s great news,” I replied. I thought Laura would be pleased by my apparent approval but instead she looked, if anything disappointed.

“I mean it,” I said, in case Laura hadn’t understood me the first time. “I really hope you’ll both be happy.”

“Thank you,” Laura said after a while.

I tried to smile, and almost succeeded.

“I’d better be going now,” I said.

Laura took my arm as I stood up.

“I wanted to see you and tell you myself,” she said.

“I said I understand,” I said.

And now she smiled, as though something had been worrying her but now it was gone.

“I’ll call you,” she said.

“Yes,” I said, and then I thought of something funny to say.

“You’d better invite me to the wedding.”

“Goodbye, Andrew,” Laura said.

After staring at the doors for a while and entertaining a wild fantasy of somehow finding an axe and smashing the glass, I let common sense prevail, and went back to my old seat. I put my coat under my head for a makeshift pillow 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. It was after all not uncommon for trains on this line to break down, and for long periods of time to elapse before they got moving again. And how often had I seen the driver walking along the track beside an immobilised train, a look of resigned determination on his face? Once or twice, that was for sure. As for the absence of other passengers, well, it was unusual but it wasn’t beyond the bounds of possibility that everyone on the train had in fact got off at other stations. Thirdly, and finally, there was nothing else I could do. I may have been the only person on a train that I could not leave, but there were worse scenarios: at least the lights and the heating were on, and a motionless train was surely better than one that was speeding towards the edge of a cliff.

No, there was literally nothing to do but try and get some rest until everything was restored to normality again.

I could see why Laura was surprised when I told her that I had been reading the Bible. Neither of us were especially religious people, and we had both been in agreement when we got married that it would not be a church service (to the disappointment of Laura's mother) and while, like many people, I admire the beautiful prose of the King James' edition, I am not one of those people who finds that they can read the Bible for entertainment: it seems wrong, to me, to reduce something this powerful, this unending, to just a series of stories.

It was during the course of my interest in whales that I became, perhaps inevitably, drawn to the most famous whale in literature, more famous even than Melville's white whale. And as I read, I realised that there was more to the story than I had first realised. Like most people, I was of course aware that there are many different versions of almost every single part of both the Old Testament and the New Testament: there are different Gospels and different Books and the whole thing has been very much what I believe is called *curated* over the millennia. And the story of Jonah and the whale is no exception. In one version, when Jonah is inside the whale, the whale and Jonah actually have a conversation. I like to imagine Jonah sitting inside the whale's belly, surrounded by fish and seaweed and shells, listening to water drip down on to him as the whale's voice booms out from all around him, as if from a kind of cetacean PA system.

The whale tells Jonah that it is frightened, and Jonah – presumably surprised that a creature so large and imposing and intimidating could be frightened of anything – asks why. The whale replies that it knows what is going to happen next: just as it had swallowed Jonah, so it too will soon be swallowed by a monster, the awful creature referred to in the Bible as Leviathan. Jonah, who at this point in the story has done nothing but take his blows – he ran away to sea to escape from God's command, where he was cast into the waters by a fearful ship's crew, and was then swallowed by the whale – for the first time takes charge of the situation and tells the whale what to do. And so the whale does not flee its destiny in the form of Leviathan, but instead swims right up to the monster, at which point Jonah – whom I imagine to be standing on top of the whale, perhaps even lashed to it with ropes of seaweed – addresses the horrible monster, threatening it with death. Leviathan, seeing that Jonah was protected by God, let the whale go.

I liked this story, because it shows how the whale, far from being Jonah's enemy, the prison in which he would end his life, actually became Jonah's ally and friend. I picture Jonah riding on the whale's back, determined to save his friend from a terrible monster. And I imagine him being gently returned to land by his new friend, and watching as the whale heads out to sea, perhaps blowing a massive waterspout in a farewell gesture. And I wonder what happened to that whale, rescued from a terrible fate, swimming through the dark ocean waves, sometimes thinking of the man who saved it.

Perhaps even man and whale were reunited later on. Whales after all live for a long time, just like the famously long-lived men of the Old Testament. And maybe one day, many years later, the whale might have been swimming across great deep waters and perhaps seen a man standing atop a stone tower, gazing out to sea.

A wave of a hand, the flick of a tail, as two old friends briefly greet one another.

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. For a moment, my brain still drowsy from sleep, I panicked. Forgetting that the train was already empty, I imagined the train hurtling along at speed, its doors open, and the passengers being thrown out into the night like passengers on a disintegrating jet airliner.

Then I came to my senses. The passengers were long gone, and as for the train, it was obviously not moving. True, it was impossible to say where we were – the night was entirely starless and there seemed to be no artificial light outside – but there was no need for me to panic. Whatever may have happened to the passengers and train crew, they had not been somehow sucked out screaming into the night. I almost laughed at this foolish idea, realizing as I did that my strange adventure was beginning to affect my mind. Clearly I needed to get off the train and find the rest of the world again.

But even with that thought in my mind, I found it impossible to act. Instead I imagined myself getting off, stepping down on the reassuring crunch of gravel and walking alongside the train until its headlights – I was pretty sure trains had headlights – revealed an unwinding track that led to the comforting yellow brightness of a not-too-distant signal box. I could see myself walking to the signal box, climbing the small stairs and knocking on the door. Once inside, I would see to my relief that the driver was also there, enjoying a cup of tea with the signalman, and explaining to both of us that after a short delay, a new engine would be attached to the carriages and we would be on our way home.

This vision came to me so vividly that for a moment I was convinced that it had actually happened, and I looked down at my hand to see that in it I was holding my mobile phone, with Laura's number displayed on it. I had actually been about to call her and tell her all about my late night goings-on. I was about to put the phone away when a thought came into my head: why not call her anyway? Just because she was with someone else didn't mean we couldn't be still friends.

And then I remembered. Laura had said she was going to Canada. She had continued her friendship with one of the people we had met on our honeymoon, whose own marriage had broken up: one thing had led to another, and Laura and this man had become romantically involved. His job meant that he had to remain in Vancouver, and Laura felt stuck in a rut where she was, so the obvious thing was for them both to be in Canada together.

I put my phone away and gazed into the night. For a second I thought I saw something not so much move as shiver, as might a current suddenly become visible with the bend of the waves. I looked again but there was nothing.

Time passed, and the only thing happened was that I was starting to get cold. There was no longer any reason to procrastinate. I took my coat down from the overhead rack and put it on, buttoning it against the cold. Then I put my headphones in the backpack with the rest of my stuff and put the backpack over my shoulders.

I was ready.

I stood at the open door looking out into the night, which without the barrier of glass between inside and outside seemed even darker than before. It was a blackness that could only be described in terms of itself: that is to say, comparing it to the night sky, or to being in a windowless room or a 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, or at the very least the firmness of pebbles and stones. I was wrong about all of these things.

I stepped out of the carriage and found myself standing on what I can only describe as solid nothing. I know that sounds strange but the fact was that I could not feel anything at all below my feet: and yet I was not floating in mid air but standing. I took one step forward, then another, and then another, still apparently walking on something both present and absent. I tried not to think about what was happening and continued to walk in as normal a fashion as I could. When I had gone a few meters, I turned round. The train was still there. It wasn't suspended in the air or floating in space or anything like that. It was just there.

I continued walking for some time, and then, as if remembering something, I stopped and turned. Far away I could see 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.