

Short story 3 – White Knuckle ride

The train is fifteen minutes late to Marden – a consistent portent of a crowded journey. More people just turned up at Ashford international on such days, assured by some unspoken law. By preference, he chooses the front passenger coach. It was rarely well populated, mostly because it was a stomping ground for the conductor. Sidney doesn't fear the ticket man, for all his social lacking. He is sitting by the door, e-ticket on fast access on his otherwise neglected phone and bags at his feet, glancing out at the departing bush and brickwork. Alone, this poor sod is too boring to motivate a compelling story. This journey will not be like the others.

Half an hour of innocuous journey put on fast forward. Counterpart stations of Staplehurst and Headcorn are flung aside without inspection – the big cat sanctuary is just a flicker on route, all its prisoners obscured. Nobody of interest comes and goes. Even the notorious one doesn't startle the monotony with his whistling presence. Sidney is sometimes writing, othertimes reading, never looking about him. The train falters before Ashford, the dover priory service couplings are severed, and the vehicle trundles on to a second halt well past the costa and lavatories of the busiest stop in Kent. A diverse and very opaque queue glances past the window, giving way to sparser and sparser occupants further and further along the platform 5. Sidney thinks he's gotten lucky, and in a rather horrible sense he has. Causality has a unique surprised in the furthermost shelter's store.

The doors mechanism beeps, hisses, clanks. He does not look at them come in, but one of them makes themselves known with a curse:

“That was fuckin’ mingin’,” This presence alights 2 chairs behind, at a table quartet of seats. A belch splatters at the back of his neck, drawing up a frisson of hairs – it smells like a costa bin.

“You’re fuckin’ mingin’, bitch!” They’re a heterogender pair, maybe a year younger or older than Sidney. Both voices are uncomfortably loud at this proximity, assisted by the empty acoustics of the carriage. People swear on this train all the time, but not usually that boldly. He tries to give them a pass, reclaiming his biro to pen another note on game design. A dual tongued moan stops him before the second line – exaggerated noises that would not even pass for porn acting.

“Shag your mom! Shag your dad!” The girl groans on and on, offering coitus to various relatives. The boy chuckles: it’s a dry, scarcely mirthful noise.

“Hey, you ain’t gonna, like, give my brother head too, bae?”

“I DON’T CARE ABOUT YOUR FUCKIN’ BROTHER!” Wham – sudden malice nearly pitches the poor bystander off his chair. The boy agrees, groaning Jesus to himself. He gives another alien laugh, then a moan. The train has only just left the station now.

It went on. The two passengers talk and talk, peppering their speech with imprecations and sing-song whines. Before they even reach Wye, the man has employed three slurs, yet Sidney hasn't even caught their name. He believes for a moment that they don't have names – that they are well and truly irrational strawmen of beshitten hay; that he is some comically pitiful side character in some unreal charade. Discomfort has given way to a kind of mortified reverie.

"Oh my fucking god, like shut up!" The girl winces, repeatedly. He never does and neither does she. Even the over-blamed culprit, the baby wailing at some unfounded discomfort, knew when to pack it in. "Shut the fuck up, you spacker!"

"Do your roar, bae. Do your sexy roar, I wanna hear!" she manages a hoarse croak like a choking horse. The boy's impression sounds like the death rattle of a strangled cat. They continue this controversial ballad for much, much longer than necessary. For once, Sidney wishes he was in a busy carriage. He wouldn't be suffering alone then. He's too mortified to even look around to see if anyone else is held in captive audience with him. Then comes the phone call. The noise at the caller's end was a turbulent mess – that man seemed to be practically roaring disjointed nonsense in response. "I'm creatin' f***! Fuckin' creatin'!"

It has only been twenty minutes. Maybe thirty. Sidney's mouth is dry, his head splitting at the ears. He isn't at Ramsgate. He wants to get off, get away. He thinks about the feeble, feeble advice his counsellor used to give him. Just walk away, they say. Sure, as if you are the problem – you are the only fault in this happy union. He goes to rise; he ducks at a pattering on his head – a half full cup of some stodgy coffee lies bleeding at his shoes. No, they'll see him now. They might single him out and assail him. They might even take pictures. He, agnostic, prays that they'll get off at Chatham or Canterbury. Jesus obviously doesn't love him back.

"Your next stop is cant-berry West! Cant-berry cathedral!" An asynchronous mockery of the intercom. Sidney says fuck it – he gets up and goes to door, practically pounding the open button before the train has even finished braking. He'll catch another train – any other train, just to get away. Beep, hiss, clunk – and he's out. The fresh air, the mizzling rain – freedom! He stands on the platform stupefied as the door closes behind him and the swearing becomes muffled, not muted. Next train is in nearly an hour, but he doesn't care. He can't even remember now why he's going to Ramsgate.

He pats himself down. A surge of goosebumps. His bags – his belongings! An impromptu pirouette back. He sees them, for the first time, in his seat. Waving his bag, emptying it, as the train rumbles to life and flees. From through the window, he hears one last shout.

"Say goodbye to your doc martens, chudlard!"