

## **Sometimes I Run**

Naomi collapsed onto the platform's bench. An anxious glance confirmed that the rushing had paid off; the London train would be here in 4 minutes. She reached for her phone. She'd had to ignore it's beeping while she'd frantically searched for a parking space. One voicemail from Seb and 2 text messages. Predictably enough Seb's message was an aggressive demand for the whereabouts of Maisy's coat. Naomi had left it out for him by the front door as promised along with her bag, wellies and lunch box. He'd then sent a text a bit later,

**“All ok now. M at nursery fine. Off to Northampton. See you On Thurs xxxx”.** Ok, that could have been worse.

And then this from Isla Merton, the client she was on her way to see in Canary Wharf,

**“Panel meeting rescheduled so 12 no good. Will be 3ish. See you then. IM.”** Sent 8 minutes ago.

*“You are shitting me! So, I'll now get to London 3 hours early, home 3 hours late and totally screw up all my childcare plans. You utter cow! No apology I notice. You ill-mannered witch! Obviously, you've got no kids. Or if you have, your husband actually shares the load or you're so minted you have a nanny or something. Jesus!”*

She dashed off a text in reply,

**“No problem. I'll look forward to seeing you then. Thanks for letting me know. Naomi.”**

As the train pulled up she considered waiting for a later one now there was no rush. Was it worth going into the office here for a bit first? She decided she may as well get down to London and do some work in a café before the meeting.

She hadn't reserved a seat and all the tables were gone so she plonked herself in a window seat with an empty one beside her. It wasn't packed so she dumped her handbag on the extra seat and got her iPad out.

She cringed at the thought of ringing her mum to beg her to keep Maisy overnight. She would say yes but it wasn't fair to ask her. It wasn't fair to mess Maisy around like that either.

As usual Seb would be away working and no use to her in a childcare crisis. She remembered the bristling tension with him that morning. He had had the cheek to be narky with her just because he was expected to get his own daughter ready for nursery *on a work*

*day*. Naomi had pointed out (in what even she recognised as a hectoring tone) that that was precisely how she and most other mothers in the country started every working day. She wouldn't mind if he was raking it in but she carried the load at home and brought in the lion's share of the money.

She had resisted her now common refrain that there seemed to be endless sums of money involved in these events that he worked on, and yet so little of it seemed to find its way into their bank account. It made no sense to her that he dedicated such a huge portion of his life to work, always living out of a suitcase, for so little money. He would retort that being in a cosy salaried job, she didn't understand the pressures of being self-employed; he was building something here and it would be short sighted to turn work away that would build long term relationships.

He was right. She didn't understand. As a consultant on events like Glastonbury and Proms in the Park, how much bigger could he get? As far as she was concerned, the real reason he did it was that he bloody enjoyed it. He loved all the reflected glory and didn't fancy a more lucrative line of work if it came without the kudos. And why would he fancy it when she was killing herself to carry both the domestic and financial load for both of them?

*"Enough!"* she thought. Deep breaths.

Anyway, it would all be alright when she spoke to him later. It always was. Things just get stressy in the mornings sometimes. He is, after all, just a bloke; and she did marry him knowing he was never going to be a steady Eddy type of earner. Right now, she just needed to get on and do an email to the team about their various meetings today. She reached for her bag to find it being picked up and unceremoniously tossed onto her knee by a stranger.

*"You don't mind do you love? Only, all the others are taken."* He didn't wait for a reply, or even look in her direction as he took his seat, breathing heavily.

Taken aback, Naomi glared at him. She nodded in what she hoped was a pointed fashion towards the empty seats which even she could see from where she was sitting. He didn't appear to care. She didn't manage to voice any objection mind you. She berated herself once again for shirking from confrontation.

He was a horrid looking thing. Quite old, mid 70's probably. His white comb-over was unkempt after a difficult morning in the wind. His skin was pallid with visible flakes around the hair line and cheeks. He had a rather hooked and prominent nose which gave him a sneering expression, especially when, as now, he squinted while rummaging noisily in his Bag for Life.

The worst of it though was that he smelt quite badly of what she would describe as "body smells". There was a combination of them but certainly stale BO was in there, as was a persistent top note of sour crotch. The journey was 3 hours. This wasn't going to work. It

would be rude to get up the instant he sat down though. She needed to get this email off anyway and then she'd invent some pretext and move to another carriage.

She busied herself with the iPad while praying he wasn't going to produce a smelly sausage roll, or God forbid, a Scotch egg.

"So my love, are you going all the way to London or getting off?" He said.

His accent was slightly Lancashire. She normally warmed to that accent but he ruined it by straining the words out through his big sneering nose, which she now noticed, was quite jammed with pale grey hair.

She caught herself wondering how that worked with sneezing and so on but then found she didn't really want to think about it.

"Errr... yes London. I have a meeting." Polite but not friendly. She turned back to her screen and tried to focus on her email. He was not deterred.

"Well I have a very long journey, you see, because I'll be changing at London to go on down to Somerset."

She didn't reply so he pressed, "Do you know Somerset at all?"

"No, not really. Although my husband goes there a bit for work."

"Does he?" He paused as though taking in this bombshell. "Does he really." And then suddenly his awful face was right next to hers, his rank breath making her recoil as he whispered,

"Well he must be mad!" He stared her straight in the eye and smiled revealing mismatched and neglected teeth.

"If I had a lovely lady like you at home, you wouldn't catch me bugging off to Somerset." He shook his head; his smile holding a hint of smut.

She snapped her head abruptly back to her screen. Her heart was racing as she decided what to do. She'd leave that there, end the conversation, quickly send this email and then change seats. She tried to focus on what she was typing but she was flustered and distracted. After a couple of minutes, she was nearly done but she could feel him easing himself into a position to better read what she was typing.

*.....not meeting at 12 after all so I will be available on the phone and online until around 2.30pm. Please ring with an update after the Asda meeting.*

He seemed to be deliberately leaning in. She shifted her shoulders around so that her back was more flush with the window but this brought her line of vision to his face. He was glaring directly at her breasts and, Holy Mother of God, his breathing was quick and laboured through his nose hair. She glanced down to have her worst fears confirmed. Inflating under his brown corduroy slacks was an erection. His grubby fingers were working it like the scuttley legs of an obese spider.

“Excuse me! Excuse me! I have to get off!” she almost shouted. Clutching her iPad, she all but shoved him out of his seat and escaped to the aisle.

*“The train will shortly be arriving at Wilmslow. The next stop is Wilmslow.”*

*‘I’ll get off at Wilmslow. There’s no rush now anyway. I’ll get a later train from there. I’ll go to a lovely café. I’ll have a nice pain au chocolate or something. And a latte.’*

It occurred to her that maybe she ought to challenge him, face him off in some way. Why should she have to get off the train just because he was a disgusting pervert? But all she wanted to do was get away from him that very instant.

She gripped the pole with one hand and was trying to fold up the iPad with the other when she smelt him breathing by her face again. She jerked her head around,

“Excuse me,” he smiled his sneering smile; head raised, a trace of amusement in his features, a whiff of triumph even,

“You left your handbag. You’ll be needing that I imagine.” He paused, holding eye contact, “...for all your little.....bits and pieces”. He grinned then, bearing all his unsightly teeth.

*‘What bits and pieces! Ugh! You REVOLTING man.’* She glanced down to see a tampon poking out of the side pocket. Her neck flashed red as she snatched the bag away. The doors opened and she flailed out onto the platform.

The train doors shut behind her and she didn’t look back. She knew instinctively that he would be watching and enjoying her discomfort. She forced herself to stand tall and walk at a dignified pace off the platform and out of his view. And then she legged it through the concourse, through the turnstile and into the car park where she stood for a minute to cool down and collect her thoughts.

*‘He’s just an old perv. You get them. Forget it. Get on with your day. He’s a loser. He’s probably not even going anywhere; just spending his days bothering women on trains. You’ve got work stuff to do so you just need to get over it and crack on.’*

*‘Now, where to for coffee and cake?’*

As she had expected of well-heeled Wilmslow, within view were 3 or 4 appealing artisan type coffee shops. She headed off for the French looking cafe with plenty of outside tables. It was a bit of a walk but she fancied getting some fresh air. Once she was settled she'd ring Seb and tell him about the dirty old man.

Just then she spotted a chap sitting on one of the outside tables wearing a T Shirt with thick red and white stripes. She smiled to herself remembering that Seb had been wearing one exactly like that when she had set off that morning. She had made a joke that he looked like he was off to a Where's Wally convention. He had laughed which had broken the tension. He wasn't bothered about the T shirt. He could still get away with most things. This guy looked dark like Seb but he had a baseball cap on which Seb would never been seen dead in, not least as hats play havoc with his hair.

As she made her way she was taking in the window displays in the high-end boutiques and homeware stores. It really was a different world this place. There were taps on sale for more than the cost of her entire bathroom. Glancing back to her destination, her eyes were drawn again to the man in the Where's Wally T shirt.

He had his back to her. There was a pretty woman with him with one of those artfully messy buns in her hair. They were intended to say, "I'm just so relaxed and cool, I haven't even looked in a mirror today!" The lady was standing up to hand over a dribbling baby in adorable pastel blue dungarees. He was maybe 8 months or so - pretty chubby with his red face upright and smiling at his daddy. The man lifted him up so that the baby was looking down into his face and giggling.

Naomi pressed the button of the pedestrian crossing which would bring her to the cafe. As she did so there was a break in the traffic giving way to a lazy quiet. Some brief moments of stillness. Even though there were no cars she wouldn't cross before the beeps. There was no rush. She could hear the breeze in the leaves of the trees lining the pavement and some distant birdsong. She looked to the sky and took a deep breath. She was alright now. She looked back across the road and just caught the messy bun lady say in an affected baby girl voice,

"There you go Maxy, Daddy does love you!" She was beaming from ear to ear as she whipped off the baseball cap and planted a kiss on the top of the man's head. "And we love Daddy too don't we?"

Naomi staggered back from the curb as she saw the man turn to reveal his sickeningly familiar profile.

"Seb! Seb!" she tried to shout, but just as in a nightmare, no sound came from her throat; only a virtually inaudible rasp. She was instantly too hot. Far too hot. Her face was burning, top lip sweating. She needed cold water. She was nauseous and her mouth was filled with

saliva. She needed to sit down before she fell. Everything was so dazzlingly bright that her eyes hurt and yet still no sound. Just the gentle breeze and the echo of the baby's giggling.

Naomi managed a panicked glance back across the road to check that the kaffuffle hadn't attracted their attention. It hadn't. They were engrossed in each other. All smiling in the pleasant Tuesday morning sunshine. Just a nice normal family enjoying some time sitting outside a high end suburban coffee shop.

What to do? Her first instinct was to get out of view; give herself a chance to think. She scurried into the first café she saw - this one more of an old ladies' tea shop. Seeing a free table in the window she lurched towards it; almost falling to grab the back of the chair with both hands. She lowered herself carefully into the wooden seat and slid her shaking legs under the table. Yes, she could just about still see them from here.

An anxious teenage girl in a black and white maid's outfit approached to ask what she could get for Naomi. Naomi wretched as she attempted her first response causing the waitress to take a step away. Eventually she managed to ask for cold water and a cup of tea.

Her head was a clamour of questions, all jostling for poll position. Above all the noise though she knew she had to decide fast whether to confront them right now or bide her time. Biding her time felt like the right thing. Or was it just the easier thing?

Could she really just finish her tea, get up and carry on with her day. She realised that actually, yes, she could. She could probably even speak to him on the phone this morning like nothing had happened and see him on Thursday. That would buy her two days thinking time. He'd come back full of the usual garbage about busy meetings and delays, "...an occupational hazard of working with creative types!" he'd remark smugly. It all made sense.

She saw the messy bun lady ask for the bill. Time was short. Be calm. Be measured. This is as important as it gets. She should choose her time and catch him out. To what end though? It wasn't like she needed to be canny to avoid being shafted out of her share of his fortune. She thought of *Maisy's coat...what about Maisy's coat?* Seb's angry voicemail that morning rang in her head and as though jolted by a cattle-prod she was out her chair, chucking a tenner on the table and striding to the pedestrian crossing.

They were still there. Smiling and laughing. There was an air of intimacy about the whole thing that made bile rise in her throat. She could see the baseball cap on the table now. It was some God awful novelty thing with a baby's bottle hanging off the front. Some grotesquely tacky gift he'd worn briefly out of manners. She could imagine his discomfort at that. No wonder it was still on the table. Did this woman know him at all?

He didn't see her at first but the woman cocked her head to one side and frowned as Naomi approached their table, smiling confidently and took a seat. She leaned back, putting her hands on the table in front of her; fingers spread. He recoiled, grabbed the back of his chair

and swung his legs around as though to make a run for it, mouth gaping, eyes wide; as shocked and terrified as if a Jaws himself had just swum up to face him.

“So Seb, you must introduce me. Is this one of your work colleagues? One of the tardy creative types maybe? Are we, “building relationships” today?”

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