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I Could Ride All Day in My Cool Blue Train

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Extract

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Dream #84
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She's called Annie; he doesn't have a name. She travels, socializes; he works in the city, though nothing too evil, his soul has survived intact and residually innocent. They're both staggeringly beautiful, air-brushed and freshly cut from magazines, made solid and somehow human. They play across the eye like slow-motion advertisements for inconsequential beauty products. They are a little older now and no longer as they once were, lingering somewhere in their mid-thirties like artefacts from miscarried youths. They haven't known each other long. It's a love story, of a kind.

They meet in the car park. He pulls up in a non-specific – though undeniably non-economy – car. Her car is red, sporty. She's already there leaning against it dressed in tennis whites, head tilted back to catch the sun, slick black shades over her eyes. A short skirt, acres of perfect thigh. The sky is blue or green. He's wearing his suit, silk and sharp, his tie loose and raffish. They greet each other with excessive and revealing and frankly unconvincing casualness. Something is going on here between them, something in its earliest, most pleasurable stages. He heads off to get changed. She loiters, magnetic and irresistibly sexy. In no time at all, time passes.

They have reconvened on court. The game is in progress. He has already sliced a plurality of shots embarrassingly low into the net and his forehand pass, his saving grace, the stroke that provides the illusion that he is a better player than he ever really could be (in secret he admits to himself his weakness) is being unerringly dismantled by the killer volleys of his net-loving opposite. The last time he probed along the

line, the ball decurving at great speed in a searing arc zenithing an inch above the tape, she moved early, impossibly early, and deflected the ball cutely down across the court where it didn't even bounce, merely rolled away, deft as hell. On her service game he has won precisely no points. He waits a yard or more behind the service line. In the distance the ball drifts high and straight, he sees her body curl in a gathering of potential energy, then there's a kinetic snap, and that is the last he knows of it, nowhere in its perfect path does the ball travel remotely near him. Six games to love, six games to love.

'Good game. Thanks.'

'So what's your ranking?'

'Three hundred,' she says with satisfaction. 'I'm resident pro here – you knew, didn't you?' She smiles. 'You didn't expect to win, did you?'

He denies it, almost convincingly. They retire to the clubhouse. He follows a little behind her so as to mop his forehead covertly.

The inside of the tennis club resembles strongly the inside of a gentleman's club once seen on TV. There is a bar, where they buy drinks. They stand around chatting delicately. Other couples do the same. They laugh discreetly. Despite, or perhaps because of, his incompetence on the court, things are going well. Their mouths twist wryly in absurdly exaggerated forms, and this passes for clever conversation, even flirting.

There is a calendar, or perhaps a diary, belonging to a full and satisfying life with numerous wonderful engagements strewn across its much-parsed pages. Without actually passing, time passes.

They are talking, as they often do these days, on the phone. She wants him to enter the Antarctic Games with her. The whole phone call is an expanse of snow, wide and white. Kayaking, she suggests. They could compete together and splash out into the freezing, unfrozen, black Southern Ocean against a background of icebergs. For some reason she feels he is up to the challenge. He num-nums the idea, as he has

done every time over the past weeks when she has raised the subject. Eventually, she does not let it go by.

'Well why not? Scared?'

'Absolutely not.'

'It'll be wonderful. Just think of it.'

'I've thought of it.'

'So why not, sweetheart?'

'Already done it.'

'No.'

'A long time ago.'

'No.'

'When I was at school.'

'NO.'

He really has. He tells her how his school – a private school, a boarding school, a school with its own chaplain, a lake in the grounds and innumerable rugby fields, a movie-fed cliché of a school – entered a team. He was eighteen at the time. There were two teachers accompanying the sixth form, flying in the school's private jet via the Falklands, where they paused briefly to undertake essential geography fieldwork regarding penguins. In the Games, they finished seventh, highest placed of all the youth teams. Uniquely, she has precisely nothing to say to any of this. He thinks a little more.

'We could do the cross-country skiing. I didn't do that last time. Not a very good skier back then.' He brightens. 'That might be fun.' Though they are still on the phone she looks at him, appalled.

In an instant, time passes. They don't see each other for a while. One, or both, are playing hard to get. She's seeing other men; he's seeing other women, but he's thinking of her. She's not necessarily thinking of him, and thus has the edge in this respect. In the middle of December he logs on to a swimming-club chat room and finds her there as *Xnnie2s*, deep in conversation with someone called *TheTasteOfFloom*. They are discussing wedding details, though both are certain they will not marry. He makes his presence known. She is

casual, almost disinterested. But eventually, and only after enduring repeated mocking interruptions from *lohengrin29* and *applesnapple* – cyberfriends of hers, apparently – he extracts from her a promise to meet, a few weeks hence.

Time passes, perceptible but swift. With his eyes on the prize he begins to plan. He has grown a grand design, fertilized its seeds with love and cunning. The rest is foretold, he knows it, he can see it. They will be together. And though he is in love with her he does not need to see her in the meantime. He does not need to call her. There will be time enough for that. He knows that she is in love with him, and he knows too that she does not yet know this. He will enlighten her.

Time, inevitably, passes.

It ends happily. They are having dinner together, somewhere sensational, outdoors at the Acropolis, in a log cabin beside a Norwegian fjord, at a charming Italian restaurant overlooking the Aegean, in the penthouse flat of a New York skyscraper. They are warm and laughing, a little drunk, pleasantly so. The dinner – or perhaps merely the place where they are eating – is red and gold. Curtains, possibly drapes, curl warmly around. Behind them, a man with a violin plays impossibly beautifully and utterly soundlessly. They are sitting across a table, but they and the table appear to be snug in bed. It is precisely as he knew it would be. He leans over and whispers softly into her ear, 'Imagine that we're penguins adrift on an iceberg.'

Deep Blue Sea

I Could Ride all Day in My Cool Blue Train

I live in a town full of rain, a liquid city. We've got water up to our gills and I'm having trouble breathing. The bilge-pumps are struggling and the overflows are overflowing – hell, even the *air* is wet. Before today it rained for thirty-three consecutive days and the water level went up eight inches. The Stilt was cramped enough already, and now the water's pushing up and we're pushing out. The Fixers are getting ready to build another level and move us all upstairs again.

All this water, and we can't drink any of it. We're down to two cups of clean a day. It's probably a good thing. Sal joked the other day that one misplaced piss and we might all be swimming. The clean pipe which runs from the purifiers up to the kitchen is beginning to taste no different to the rest of it. The water in the showers is thick and coloured and you feel cleaner without it. After the rain, everything stinks. The purifiers can only do so much. The food situation though is just about stable. There are seaweed crops. Some days we eat fish and some days we eat *fish substitute.*

As of last week, downstairs became submarine. It's like someone drowned my youth, because we were brought up down there. That was back when there were still children allowed on the Stilt, before all of that was taken over to the Dries. I was eleven then. A big transport arrived and mothers and children made a mass exodus. Except for me, because my mother was dead and I was sick and didn't qualify. They left me to see if I'd make it. I tell myself that maybe now that I

have, someone will come back. They never do, though. Soon after that the travel permits came in, and no one goes now who isn't taken. People arrive, and are put to work. But they never leave, no one gets permits now.

Once when the water was lower, before the Overboards were even built, I sat on a step and watched the last swan anyone here ever saw, floating in the water like a long-necked lily, an opening fist of a flower. Then the thunderous snap of its wings in take-off. The immense clean span of its flight. Maybe it's gotten bigger as I remember it, but it was *huge*. Even then it looked like a creature from myth. No one dared kill it, not for food.

But now the Overboards are built, everyone else I knew then is gone, no one's seen any kind of a bird except seagulls for years, and even they've finally learnt to stay away from the rigged netting we set. From time to time a helicopter flies over, going this way or that. Out to the west the line that looks like the horizon is actually the start of the Dries – a great levee keeping the water at bay. Though with the weather lately, I don't want to think about the kind of trouble they're having over there.

There is Upstream and Downstream. The main currents run right past town, and lately there's something dark in the Wide Channel, like a slip of oil spooned into the river and threading along it. They've cut off the inflow for a couple of days while someone works out who's dumping what, but in the meantime everything is progressively stagnating, and after all the rain there are traces of black even in the water downstairs. There are rumours it's infiltrated the seaweed crop, though I haven't been to see. Can't stand the smell there, is the thing. And no one knows what the dark stuff is. A couple of people have grown sick.

But I've been sick a long time, since the beginning. Since I remember, which is always. I get chills which come and go and I natter my teeth with nausea for a day. All I can do is give the doctor a call, then curl up and wait for someone to bring pills. They bring pills.

Those days I stay in my bunk. We're berthed in a raised railway carriage, the insides torn out and the bunks built in, just the blue of the upholstery remaining. Most days I'm the only person in. Everyone else works. It sways on stilts in the wind. And with the noise of the bilge-pumps churning away on the lower decks below, you might just think you're moving, if you take your pills and close your eyes.

I could ride all day in my cool blue train
If my cool blue train would just stay in lane

I've been writing lately but it hasn't been going well. No one likes the stories I've finished, and I can't seem to get them out. For a few days now I've been trying to write a story I've called 'Trash'. It's about a world ruined by a Major Climate Event so that everyone who can has left the world. The firefighters and geriatrics have gone off to live on the sun. Anyone who can afford it has relocated to cooler planets out in the solar system. There's just an underclass left on the world living in these tiny cells which are part of one great machine, which gives energy and cools the temperature to bearable by recycling waste. Air and water are strictly rationed. Nothing is thrown away. There's terrible overcrowding, but strict individual segregation has been established by some unknown controlling body, to quell trouble and prevent breeding. So there are these tiny cells full of the inhabitants' own waste and rubbish, and in one of these cells there's a desperate man who feels he does not belong there, who is forming a plan to get up out of the cells, and thinks that he could survive it all if only this one girl were there with him. *If you were with me,* he thinks, *I could survive it all.* But she's not, and I can't work out how to end it. I'm really not good at science-fiction. But I think it's a pretty funny story, considering. One they'll appreciate.

Yet even with the pills I can't get it done. I just curl up and get as warm as I can, and still I keep shaking. Then before

everyone else gets back, I fall asleep, riding all night in my cool blue train. You can get travel sick staying in the bunks too long.

One Day I Grow a Horse's Head

Today I take my pills and grow a horse's head. It's something I've been meaning to do for a long while. When everyone else is out of the bunks I take my pills and my forehead splits and lengthens. I look for a reflection in the murky glass window, and I'm a horse, I'm a horse. I stay that way all day and by the evening I've got a big old headache in my big old head. Still, the thing about horses is that they're honest above all, and some days you need to be that way.

I get dressed and go deck to deck until I reach the bar. The rain's holding off and it's a dry walk over. Heavy tarpaulins hang over the bar entrance and you have to slide in through them. The air inside is close and thick. Everyone's there, everyone who can be. They can't drink water so they come to drink the whisky.

By the entrance on the inside there's the Idol. The Idol's made from an old diving suit stuffed with plastic straw, the suit itself too ripped and the rubber too spoiled to be any use. The head is a round mask with black stone eyes, like an insect's, and has two old flippers for oversized ears. The Idol blesses the bar, and if you baptize it with whisky it'll bless you too. But there's always the weighing up to do – precious whisky or unlikely luck? I always choose the whisky. After all, how lucky can anyone get?

Sal's waiting behind the bar, a worn look on his worn old face. He's standing beneath a fading drawing of an alligator someone did once, charcoaling it onto the wood wall at the front. The alligator grins, and I grin back.

'Whisky, Sal?' I say.

'You're late,' he says. 'Maybe when you're done. If you're good.'

He bangs the bar and things quiet down, a little. Sometimes

they want to listen and sometimes they don't. Tonight they don't seem too sure either way.

I stand up on the bar and read out a story. It's an old one but they haven't heard it, and I couldn't write anything new. It's about a boy and a girl who meet and fall in love and generally cause each other completely inexplicable amounts of happiness. They get engaged and exchange vows of *undying love* one perfect day. They live Happily Ever After, until one day when she tells him she's leaving him. She takes her bags and starts to walk out on him and he can't believe it, he's in tears, I mean he's being completely *torn apart* here because very real pieces of him are going out the door with her and the horrible bitterness on his tongue is a foretaste of his own death, but he gets himself together enough to say, *but you said you'd love me forever*. And this at least causes her to pause at the door, and she turns round, and he's waiting for her to Come Back In and Realize She Made A Mistake, and to Make It All Alright Again. Or at least *explain*. But in fact all that happens is that she slips a puzzled look on her face and she says, *well gee, honey, it sure* felt *like forever*. And off she goes.

They don't like this one at all. Some of the Fishers and Fooders who have been struggling all day to gauge and gain resources don't want to hear this kind of thing. They do not like it one bit, and for a minute I'm in danger of being lynched by a couple of the larger thugs. There is a distribution of discontent, which can always get nasty. Then one of the Lazy Sunbathers stands up from where he's been sitting, holding up his bag of stones, and things calm down. Grateful, I'm merely kicked out of the bar, forbidden to read stories for a week, and told in whispered threats that whatever it is, it had better be better next time, or I'll be looking for a new career.

As I'm being dragged out the crowd disperses, dousing the Idol with whisky on its way out to purify the place after my disturbing of the peace. Bad stories will do that. I go back to skulk in the bunks for a while. Then the chills come over me

and I get a heat beating at the thin skull around my temples and my teeth begin to natter.

I could sleep all night in my cool blue train
If my cool blue train would just kill the pain

Getting Back Together Was One Long Negotiation

At the end of the week a helicopter appears and hovers overhead. I was with the chills up in the bunks and didn't see it, but Sal did, and he comes by to tell me about the hovering. He says he saw ropes flung from the inside of the helicopter, and four men in black leap out and slide down, landing on the decks where the canoes are usually moored. Not that we have any canoes any more. He laughs and tells me that one of the men took one step and fell straight in, before the others dragged him out. They waved to the helicopter, which flew off. With a lot of slipping they got off the decks onto the ladders and clambered like lizards up to the Overboards, heading, for sure, for powwow with the Lazy Sunbathers. They'll be out in their deckchairs wrapped in thick towels against the cold.

I feel a lot better after he tells me that. Men don't come from helicopters just to stay. They come with reasons. Something important. Contact with the others is always good for the Stilt. You can go for months otherwise and think that you're all there is in the world. And then they might just have come for you. You never know. I think to go over to the main deck to see what's going on, but I know I'll never get close.

By then my ban from the bar is over so I spend the rest of the day writing a story which I read out that night. The bar is full, as it's always full. Everyone's in. There's something strange about the atmosphere that I can't quite place. They're waiting for news from the Lazy Sunbathers, apart from everything else. We like to be kept informed. But the Lazy Sunbathers aren't here, which means they're still in counsel.