

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Model/Train



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F or as long as I can remember, I have been a magnet for oddballs on trains.

Actually, that's unfair. I've met some remarkably interesting people and had some fascinating (and, equally, some downright weird) conversations as I've made my way up and down the British Isles. On one trip, I was even able to add enigmatic academics of dubious doctorate to my list of travelling companions...

It was shortly before Christmas 1968, and I was in my last year at Durham University. I was heading home to Ely, a long journey by rail and bus- time I was going to use to get some long overdue work done on my thesis. Back then, trains still had compartments and I had set 'mine' up for getting some serious reading in. At least, that was the plan...

Distraction one appeared around York. I was well into my stride with my reading and wasn't even aware that the door had opened. The inner territorial animal only made me pay attention when I saw a pile of books on the opposite seat move out of the corner of my eye. I must have looked up more suddenly than I realized, because the new arrival nearly leapt up in fright.

She was about my age and looked like those girls you saw in foreign New Wave films. She even seemed as if she *was* monochrome- her skin was pale, the kohl-rimmed eyes contrastingly dark. If a picture from a magazine had come to life, she'd be it. Her jumping made me jump. I smiled weakly at the girl, who regarded me icily and then proceeded to ignore me, staring into space. She was obviously one of *those* pretty girls, the ones who were all-too-used to scruffy, bookish types like me getting all silly and awkward around them. I returned to my notes and the girl faded to an occasional glimpse of alabaster white at the corner of my eye as I worked.

Distraction two occurred not long afterwards and was the more markedly pronounced. The compartment door flew open and the inrush of air from the open window opposite blew my papers about. In fact, the only ones not displaced were those held in situ when the new arrival sat on them. This was going to be one of those chatty interruptions, I could tell. Bang, I mused, went my chances of getting any work done.

A long, booted leg stretched out onto the seat opposite, knocking over a pile of books that was ironically positioned directly below a sign reminding people not to put their feet on the seats. My gaze followed the leg back from the boot tip, along the course of its owner to where a pair of wide blue eyes was regarding me from under what can only be described as a shock of

curly dark hair. He fixed me with the sort of grin that, despite my inclination to try and see the good in people, had me questioning its owner's sanity.

The man's attire could best be described as bohemian: a pair of buccaneer boots with a pair of violently checked trousers and a long tweed coat with a hat stuffed into the pocket nearest to me. Dressed like that, I wondered if he was something to do with the university: my friend Geoff's philosophy tutor wore bolero shirts and a monocle to lectures like Dr Zhivago. The most striking thing was the long multicoloured scarf that flowed, if that's the word, round the man's neck, down his chest to his legs and from there, rather inconveniently, onto my work.

"This all looks terribly productive," the newcomer intoned, "am I interrupting something?"

I went to reply, but he'd already grabbed a book and began to read aloud:

"I listened, motionless and still, and as I mounted up the hill, the music in my heart I bore, long after it was heard no more..."

With that, the book was shut violently and dropped to his lap:

"Not bad for a man with hay fever, was it?" the man continued, explaining "Wordsworth, not me. Told me to go out for a walk: his sister Dorothy was teaching me the euphonium- trying to, anyway- and describe what I saw so he didn't have to go outside. My notes about the daffodils *really* stood him in good stead..."

I couldn't believe my ears:

"Are you saying you met *Wordsworth*?" I asked incredulously. I'd had some crazy conversations on my travels, but this was outright bonkers!

"I can see from your face that you don't believe me, so I'll spare you the highlights of my day so far- you may not be ready for the more amorphous of my recent acquaintances..."

"Amorphous?" I repeated.

"Anyway," he went on, ignoring my incredulity, "I'm only with you as far as Peterborough- probably. I think that's where I left them..."

"Them?"

"My friends. It's been quite the last couple of days..."

Not an academic then, I reasoned. He's a hippy and he's been to some sort of happening, got loaded and woken up miles from home and now I'm stuck with him. The 'flower power' revolution hadn't really penetrated the halls of Durham University- the North East of England was too cold for all the cavorting, more's the pity.

"I'm the Doctor," the man said suddenly, seemingly noticing me for the first time, "and you are?"

"Stuart," I replied, "Stuart Milner. Anyway, are you honestly trying to tell me you've met William Wordsworth?"

"Oh, you know," he said, airily, "popped in, wandered lonely as a cloud, left..." he said dismissively with a short puff of feckless laughter, "not the most exhilarating weekend- now, John Wilmot *really* knew how to keep his guests entertained..."

Despite myself, I slammed my notepad onto my lap with irritation.

"I'm really sorry," I began, "but I'm trying to do some work, and..."

It was no use.

"Where's our chiaroscuro carriage-mate gone, hmm?" this Doctor mused, ignoring me again.

He was right. At some point during this ridiculous exchange, the girl had left the carriage. Part of me wished I'd gone with her.

“Probably gone to a quieter compartment” I said pointedly

“I would be very surprised if that was all there was to it,” the Doctor said, suddenly serious.

That’s when it happened: distraction three. The train jolted violently to a halt as everything outside went black.

“What’s this?” I asked

“All there is to it...” the Doctor replied ominously.

I crossed the compartment and went to the window. It was cold but there was no breeze.

“We’ve probably just broken down in a tunnel” I said, reasonably, “there’s no need to be melodramatic...”

“Watch,” the Doctor said, pushing past me and making to open the train door. I put myself in his way, but he just continued past me as if I weren’t there, which, if anything, riled me more than the disturbance and all the nonsense about Wordsworth.

“For one thing,” he began, towering over me, “I’m fairly sure Section 219 of the Transport Act 2000 doesn’t cover this journey on the grounds of it being at least thirty years too early. For another...”

He flung the door open and stepped out into the darkness.

“I’d bet my hat it doesn’t have much to say about this...”

I gawped in amazement. I expected the Doctor to have dropped to ground level. I expected the sound of gravel as he hit the floor. Neither thing happened.

The Doctor was floating in midair.

“See?” he flashed me that lunatic grin again, pulled the hat from his coat pocket and let it go. It, too, hung in the void. Having paused for effect, the Doctor pushed off against whatever unseen force that was holding him there, returning briefly for the hat before propelling himself back to the carriage door.

“I don’t think this is even covered under the section on ‘unauthorized access and loitering’”

“HOI!” an angry voice and the sound of heavy footwear interrupted the moment, a surprising shot of normality in the madness of what had just happened. A guard in British Rail uniform appeared.

“Get back inside this instant!” his voice was irritatingly nasal, “What if another train had come along?”

“Then I’d congratulate you on having established pandimensional locomotion some five hundred years early,” the Doctor said conspiratorially to the guard, who was equally the Doctor’s height but was, in contrast, as baleful as my fellow passenger was exuberant.

“Who are you?” the Doctor asked, suddenly businesslike

“My name’s Longmate” the guard began

“That reminds me,” he continued, leaning in almost conspiratorially to address the unimpressed guard, “I have a friend with an exceptionally long name- I shortened it to Fred but she prefers...”

He stopped dead mid-sentence again, irritatingly.

“Have you seen a girl?”

“Several,” came the guard’s sarcastic reply, “this being a busy train and all...”

“Not like this one you haven’t,” the Doctor replied, “she’s about five-four, five-five, almost totally grayscale and she’s in the sort of danger that will be the end of all of us if we don’t find her very soon. Now, who’s coming?”

Unquestioningly, and with a growing sense of curiosity, I followed the Doctor into the passageway, the hapless Longmate clomping along behind us in his regulation-issue shoes.

One of the upsides of the perennially unreliable British rail system is that people are either unaffected by or, more likely, half-expecting delays and unplanned stops in their journeys. As always, there was a split between those who occupied themselves in reading (or, in the case of one couple we passed on our way up the train, each other) during the hiatus, and those who stopped Longmate on his way past to enquire when the journey would be underway again.

However people had chosen to occupy themselves, they weren't expecting the Doctor. Compartment doors were flung open, baggage was overturned, and anyone unlucky enough to have crawled under a coat against the cold for a nap was unceremoniously unearthed and awoken in the course of the Doctor's investigations. One chap, a short, rather dapper-looking man with a pointed beard was accused of being 'The Master' and quizzed at close quarters about 'temporal transference fields'. It turned out he was a sales rep returning from a conference in Edinburgh, his name was Pritchard and he didn't much like being shaken. The train was soon abuzz with people besieging the staff not about the anticipated resumption of the service but about dealing with the wandering madman who had interrupted what was otherwise turning out to be a run-of-the-mill delay on the line. It could be said that by the time the Doctor had reached the buffet car, he had built up such a head of steam (no pun intended) that the entire train was in on the hunt for the missing girl.

"If I may have your attention," the Doctor began unnecessarily from his vantage point on a table in the dining car to a crowd of people glowering expectantly at him for some clue about the cause of the recent commotion:

"I am looking for this girl," he continued, holding up a page from a newspaper that he'd acquired on his rampage. He held aloft a full-page advert for some perfume or other and waved it round so that everyone could see it.

"That's an advert!" came a voice from the back, "she's a model!"

The crowd was voluble in its dissent. They'd been dragged all the way here by some nutter on some wild goose chase for a model! People were incensed, apart from one man who had rather missed the point:

"There are models on the train? Where?"

While some of the crowd tutted at the man, Longmate saw his moment. The pendulum of public opinion was swinging back his way. Pushing to the front, he strode forward and grabbed for the Doctor's leg:

"Down you come, chummy!"

As much as I found the Doctor trying, and as much as I didn't want to be the next person that sat down to eat at the table he'd been standing on, I didn't want to see him hurt by being pulled from it, either. I went forward to reason with Longmate, prepared to grab his arm if need be. I'd once banged my head after losing my footing on a set of library steps and wouldn't wish that on anyone.

And what happened next, I *really* wouldn't wish on anyone. The guard's lunge for the Doctor's ankle was stopped suddenly and violently by a blast of light that held him in mid-air for a fraction of a second before he hit the floor. As one, the crowd turned to see the cause of the blast and equally, as one, probably wished they hadn't.

To be honest, for my first (or was it second?) experience of alien life, I'd hoped for something a bit less, well, Heath Robinson. There were six of them and they looked like they'd been constructed out of a giant brass Meccano set, for want of a better description. Their spindly metal bodies were covered in rivets and swathed in tubes of rubber and loose electronic cabling. Their huge trapezoid feet were completely out of scale with the stickman-like figures and reminded me in a way of when our family Labrador, King, was a puppy and his feet were too big for the rest of his body. The giant, articulated clamp hands were equally disproportionate, making them look like they were wearing boxing gloves. Their heads were smooth, round and made of grimy glass, a bit like someone had stuck ski goggles on a streetlamp that had been left to rack and ruin. The stocky snub-nosed cannons mounted on the wrists of the robots' arms curtailed any humour that might have been derived from their appearance.

"I wondered when you'd turn up," the Doctor said gravely, jumping down from the table and fixing the new arrivals with a grim stare, "if you've killed him..."

"He will recover" the clipped reply came from the robot at the head of the group, "Orders were as follows: seek and retrieve the prototype with minimal collateral damage. Equitable action only in extreme circumstances..."

"Your definition of 'condign' and mine would appear to differ, old thing," the Doctor said, leaning in to stare into the empty glass eyes of the nearest of the new arrivals, "but, as I've always said, the day we rely on machines to be the arbiter of a well-turned phrase..."

A metal hand shot up unannounced and grabbed the Doctor by the throat:

"Order sub-clauses contain stipulation," the voice rapped, "local resistance shall be subdued as deemed necessary. Subdue."

To this day, I have no idea what came over me. Against all logic, I rushed forward and gave the creature holding the Doctor a push. The one holding him lowered its arm but maintained its grip, forcing the Doctor to the floor, while a couple behind levelled their wrist-guns toward me. As much as to hear myself over the pounding of the rush of blood to my head and the sound of my reason asking me what on earth I thought I was doing as with outrage, I shouted:

"Let him go!" I heard myself begin, "Can't you see he's more or less done your job for you? He was looking for the- prototype- before you'd even turned up! Harm him and you don't have a cat in hell's chance of finding her. It," I added, floundering: "Whatever."

Not for the first time when speaking in public, I ran out of steam under the glare of attention. The silence that followed felt like it went on forever. Eventually the guns were lowered. The first creature let go of the Doctor, who slumped gasping to the floor, and stood bolt upright. Some lights on a junction box-type device on its chest flashed and there was a brief electronic trilling before the creature looked down at where I was tending to the Doctor and Longmate.

"Variation of approach," it said, to me as much as its comrades, "allow local search to continue. You will continue" it was now addressing us though the tone did not change, "We will not intercede until the end of the allotted time. Confidentiality clause of contract stipulates all non-essential involvement will be forcibly ceased at the end of this period."

"You mean we'll be killed," the Doctor chimed in sourly from the floor, propped up on one elbow.

"Confidentiality clause of contract stipulates confidentiality. No discussion with third parties. Discussion ends."

The creatures marched from the dining car and I swear actually faded into the darkness.

“Wait a moment!” the Doctor boomed after them, “How long’s the allotted period?”

An answer came there none, as the poem goes...

“They’re wasted zapping trains into conterminous interstitial spaces,” the Doctor said, mostly to himself, as I helped him up, “with that degree of circular logic, they should be writing mobile phone contracts...”

“What’s a...” I began, but he was already out in the corridor. Not that I reckon I’d have understood the answer if I’d got one...

“Phenomenauts”

“What-nauts?”

“Phenomenauts,” the Doctor said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, “Them. Phenomenauts”

Speaking of answers I wouldn’t understand...

The Doctor had recovered from his recent experiences and was holding court back in our compartment, which was now significantly more occupied than when we left it. The Doctor, Longmate and I, as the *de facto* leaders of the resistance, were besieged by our fellow travelers, crammed in with us in hope of some answers. Answers better than the one we just got, hopefully.

“So, what are these...”

“Phenomenauts,” the Doctor said again

“Them,” I persisted, “what are they?”

“30th August 5742,” the Doctor replied, obliquely

“You’ve lost me”

“Oh, come on!” the Doctor became irritable, “I thought you were at university!”

“But I’m reading English Lit,” I began, “We don’t cover...”

“That’s the trouble with modern education,” the Doctor cut in, sharply, “Either the exams are too hard, or the syllabus is too broad, or it hasn’t happened yet... all the usual excuses...”

He sighed, plonked the hat from his pocket haphazardly onto his head and sat sulkily with his feet on a pile of my books. Without warning, he snapped out of his brief malaise, all energy again.

“30th August 5742: the New Oswestry massacre. This human race’s proud history of finding new and innovative ways of blowing one another to perdition hit a prodigious new low with the unveiling of the Heisenberg Stratagem.”

“I just know I’m going to regret asking,” I replied, drawing strength from the number of other rolling eyes in the audience, “but what was the Heisenberg Stratagem?”

“By the 58th century, mankind had made considerable advances in the field of Consequential Dynamics- the ability to travel along gaps in the law of averages. The geopolitical situation at the time was also fragile- extremely so, in fact. Détente was achieved by the rumoured development of an Uncertainty Paradox Attack Squad: if things got really bad and if something unexpected, not to mention untoward, happened, it would trigger the Paradox Attack Squad and bring the robots in their droves...”

“Where do the Phenomenauts come in?” I asked

“Phenomenaut’ is just a particularly trite bit of marketing,” the Doctor replied simply, “They *are* the Uncertainty Paradox Attack Squad”

“So what happened?”

“Well, this is where things went somewhat awry,” the Doctor continued, “Obviously, nobody knew what the trigger would be- it was completely beyond anticipation. Once war became inevitable, the race was on to prepare for when the proverbial balloon finally went up. Consequential Dynamics experts were suddenly much in demand and paradox weaponry was the order of the day. An arms fair was arranged in New Oswestry for the 30th August 5742. As the serried ranks of the world’s warmongers converged on New Old South Wales, something happened that activated the shock troops...”

“And?” Longmate asked

“And...” the Doctor tailed off, staring into space. Slowly he ran a hand through his hair, pushing the hat gradually backwards and off his head. The wild grin crept slowly back onto his face.

“...I’ve just remembered they have a fatal flaw,” he got up, long legs swinging round and narrowly missing Longmate, who had sat opposite, “Which means we’re in with a chance. Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“We still need to find our monochrome model,” came the sonorous reply as the Doctor pushed his way through the crowd in the passage, “If we don’t, they will, and if they’re as good as their word, they’ll live up to that contract of theirs by wiping us out the moment we’re surplus to requirements.”

Soon, a crocodile of people was again traipsing the length of the train behind the Doctor, who continued to stride at its head like some sort of maniacal tour guide. Occasionally he’d stop us by theatrically raising a hand while he investigated some clue or other best known to himself. Again, doors were flung open. Luggage was once more overturned. The sales rep, Pritchard, who had taken himself off to the smoking compartment to get over his recent experiences, nearly leapt out of his skin on seeing the Doctor again. However, there is only so far one can go on a train and soon we had reached the engine itself.

“Hello!” the Doctor stuck his head into the driver’s cabin and beamed unnervingly at the surprised driver and his mate.

“I don’t suppose you’ve seen a life-size moving approximation of a picture of a perfume model milling about, have you?”

If synchronized jaw dropping were ever an Olympic sport, these two would be representing Great Britain.

“Striking-looking girl, about ‘so’ tall,” a hand was held out at the relevant distance from the floor, “not a great deal of colour in her cheeks...”

“Come on, Doctor,” Longmate took him gently by the arm, “there’s only so many places she can be...”

“...moves trains into adjacent dimensional spaces...”

In the vestibule outside the driver’s cabin, the Doctor turned and violently slammed the flat of a hand into his forehead.

“Of course!”

These sudden unpredictable bursts of energy unsettled me and, not for the first time, I jumped. The Doctor had clearly seen the effect this particular character trait had on me. Placing a consoling arm around my shoulders, he whispered:

“Do you think these people enjoy walking?”

“I don’t know,” I answered, nonplussed.

“They’re not the best-humoured travelling companions, are they?”

“Can you blame them?”

“Do you think they’ll be put out by the fact we now need to go all the way back again?”

“Back?”

“Back,” the Doctor replied, still in a stage whisper, “I’ve overlooked something glaringly obvious...”

He released me and started back down the train at speed.

“What now?” Longmate asked

“We’re going back again,” I said, guiltily starting to relish being slightly ahead of everyone else in the unfolding mystery, “apparently the Doctor’s missed something glaringly obvious...”

I was soon hot on the Doctor’s heels, nearly jogging to keep up. This was the most exercise I’d had in ages. I could hear people falling in behind me. As someone who had more than once been the only person at the counter of my local shop and *still* not got anyone’s attention to get served, this was a bit of a red-letter day. Despite myself, I felt a rush of excitement and I began to stride, Doctor-like, falling in behind the genuine article.

When we arrived again at our starting point, the Doctor immediately gestured for silence and repeatedly mouthed ‘hush’ until he got it. Once silence was achieved and the last ‘ssh!’ had sounded in the corridor, the Doctor stood in the middle of our compartment, head tilted slightly upward, as if he was actually talking to the carriage:

“You never went anywhere, did you?” he said, seemingly to thin air, “The transference was only possible if you provided the energy yourself, wasn’t it?”

There was no reply. The Doctor gave one of his little snorts of laughter.

“I can’t very well talk to you when you’re being like this, or whatever it is you’re being like. Why don’t you show yourself, so we can have a bit of a chat?”

Still nothing. The Doctor’s face became serious.

“Let me put it another way: I know where you are and if you don’t pop up and flash us a simulated smile, I shall hand you over to the Phenomenauts in exchange for the safe release of the train and its passengers...”

That seemed to do the trick, because within seconds, a humanoid shape was forming out of the pile of my notes on the floor. The words and the lines stretched and warped and blurred, twisting upwards and creating new shapes: facial features, bodily contours, outlines of clothes. Like the melting of an iceberg in reverse, the creature took shape and stepped from my papers. Soon the approximation of the model stood before the Doctor, who gazed back insolently at the newcomer:

“Very impressive,” he began wryly, “But if you’d landed on a Sunday, you’d have had the colour supplements to choose from...”

“Do you represent the Phenomenauts?” the model-creature asked, in a voice that seemed to come from the air around it rather than through it.

“Let’s say we have an understanding...”

“Then you are a threat to me,” the voice whirled round the room again, “and you must die”

The creature blasted the Doctor with a stream of energy that emitted from its eyes. He crumpled to the floor and was almost blown under the seat by its force. Soon, the barrage ceased, and the Doctor lay still. The alien turned its attention to me, eyes glowing:

“You,” it hissed, “do you speak for these people?”

“I...” my recent rush of confidence had picked a fine time to desert me again, but the threat of annihilation by glowing-eyed aliens tends to do that.

“Answer me!” the glow in its eyes became fiercer.

“Young Stuart...” a voice began from the floor and an arm waving a white handkerchief arose in its wake, “is only qualified to talk about dead poets with histamine intolerances,”

The Doctor made his way cautiously to his feet, still waving the hanky.

“And anyway, he’s shortly changing his subject of study to the life of Dorothy Wordsworth, who was inestimably more interesting,” suggested the Doctor.

“I am?”

“You are,” insisted the Doctor.

“Oh.”

It’s surprising what you learn about yourself in times of crisis.

“Let’s start again, shall we?” the Doctor addressed the alien now, cautiously lowering his makeshift flag of truce as he did so:

“Why are they after you?”

“I am the Wave J5. After the massacre at New Oswestry, the Phenomenaut project was sidelined. The research was not. Temporal transference over the Uncertainty Principle has been proven possible thanks to the work of the Vedara Corporation...”

“So this is basically a bit of good, old-fashioned corporate espionage?”

“The Vedara Corporation was due to demonstrate the Wave project at the next Consortium of Federated Nations Arms Fair....”

“The Consortium of Federated Nations,” the Doctor interrupted, observing bitterly “nothing brings people together quite like blowing them apart. Go on...”

“An act of sabotage by the Palanquin-636 Partnership led to the demonstration being postponed. At a rehearsal for the buyers’ presentation, it was discovered that certain words had been altered that would change the tone of the presentation...”

“Literally a fatal typo,” the Doctor said, turning to me: “That’s the importance of a good proofreader- I hope you’re paying attention”

“I haven’t followed a word so far...” I breathed

I tried reading *Ulysses* once. It made more sense than this.

“This development was unexpected and the Phenomenauts were activated,” the Wave J5 continued:

“Significant loss of life ensued.”

“So what this essentially amounts to,” the Doctor said with barely disguised disdain, “is some sort of big business flea-biting over who gets paid the most obscene amount to provide the more elaborate means of killing people.”

He stepped towards the J5, whose eyes were starting to burn more intensely.

“You do realize you are - at best- a morally-bankrupt vanity project,” he hissed angrily, looking down into the face of the alien with undisguised rage, “and I will tell you something else: you’ve just failed the audition!”

“This is not a beta-test”

“You can’t hide from them AND generate the energy to maintain this shape,” the Doctor replied, triumphantly, “if I’m not mistaken, that’s the sound of big brass feet in the hallway and we’re all going to need to hold onto something very soon...”

“Hold on?” I interjected

“Yes,” said the Doctor, “there are quite simply no more surprises to be had!”

The Phenomenauts burst into the room, levelling their weapons at the J5. The J5’s eyes built up a fiery glow that was discharged at the newcomers. In the corridor, people ran for cover as the exchanges started, piling into adjacent compartments or clambering over one another to get away to other carriages. In ours, pandemonium ensued: windows were blown out and clouds of seat stuffing began to fill the air as the chairs were obliterated. ‘My notes!’ I thought, distraught, as I watched what little work I’d managed to do being blasted into confetti, along with several library books. I could see my fines going up and up as the contretemps continued. What was I going to tell the librarian had happened to them?

My excuse planning was interrupted as the Doctor swept me under one arm and we joined the exodus, a small silver device gripped in the corner of his mouth, cheeks puffed out slightly. He’d picked the wrong time to give up smoking, if that’s what it was...

The gunfire and the scream of energy bolts went on for what felt like an age, but an eerie silence eventually fell. The Doctor, Longmate and I were the first to tentatively venture back to the compartment, which smelt like the aftermath of Bonfire Night. All around us were bits of shattered robot, broken British Rail upholstery and shredded textbooks. Longmate swore. I would have done, too, but my mental totting-up of my library fines was reaching a crucial and expensive stage around the mid-double figures.

“I never wanted a Christmas bonus anyway,” he muttered, “So much for ‘maintaining reasonable care of the workplace’...”

“What happened?” I asked, “What did you mean about ‘no more surprises to be had’?”

“Well, when the J5 appeared on the train, that must have flagged up somewhere with the Palanquin-636 people. When she took the train out of our dimension that was an unexpected enough action to bring the Phenomenauts in. When she reappeared, she had to cede dimensional control, putting us back in the real world, which was a really unexpected move, because...”

The Doctor stopped, his eyes widened, and he exhaled sharply

“Oh dear,” he gulped

“Oh dear?” Longmate echoed

“Oh dear,” he repeated, his voice somber, “remember what I said about needing to hold onto something?”

Almost on cue, the Doctor leapt from the room just as the floor vanished from beneath our feet...

The next new experience in what had been a day of them so far was apparently going to be mountaineering my way up an Intercity 125 that was falling out of the sky. People were falling towards us like human boulders, screaming and landing with sickening thuds. We endeavored to help those we could to find safety. The ones who had gone back to their compartments faced an equally awful challenge, tossed around against each other in their confinement. I briefly saw Mr. Pritchard, splayed against the glass of the smoking car as we went hand over hand upwards on our way. Occasionally the fall would work in our favour and we would slide some of the

distance toward our eventual goal: the driver's compartment. Reaching our destination during one of those plummeting phases, I noticed as I slid into the cabin that an old police call box was propped in the vestibule entrance. A complication of leads and cables flowed from it to the dashboard of the train. Flashing me a beaming grin, the Doctor let go of the doorframe of the compartment he was holding onto and allowed himself to fall into the cabin.

Guessing I had nothing to lose, I followed suit and plummeted into the unknown. Once I'd finished bouncing painfully off assorted things and people, I came to rest at the feet of a pretty girl with long fair hair. Given her mode of dress- plus fours, Argyll socks, heeled correspondent shoes and a Breton sweater- she was obviously here with the Doctor.

"What kept you?" the pair snapped at one another in unison

"It hasn't been easy," the new arrival shouted back, "if *somebody* had fixed the helmic regulator..."

"We don't need the helmic regulator!"

"Clearly we do!"

"How often do we actually regulate things, helmically or otherwise? It's an optional extra..."

"So you'll soup up the dog whistle, but you won't fix the guidance system?"

"You found us, didn't you?"

"Now is not the time!" I interrupted

The girl became aware of my presence at that point:

"Who's he?" she asked

"A leading authority on Dorothy Wordsworth..."

"But..." I began

The Doctor had struggled to his knees and joined the girl at the dashboard of the train, which she had pulled to bits and wired in the knot of cables from the police box.

"Ready?" she asked the Doctor

"Ready" he replied

"That's good," she answered, "because the ground is getting rather close"

Dragging himself up and out of the cabin, the Doctor disappeared into the police box, saying something like "Hello, boy" as he did so. There was a bellowed 'NOW!' and the girl pulled a lever on the dash.

After that, we just stopped falling. There was no crash landing, no sudden, violent impact- nothing. One moment we were falling at speed and then we weren't, yet somehow we'd levelled out. Had we landed?

The girl slumped onto the driver's seat, eyes closed, exhaling with relief. The Doctor reappeared and leant nonchalantly in the doorway.

"That went well, if I *do* say so myself" he said, beaming broadly, "a smooth landing"

There was a sudden, violent dip that put my stomach in my mouth as the train contacted something solid.

I had stopped to find Longmate before stepping outside. He'd got himself wedged in a luggage rack while the train was falling. The Doctor and the girl were already outside, helping other members of the train staff to tend to the wounded passengers. The train had come to rest in an undulating field, surrounded by hills, and resembled a stranded metal caterpillar resting in the

long grass. A herd of cows, rightful occupants of the field, had retreated to a vantage point further up and, having assessed the situation, resumed their ruminations at a safe distance.

The Doctor was making his way back into the driver's cabin when he saw us approaching. He jumped down from the footplate and shook us both vigorously by the hand:

"Hello, gentlemen!" he said airily, as though nothing had happened, "No ill effects, I hope..."

The guard opened his mouth to remonstrate, but the Doctor continued.

"Romana, come and meet my aides de camp: this is Stuart..."

The girl- Romana- flashed me a winning smile and I blushed, despite myself. He turned to Longmate.

"And this chap apparently also has a very long name..."

"What is it?" Romana asked, "your name?"

"Ted," came the confused reply

"He's just syntactically lazy, I'd say," she noted, before adding: "We should be going"

"Going?" Longmate started, "What about us?"

The Doctor led us to the crest of the hill and pointed to where a large crowd had gathered. Like the cows, they were understandably distracted by the arrival of a train in the fields. I noted with some irony that they were looking at us from the local railway station...

"That's where I was aiming for," the Doctor said, ruefully, "Still, it's not the winning or the losing, it's the taking part"

Leading me back to the throng of displaced commuters, we walked to the front of the train and he outstretched a hand, "Well, goodbye and good luck with the studies," he leant forward confidentially, "*Do* bear in mind what I said about Dorothy Wordsworth: a fascinating life in her own right. Fascinating."

With that, he fell in with the retreating Romana and started to clamber into the driver's compartment. I had one last question. "If the prototype and the Phenomenauts were activated by the Uncertainty Principle, what brought the prototype here in the first place? Something must have kick-started it?"

The Doctor looked a little sheepish. "Delays due to extraterrestrials on the line..."

"Aliens? You mean..."

But they were gone. There was a flashing light and a rumble of noise from the cabin. A cursory examination revealed that the box had vanished, and with it the Doctor and Romana. Strangely, I wasn't surprised. I'd seen too much that day for that.

There was a commotion behind me. Turning, I saw that the vanguard of locals from the station had made their way up the hill. A couple of policemen were with them and I could see an ambulance on the road by the railway.

"So, err, how do ye explain all this?" asked a big man in a British Rail uniform: "Anyways, are ye OK?"

With a sinking feeling, I recognized the accent as the local twang of the part of the North East where I was studying.

"Where are we?" I asked the man, already dreading the answer.

"Alnmouth," the railway man replied.

I thought as much. Yes, we were safe, but the Doctor had put us down a few hundred feet from the railway track and about fifty miles back up the track from where my journey had started!

"What time's the next train to King's Cross?" I asked

“You’ve got a train here, man” the man replied, with typical regional humour, “What d’ye want another one for?”

And that, as they say, was that. Well, nearly. I eventually got home a day late, where I followed the Doctor’s advice, changed the course of my research and got my PhD by the skin of my teeth. The experience changed me, though. I was more open to new things, new ideas, meeting people and getting involved...

Sorry, I’ve talked all the way through your train trip, haven’t I?



A long rail journey down the east coast of England looks like the perfect opportunity for literature student Stuart Milner to do some long-overdue work on his thesis. As long as there are no distractions, he'll be done by the time he gets home. At least that's the plan.

Unluckily for Stuart, the interruptions come thick and fast from the get-go; first he's joined in his compartment by possibly the most beautiful girl he's ever seen. When she leaves, the Doctor appears. The trip takes another bizarre turn when the train is lifted into another dimension and a posse of armed robots appears. They order the assembled passengers to track down and hand over the missing girl or face execution.

Who are these robots? Who sent them and why is the girl so important? Stuart is co-opted into the Doctor's investigations and finds himself embroiled in a tale of corporate espionage from a future world on the edge of war, where the laws of coincidence themselves are a weapon. And all this in the confines of a 1960s British Rail Intercity 125...

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