

Sue Laver / LISTEN TO THIS TRAIN

Waiting.

Hands cold. Red.

Fingertips numb.

Clasp them together, put them between my legs, sit on them. Anything to get warm. Cup them. Blow hot breath into the fists.

Sniffing, pure water.

Eyes starched open.

Close them.

Can't sleep.

Every time I open my eyes I catch someone looking away. Usually a woman, embarrassed to have been caught staring at a sleeping stranger. They nearly always look sorry for you; think you're a run-away. They don't talk to me because I glare at them. Purposefully, so they keep their distance. Most days I can't stand the polite chit-chat you're forced into. Best to be quite rude or hostile and people leave you alone. I only talk to them when I want to complain about how late the bus or train is. They just nod. Always agreeing. I make them uncomfortable.

This woman is big, has a fur coat, smells like a Woolworth's perfume department. She's one of those people who doesn't perform the same bodily functions as the rest of us. Smothers herself in fake odours.

She's offended by me. When I sit up she stands quickly clutching the collar of her coat, licks her ruby lips and skips a few inches away.

When I start rolling a cigarette she flinches. Feels implicated. She sniffs, pats her cheeks with a linen hanky and walks off, wobbling on inches of heel. I can still smell her.

I run my hands over my face, through my hair, rub my eyes. Feel so stiff and tired of this waiting around. Seems I have been waiting for weeks now. Waiting for buses

trains

telephone calls

food

money. Moving in a world of long queues,

people moving only inches at a time, buying tickets

collecting dole cheques

filling in forms

signing our names like it was
some code.

At the dole office they don't like you to touch their pen. I never have one.

There is a huge Victorian clock in this station. Set high up above the information desk. It has a massive octagonal face, big black Roman numerals. I can see the hands move if I stare long enough. I cannot understand why I don't hear it tick. It is ten after eight and I have slept on this bench since six-thirty. I lied to my mother. Told her I had an early train to catch. Couldn't stand to see her face in the morning: bitter, that I was leaving after only two days. Wouldn't be able to eat the breakfast she'd cook, choke on the guilt she so effectively makes me feel with her quietness, her closed face. I'd make promises I couldn't keep and she'd know. And I'd know. And it would make things harder next time. It was easier to slip out in the early morning darkness. But she'd be awake, lying still, listening to me leave.

I put a ring on my sister's pillow. I couldn't leave anything for my mother except a clean table. No trace of me. I felt she was watching me when I left her house. I pictured her staring as I walked into the blue of this morning. I did not look back. I will phone her in a day. We will be polite.

The café is open. Can't help cringing at the thought of a British Rail breakfast. But I think I am hungry enough.

Brit Rail cafés: stained plastic, cracked linoleum, gummed up salt pots, stink of stale meat fat. Nothing feels clean or fresh. The trick

with the food is to hold your breath as you're lifting the fork to your mouth. That way you can just manage to swallow without throwing up.

The old man ahead of me had two fried eggs. They weren't fully cooked, shimmied around on his plate in a pool of days old grease. I took a bowl of faded cornflakes. The old man was pushing his tray with one hand and holding *The Sun* in the other, slobbering over the page 3 *Sun Girl*. He pushed his tray right off the end of the counter. I couldn't see where the eggs went. No one seemed to care. He went back to the end of the queue.

My cornflakes were soft. The tea was luke-warm and thick, coated my mouth and throat. I didn't eat the toast.

I rolled a couple of cigarettes and smoked them both. Wondered why I didn't just smoke in the morning. I enjoyed it more.

The place was packed, noisy, steamy. So many people you couldn't help but feel anonymous. There was a table of sailors not far away. Young men, loud and coarse. They think they're impressively masculine, neatly ironed. They look like puppets. I'd like to see them crying, too sure they will live forever.

There are three women at a table next to them. I think of how early they must have to get up to fix their faces that way. It seems strange to someone who did not bother to brush her hair this morning. And now the sailors are talking to them, waving their arms around and laughing even louder while the women laugh for them, look coy and demure. Makes me sick. If I squint my eyes they all look like clowns. I'd like to strip them bare of their uniforms. All of them.

There are other women, with children or alone. And I try to imagine myself as each of them. A mother, a businesswoman, one of the waitresses, a nun. I cannot, without feeling amused or sad or numb. I cannot see myself other than in this café, at this time, in my body, my clothes, with my memories and plans. I do not feel that I am in any way connected with these people.

But I like these cafés. The noise and smell and dirt. It feels protective.

I heard my train announced. Main stops, Birmingham, Gloucester, Bristol, Yeovil. And then I change for Crewkerne. I'll call Ros when I get there and see if I can stay. If she's not there I'll sleep in town. Call her again in the morning. Maybe just leave right away.

Leaves in ten minutes. I just have time to go to the washroom. I gather my things together and check to make sure I have a penny. I'd like to say goodbye to someone.

Public toilets — underground. Out of the way. As you walk down the steps the stench of piss and disinfectant envelopes you. It's clammy inside. Always water running down the walls, the concrete floor is wet. I put my penny in the slot and push the door open. There is green mould growing on the pipes and back wall. I bolt the door shut. I never put my bags on the floor. I hang them up. I take out a roll of Royale. I make it a habit to carry one. Public toilet-paper feels like wiping your ass with a potato-chip bag.

When I'm washing my hands I remember I do not have my moonstone ring. Max will be wearing it now. She'll be at school. Mother will notice it and be hurt. My tokens of affection for others always highlight the distance between her and me. She thinks I do it on purpose.

It's an old train. Has separate compartments and I'm glad about that. The one I choose is empty. I watch the guardsmen out of the windows.

Every one of them is West Indian. They have big brown faces, round burning eyes, large hands. They smile and slap each other. One of them keeps doing a kind of shoe shuffle, while rolling his eyes and clapping. His head jiggles around unbelievably as he struts and poses. The others are doubled up, wiping their eyes, holding their bellies. One is even lying down, beating the floor and shaking his head. The dancer stops, and bows low, and smiles. He has the whitest teeth ever. They notice me watching and wave, but I shrink away from the window: shy. Mad with myself I look out again, but they are gone. What an idiot I am. I hear the shriek of the whistle and there suddenly is the dancer: standing, smiling, waving his green flag. He makes an O with his other hand and the train begins to move. His head was still jiggling.

A man opened the door to my compartment and started to come in.

Don't please don't come in here.

The man looked startled, then angry.

May I ask why. I have every . . .

Because I'd like to be alone. Please. Just go away.

And then I was crying and he left quickly. My breathing was fast and I couldn't believe that I had said that. I pulled down the window blind, closed the door, forced myself to breathe more slowly.

I listen to this train move me. Moving. Always moving: on, away, to.
If I stop in one place too long now I feel trapped, look out of windows
and feel scared that the scenery isn't passing. Cannot relax. Need
that sensation of into and away
clouds now ahead, now in front, now behind
gone.

I've become so used to this sitting, staring, talking to myself that I
resent conversation with others. I resent their company, their presence,
their interest in me. I want to shout at them all the reasons why I'm
on this train and all the others, why I live for these tracks and wheels,
why I shout when people want to keep me a little while longer
one more day
just for the night.
I'm so scared to stop
to slow down.

Then I'd ask them if they feel better for knowing. Feel better to cut
me open and see it all.

I am trying to heal but there is no place to.

When I woke up I panicked because the train was stopped, but it was
only Bristol. Another hour's travelling. Another hour of watching
fields and birds and sky and
wires and towns
and villages and
people

and signs and cars.

One day I want to do the length of Britain without stopping off anywhere. Try and plan it so I can get from one point to another without having to spend a whole day in any one place.

At Yeovil I get off and change for Crewkerne. For a few minutes I stand and listen to the porters shouting. I like their accents. This must have been a mail run. There are young boys, stiff and awkward in their black suits, dragging the mail sacks off the train and onto the platform. They yell. As if they are huge distances away from one another. Instructions. And insults. An older man, cap pushed to the back of his head, watches them. Watches me. Drawing slowly on a pipe filled with sweet smelling tobacco. I ask him if this is the right platform for the Crewkerne train.

Aye Miss. 'Ere in ten minutes.

Drawled out slowly. Looks at me straight. And smiles. He pointed to the track on the other side. I knew where the train came in. I only wanted to hear his voice. I only wanted to hear how he'd say it.

Ros lived very near the Crewkerne station. I could walk from there. I phoned and she answered almost immediately.

Hello Ros. It's Janice.

Jan. How are you. Where are you.

Well I'm here actually. In Crewkerne I mean. I'm at the station. I want to visit and stay for a few days Ros. Can you do that for me.

She was silent for a few seconds and I felt hurt.

It's o.k. if it's not convenient. I'm just passing through really. Look I'll phone you later. I'll get a room in town. Don't worry about it. Forget I asked.

Janice — will you slow down. It's just a surprise that's all. Of course you can stay. Can you hold the line a second. It's sort of a bad time to talk. Be right back.

Why was she being stiff with me. My closest friend, once.

O.K. Now, do you want me to pick you up.

No thanks. I'd like to take a walk in town first. So I'll get a cab if I don't feel like walking.

Are you sure.

Yes really. Can I get you anything on the way.

No that's O.K. I just got in from shopping. Janice. I think you should know that Ian's here. He's looking for you.

I didn't answer. He must have been speaking to mother. I put the phone down and picked up my bags. My hands were cold again. I needed to eat. I put my stuff in a locker and went outside to flag a cab down.

Where to Miss.

I got out in the market square. Crewkerne is hardly much more than that. Streets rolling down or rising up to meet in the square. Low tilting cottages and terraces of tall stone houses. Ros' house was on the outer edges of the village. Three storeys of stone and leaded glass. A fortress, hidden by thick bushes and blackberry brambles. Steep, hard-to-climb steps and a huge wooden door in the shape of a lion's head. You had to put your hand in its mouth. It was the only place I felt I could live permanently. Pity it was not mine.

Only ten minutes walk away. Perhaps Ian was already racing to the station. Perhaps I passed him on the way in.

I went to the Coach and Horses for a beer. It's Badger Bitter in this part of the country: strong, sweet, still drawn from a barrel. They make good sandwiches here. Toasted cheese and ham. I am hungry and order two. The barmaid looks around me as if I'm hiding someone.

You expectin' company dear.

No.

Oh. They're both for you then.

Yes. They're both for me.

I could see she was disappointed. Wanting something from me. Something to spin and exaggerate to amuse the locals with when I leave.

There was only one other person in the room. A man alone. Reading the local newspaper. Pretending to. He wants to know why a woman comes alone to a pub and eats two toasted sandwiches and isn't waiting for someone else. Well he can ask.

And I stare at him over the rim of my pint glass. I dare him.

All three of us used to come here. Ian never liked it much. Said it was small and stuffy, old. It is.

But I don't like those bars for young people. They're like huge display cases: You walk to the bar. You're stared at.

Walk to the washroom. You're stared at.

Walk to the juke box. Stared at.

Like we're all cattle with nothing better to do than eat, drink and fuck. A field full of cows. Meat. Trophies. First Prize.

I hate those places. I like small rooms. To squeeze into their corners. For comfort.

All the time I am eating and drinking, the barmaid slyly watches me. I should leave her a note on the table: I MUTILATE BABIES. But I wouldn't have the satisfaction of seeing her face. Maybe she wouldn't be as shocked as I think she would.

So Ian might come here. It would not be a good place for that. He knows those things about me: where I would go, where I would be comfortable, who I want to see. He knows at least that about me. Thinks he knows more. Thinks he knows me inside out.

He announced he wanted to help me. As if I'm his great mission in life. He tried hard: his shadow shielding mine
his umbrella over my head
his cloak across my back
his arms carrying me
across whatever it was
at the time.

Cared for. Like something over-watered.

His hand lives on my shoulder.
It grips me hard sometimes.
Rides soft sometimes.
Never rests.

And if he came in now. He'd have it all worked out. What the trouble is. He'd expect to leave. Me attached to his arm.

I'll have to get a room in the village. Pick up my stuff tomorrow. And go. Head for Taunton.

I got up to leave. The barmaid said goodnight and I pretended not to hear.

It was raining, drizzling really, and getting dark. I turned eastward and began the climb up Toberley Lane to Ros' house.

Past the Antique Store
the Green Grocers
the Florist and
the Post Office.

Then only houses, with lighted windows, the occasional face looking at me. And a cat, black with yellow eyes, who followed me for a while, mewing loudly, running ahead and waiting to walk with me. It was hard to ignore him. It would have been nice to pick him up, to stroke him, make him purr. But I wouldn't want to put him down. Then what. What would I do with a stray cat. So he left me. Turned back and went home I suppose.

Past the park it had stopped raining, was only quiet. I sat on the street bench next to the phone box on the crest of the hill. Nine houses down. You couldn't see the house. Only the gate. Ros' old Volvo was parked outside. I sat and rolled ten cigarettes. Smoked two.

Now I am afraid to think of Ian. To picture him. To hear my voice saying. His face. Mine.

I started down the slope. My breathing was tight. I walked around the back of the house to her kitchen door. Ros opened the door before I knocked. You could see the street from her living room. She'd been watching for me. The light behind her was bright. Everything looked crisp and sharp, defined. Her hair was shorter, clipped around her ears and close to her neck. I didn't like it.

Hello Jan. I'm glad you came.

Hi. I don't like your hair.

She stared at me, then turned away into the kitchen. I waited to be invited in.

He's not here and you'd better shut the door.

Sorry. I didn't mean to be blunt.

You don't make much effort not to be.

I said I'm sorry. I'm just tired Ros.

Look Jan. You're welcome here any time. But so is Ian. I don't want to be in the middle of this. I care about you both.

That's O.K. I won't be staying.

You know I didn't mean that.

I wanted to lie down and sleep. It was warm in there and the light hurt my eyes. Won't take off my coat. Can't stay long.

Ros sat with me. Held both my hands and pressed them hard. She kept gripping and stroking, gripping and stroking, working something across my palms.

D'you want to lie down.

No. Thanks.

A car door slammed outside and I pulled my hands away. I stood up. Cool sweat. Room's too warm. Need air.

Ian came rushing in, out of breath, flushed. I watched his face when he saw me. What expression to use. To draw me in. Watched his features slide into place. And lock. I wanted to laugh.

Jan. You're here.

Apparently.

Ros went out then. And left us.

Can I hug you.

I'd rather you didn't.

He sat down at the kitchen table and lit a cigarette.

You're smoking again.

Apparently.

Touché Ian.

And I did laugh.

He looked at me a long time. I knew my laughing was perverse. I couldn't help it.

Ian I know this is hard for you and I'm a shit but just take it will you. Stop chasing me.

Jan all I'm asking is that you'll at least see me. You forget something. I lost too. I understand what you're feeling. What else can I say. I love you Jan. I can help you. We can help each other.

Couldn't stand to look at him then. I have to leave. Have to leave soon. Something clawing me inside. Grips my belly. Holds on and shakes me. I must leave. Count to ten. To twenty. Count to one hundred. Remember that chant. And breathe slow. Don't cry. Shout, but don't cry. Not this time.

And then a touch like fire on my shoulder.

Stepping back to look at him. His touch moves with me. His arm still outstretched. Feel the burn of his eyes. And I look into them. See the change there already. His mouth grey like a pencil mark. Skin stretched taut over bone. And pale. Even now I would still like to curl his thick black hair around my fingers. Not to please him. To please myself.

I didn't lose the child.

What. What do you mean. You mean you're still pregnant.

Don't be an ass Ian. Do I look it. You know what I mean.

What are you talking . . .

There was no miscarriage Ian. Do you understand now.

And I was right to be frightened of his face. Something foul moved across it. Unlocked that pose.

I waited for him to speak but he smoked. He didn't cry and I was glad of that. I won't comfort him. He will not want me near.

I'm not sorry.

When he didn't answer I picked up my bag and went outside.

It was too late to catch a train to Taunton but I could get one tomorrow.

I am sorry for Ian. Ros can look after him.

I felt sick and hot. I needed a bath.

I cut through the park. Listened to the trees moving. I thought of the lullabye that all mothers have sung to their children and I began to whisper it:

Rock-a-bye-baby
On the tree-top
When the wind blows the cradle will rock
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall
Down will come baby, cradle and all.

There were leaves on the ground. I liked the dry sound of them, the crunch of them under my feet.