

Thought for the Week submission from Revd Kevin Davies.
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(A short work of original fiction, in the spirit of the season)

Last Train from London.

It was a bitterly cold night in late December. The 11.05pm departure from Paddington was late, and there was no sign of it. He wanted a fast train home that evening before the bank holiday. Planned engineering works were scheduled to close the line completely for four days, in about thirty minutes time. Joe was regretting the second cocktail at the university do, and wondered if someone had used photocopier cleaning fluid in error. He looked around for a coffee shack, but they were closing around him as quickly as trains were disappearing off the station board. Every train except his, that is. Where was it? A dejected station employee was shuffling towards him in a rather desultory way, pushing a broom ahead. The growing mound of detritus and litter ahead of the broom seemed ominously threatening. Joe, it said, you are in the way. You do not belong here.

Joe looked anxiously around. Still no train. The clock ticked. There were fewer and fewer people waiting on the station concourse now. Even the middle aged man with a folded bicycle, so still and immovable that Joe had initially mistaken him for one of those pieces of life-art that surprise you by moving, had gone. Been swept up, probably, Joe thought.

Suddenly a hand gently grabbed his elbow, and a bright face appeared at his side. It was a station dispatcher, smartly suited and tied, a vivid orange day-glo jacket to match the smile. "This way, sir!" the man said, steering him off to the left. "Platform One!" "This is the train, sir! 11.29, the last fast one."

Sure enough, there, behind the closed up croissant bar, was a train, warmed up on Platform One. "But, where is it going?..." Joe began to protest as he was shown into carriage B, and squeezed into what seemed to be the only free seat.

"It's the last fast train, sir!" called back the dispatcher. "Everyone needs to get this train!"

Putting it like that, Joe supposed he did need to be on it. He could figure out where it was going and when to get off later. He began to settle himself into his seat and it was as he was removing his jacket he realised that he had left his briefcase on the station platform, such was the rush with which he had been escorted to the train. A mild feeling of panic set in and he stood to see if he could find the train manager. This feeling intensified as the train began to move out, but then he saw coming down the carriage a steward, carrying his distinctive brown leather case.

The man saw the look of relief on Joe's face, smiled and handed it over. "The dispatch team's compliments, sir," he said. "They thought you would need this."

The train was almost out of the station and Joe was settling down again when the brakes were slammed on and everyone was thrown forward with a jolt. The train screeched to a halt, there was a babble of conversation in the carriage and then suddenly someone cried out, "Look, its the Prince!" Joe peered out of the window and caught glimpses of a famous personage hurrying by on the platform with a large trailing retinue. Wasn't first class normally at the rear of the train, he wondered to himself? They must have been in such a hurry to get this train out that they had not had time to turn it. A few more minutes, and they moved off, properly this time, and began to pick up speed. The lights of the city twinkled for a while, and then faded to a blur.

Joe looked around the carriage. A couple were canoodling in the seat across the aisle. The girl looked quite young, the man older, dark skinned and bearded. Joe tried not to look but as he

pointedly turned away the bearded man noticed him and smiled across. "I'll just find us a coffee," he said to his girlfriend, and went forwards towards the buffet car. Now Joe could see that under her top coat she was heavily pregnant, and he managed a smile, more in pity than happiness. Poor kids. Did they have any idea of the world? The Boyfriend returned with two poly cups. The girl shook her head. "No thanks, I feel a bit queasy just now." The man shrugged his shoulders, looked at Joe and held out the spare coffee. "Would you like this?" he asked. "No, don't bother, its alright," he said, as Joe gratefully held out a couple of coins in return for the steaming brew.

The train slowed, and pulled in somewhere – Joe could not see a name, but it looked like Slough. A noise penetrated the warm cosiness of the carriage – was that singing? Joe groaned inwardly. He was not aware of any rugby fixtures, but here they came, a group, nay a herd, of swaying and boisterous fans, obviously returning to Cardiff or wherever after a victorious foray into England. But rugby, in Slough? The rough, enormous men, fragranced by Stella Artois, were steered into coach B by an equally large group of orange jacketed dispatchers.

"We're full already!" the occupants of Coach B protested, to be ignored, the songs of the men swelling to fresh heights of bawdiness.

"Here's lovely!" one of them cried, his eyes alighting on the boy and girl opposite. "When's the baby due then? Do you know what you're getting? Look at her, lads!"

"Its any day now," the bearded man replied. His partner was looking paler by the moment. "He's a boy, not an it, and he might be here any minute," she muttered.

"Any day? Any minute?" cried the Welshman. "Let's give the child a song, boys, and help him into the world in true valley style!"

How they got six men into the space around the couple, Joe would never know. But lager or not, there was harmony undreamed of in that moment, as Cwm Rhondda filled Coach B, and the girl shed a tear as the song calmed the fears in her heart.

The train must be nearing his stop, he thought, but there was just time to check his phone. He'd left it in his case, which he got down, and opened. Again his heart missed a beat. The case looked like his, but inside, it was not. There was a royal monika on the leather, and three small, perfectly wrapped gifts, nestling in a presentation package.

Joe sat in stunned silence for a moment.

He looked across at the couple. He looked down the aisle at the swaying Welshmen. He remembered the fuss and bother of getting the Royalty onboard. He remembered the day-glo jacket and the words of the dispatcher, "This is the train for you, sir."

And right at that moment he realised that there was something he had to do. He leaned across the aisle, and said to the bearded man, "This is for you. For the little one. When the time comes," and handed over the case.

"Reading Station, next stop." The train pulled slowly in. It was five minutes past midnight. Nothing should be running on the line now, but this train was. Joe stood in the gangway with a crowd of others waiting to disembark. The songs of the rugby fans had died away with the miles, and the girlfriend was gripping tightly onto the arm of her seat, her breathing shallow and short.

He alighted, paused for a moment on the platform, then decided. Swiftly he turned around, and got back on board. The steward seemed surprised, but then smiled.

Joe smiled back. "Yes," he said. "Everyone needs to get this train, don't they?"