

NIGHT TRAIN

a story by Aharon Appelfeld

Once, many years ago, we rode a night train, Mother and I, on our way home from a beautiful but little-known resort. The coach was new, and on one of its curved walls there hung an advertising placard, a picture of a girl with cherries in her hand. It was a reserved car, with substantial seats, their headrests covered by embroidered white cloths. The forward door was open, and a girl who looked very much like the one in the advertisement appeared there holding a wooden tray. She stood in the doorway for quite some time. Then, all at once, as if responding to an order from outside, she began to serve late-evening coffee and cheesecake.

The blue of the darkness in the closed windows reminded me of the quiet water by whose shore Mother and I had spent the summer. It was a forgotten embankment, strewn with abandoned belongings, and the people too seemed deserted in the silent light. There were a lot of plump little fish there, which peered up from the bottom in dumb despair. They swam slowly, bitterly, with a kind of disquiet that infected me as well.

Summer vacation was over now. We were making the long journey home. It too was enchanted, filled with little touches of delight. Like the young woman with the green silk scarf around her neck who, for some reason, I took to be a baroness. Her face was transparently fair against the white cloth. Only a short while before, two servants had loaded her baggage on the train, and a dark gentleman with a foreign majesty about him had kissed her forehead. Since then, it seemed, she had not moved.

Her gaze was fixed - fastened, as it were - on some far-off point. She was partially hidden by a curtain, but I made do with half her face. The sight of her forehead inundated me with delight. But, as it happened, my happiness was already imperfect, was bound to be imperfect, for a certain sadness was gnawing at it from within. The intimation that, before the long journey had ended, this lovely face would wither darkened my small joy. And so I stared all the more intently, fearing to miss a single twitch.

The pure, white, motionless face called to mind the sunny days we had spent, Mother and I, on the deserted shore. There was no one there but us, and those who happened by, I understood now, were either lost or misled, quickly to pass on in one of the gusts of wind that blew through the reeds. And we'd be left to ourselves once again alongside the waning, imperturbable summer waters. The two dinghies apparently belonged to other times, other waters. In summer, the river is low, its banks dry and shriveled. The quiet silenced us completely. And if at first a few words had fluttered back and forth between us, they were soon snuffed out and never came back to life. Only in the water were we together.

We had gotten there by accident, in haste and out of caprice. Mother detested the luxury hotels and pensions. Father had been completely taken up with his literary successes, drunkenly shuttling back and forth between Vienna and Prague. His successes brought us little joy. A certain bitter tension filled the house. As though we were merely dust to be compacted by the steamroller of Father's achievements. He himself was probably not very happy

either. And since he was leaving just then for Prague, Mother decided that we should get away from it all to the simplicity of some desolate spot. It was thus that we chanced upon that particular cottage, by that particular stream, which was probably never considered worthy even of a name. At first she was content there, but little by little she withdrew into herself, her movements grew more sparing, and a kind of quiet, like that under a muffled ball, progressively enfolded us.

Only on the last day, when all this pleasantness had been laid bare - the two beds stripped, the suitcases packed - did Mother burst into bitter, mute tears. And I knelt down and dried her tears foolishly. I knew that new waters had flowed into the river, that we had been expelled from that place, even though no one had ordered us to leave in so many words. And all the simple beauty, that had never amounted to anything more than black bread, fresh milk, apples in an old basket - all the simple beauty on the banks of this river that was hardly worthy of the name - all this was suddenly gone, as if it had never existed. Mother wept, and I was at a loss for words, and foolishly I dried her tears.

And now the train was sailing along, gliding on its cushiony springs. Strange: it was as though this soft, new void were connected to the same nameless place we had just left. Every face, every shadow of a face, reminded me of the green water and the rustic hut where we had been.

The boy who had been brought into the forward compartment in a wheelchair was probably known to us from there too. His features were very delicate and seemed to float above his stocky

body, which was, apparently, completely paralyzed. His gaze slid over me briefly, and I sensed that he too was afraid of the soundless withering, the mysterious decay that was taking place here. Who knew where he was going? His head, floating above his stocky body, silently took in every glance, every hand carefully bearing a piece of cake to his mouth. I had no doubt he was pondering us.

The feeling that we were doomed here to destruction permeated me like a thick liquid. Perhaps it was because of the imposing appearance of the chief steward, splendid and severe in his green uniform, going from table to table and greeting the passengers with chilly correctness.

"Everything is in order," Mother said. Now I understood Mother's weeping. She had been afraid of the question, though it was clear that it would be asked in precisely this way. Mother laid her arms on the armrests and spread them apart. The chief steward, she explained, was merely inquiring after the passengers' well-being, asking whether they had any special requests or unforeseen problems. She still thought such explanations were called for.

The young baroness' eyes lit up and began roving from side to side. She was frightened but did not want to show her fear. She smiled a secretive smile. The crippled boy did not move. He seemed placid, as though resigned to his pain and to all that would befall him. A pity that went beyond himself rose in his quiet eyes.

"Why did you leave that beautiful riverbank?" the boy seemed

to ask, suddenly turning his gaze toward us. "It wasn't our fault," I tried to tell him, casting the words back into his gaze. "Other waters, wild waters, came down from the mountains and confounded everything."

"Too bad. It was such a charming place."

"Certainly, but what could we do?"

"I would not have left such a place."

And as weariness gradually overcame my power of imagination, the train ground to a halt. At first it seemed an illusion. Everyone knows the Express doesn't stop at small stations, much less at minor rural sidings. Taken by surprise, no one moved.

But it quickly became apparent that the train had, in fact, come to rest, and there was nothing to distinguish the place but a dark old sawmill. A woman's voice broke the silence. "Even the Express makes a mistake sometimes. It's just lucky we weren't derailed." The young baroness' eyes came into focus, and she surveyed the car with a look of cold puzzlement, as though we ourselves were the riddle.

"There are mishaps from time to time," came a rather complacent-sounding voice from within.

"There seem to be more and more of them lately. You can't depend on the Express any more."

No one moved.

It was the young baroness who was the first to get up. She reached over to the broad window and pulled it up. "Night," she said to no one in particular. "Can't see a thing."

"Why don't you go and ask?" a woman said in a cloying, feminine drawl, turning to her husband.

"What's there to ask? There's been a mishap."

"Well then, would you like me to do it?"

The man got up, stood erect, and turned toward the door. His bearing suggested that of a diplomat. The door opened with difficulty, emitting a heavy squeal. "For your information, I can't see or hear a thing. There's nothing here but an abandoned sawmill. Just what else did you expect me to find out?"

"Why we stopped."

"Because the engine stopped."

"I won't trouble you any further." The woman fixed her anger on the empty space inside the car.

Other passengers, their patience worn thin, climbed down off the train. They looked odd alongside the cars: like tiny insects, crumpling the straw which stood in their way. Had it not been for one woman who burst out laughing - a bold laugh, scorched by cigarette smoke - it might have been awfully tiresome to stand there. The woman laughed, and her voice bespoke a kind of mad pleasure. As though she had been expecting this very thing all through the years. The Express had never been late. This time it would be. There's nothing more human than being late. Her husband and two daughters would have to wait for her till kingdom come. Never mind, let them wait. The thought of her husband and daughters waiting on the platform amused her, and she laughed uncontrollably. And the longer she carried on, the more grating the sound of it became.

Suddenly, a clear voice jolted the speechless void:
"Express Number 422 begs the passengers' indulgence. Be-

cause of the unusual conditions, the Security Services request that all aliens, as well as Austrian citizens not born Christians, come forward to register at the office which has just been set up in the mill. They are requested to bring with them their passports, their identity cards, or any other documents which might serve to identify them."

The voice sent shock waves through the car, but it had no effect on the laughing woman. The laughter welled up out of her, as if she had been made to drink great quantities of overly sweet wine. "They mean me, they mean me!" she laughed. "A born Jewess!" Her heavy, ugly laughter was now infuriating in its frivolity.

"Why don't you keep quiet?" someone said, trying to get rid of her.

"What do you care?" she said.

It was evident by now that it was a drunken laughter. The woman stood up, looked around the car, and turned toward the exit. She was powerful and heavysset, and a gold medallion dangled from her hefty bosom. Mascara was running from the corners of her eyes. She snapped her head around, as if to announce that she alone was responsible for what was happening, that it was all her doing. But then, to everyone's surprise, she turned to those present and said in a motherly tone, "Come, children, let's register. You mean to tell me there are no Jews but me in this high-class coach? Amazing."

"Who's stopping you?" said the tall man with the diplomatic bearing.

"I need company."

"What are you talking to her for?" said his wife rancorously.

"Take me," said the crippled boy to his companion, an elderly woman with a pious, introspective look about her.

"Where?" the old woman asked, alarmed.

"To the office."

"What's got into you, my boy? There's no loading ramp here. You can see ^{for} yourself we're in open country. They mean healthy people. You, my boy, are exempt from all those things."

"I don't want to ignore official decrees," the boy replied, casting her a piercing glance.

"Of course," the old woman said, "but you'll have to agree with me conditions here don't permit unloading a heavy carriage like this one. I'm a woman, and I'm not so young any more either. I could hardly carry such a thing on my shoulders."

"I'll do it," the laughing woman said. "If the boy wants to register, why should he be prevented from doing so? He's been denied enough in his life."

"I'm certainly grateful to you for intervening," the old woman said, containing her anger.

"Will someone be good enough to lend a hand?" the laughing woman asked, addressing the car.

"I will," said the young baroness, getting up.

"How remarkable," the laughing woman exclaimed excitedly. "I would never have believed that you too belonged to his inferior race."

The young baroness did not react.

The old woman had no choice now but to respond to the help proffered by the others: to fold up the front armrest, to empty the storage compartment, and to indicate the proper points at which to take hold of the chair. She did all this reluctantly, mumbling the whole while. "Watch out for people's kindness. They're likely as not to send you to perdition."

The laughing woman took a firm grip on the chair, and once she was outside she addressed the coach malevolently. "Come out, children, come out and don't be ashamed."

The three women clung to the wheelchair, clearing a path for it down through the dry brush to the entrance to the mill, which had been illuminated in the meantime with a dim electric light.

A heavy, cumbersome movement in the adjoining cars had become noticeable. Voices grated in the entranceways, producing what sounded like arid laughter.

The man with the diplomatic bearing, his patience exhausted, got up and said, "I'm not going to hide in here like some thief in the night. If those people aren't ashamed to issue such invidious decrees, I for one have no intention of hiding from them."

"If you want to go, I won't stop you," his wife said. "Just keep in mind that what you are doing is harmful to all of us. You are aiding and abetting night-madness, pure and simple." She spoke with deliberate dryness.

"You want me to turn a deaf ear to this?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then what is it you want?"

"I want you to protest. The people in charge must be made to understand that the Express is not to be toyed with."

"Now I get it. You want me to make a scene."

"Do as you like. I don't care to argue."

An elderly couple got up from one of the side rows. The man, wearing spectacles, was evidently blind, and the woman, who next to him looked short and thin, held out both hands to him with the tenderness of warm affection. Mother went quickly to help them; and so we too joined the exodus.

In the wooden millhouse, all was commotion. Apparently the registration instructions had not been clear. A number of pragmatic types ran around protesting the delay. One of the officials explained to them that no one intended any harm; the purpose was merely to collect statistics. Two parallel queues were organized for registering. The crippled boy was already at the desk. The laughing woman stroked his head motheringly, provoking the ire of the elderly custodian.

When our turn came, Mother presented the documents ingenuously. She remembered every detail and, when it came to reporting my age, looked straight at me as if to indicate that she had exaggerated nothing.

The registration came to an end. The three women now dragged the wheelchair back alongside the train. The boy seemed pleased and used his hands to help turn the stubborn wheels. The elderly couple managed to climb back aboard without our assistance. The brightly-lit coaches, nestled in the open field, resounded with gaiety, as though newly refreshed by some restorative act.

"Someone's gone crazy," a man's voice announced. "I'm lodg-

ing a complaint."

"To be sure," said a woman who had apparently not intended to say anything at all.

At last, the doors were locked, and people returned to their seats. The chief steward stood once again in the doorway, a sign that the night had resumed its normal rhythm. Only the laughing woman, with her streaked mascara, did not stop exchanging glances with the crippled boy, who now sat erect in his chair, his hands clasped in front of him.

"Whoever didn't register can do so at the next stop," the woman said, taunting the others in the car. "There are still a few who haven't registered. No need to be ashamed. There are worse things than being a Jew, you know. The Jews are merchants. So what? Quite a few of them are doctors. Quite a few are journalists. I for one am not ashamed."

"We didn't make this trip in order to listen to your confessions," said the wife of the man who looked like a diplomat.

"What I'm concerned about is orderly administration," said the laughing woman, winking at the boy.

The young baroness now withdrew into her corner on the couch, fastening her gaze once again on some point in distant space. The thought that she too was one of us flooded me with a sweet sadness. But the laughing woman would not allow the coach any rest. She guzzled continually from a small, elongated bottle, all the while exchanging glances with the crippled boy, who sat in his chair drinking lemonade and cutting bits of cake for himself in a coldly pedantic fashion.

The train burrowed deep into the night now, its lights all

ablaze. The forward coaches were noisy with merriment, as though this were no ordinary night express but a train out to entertain itself. Couples stood in the dark entryway embracing shamelessly. The laughing woman egged them on with frolicsome grins and gestures. The crippled boy now laughed without interruption.

The stern wife of the man who looked like a diplomat stood up and said, "I simply can't understand what's happened here tonight. Is this the first-class coach or have we made some sort of mistake?"

"Don't you like our company?" asked the laughing woman in mock innocence.

"To put it delicately, no."

"Well, that's the way we are, like it or not."

"One expects certain manners in first class."

"What have we done then?"

"This Jewish noisiness is intolerable."

The laughing woman rose, and in a motion charged with pent-up energy, said, "Look who's talking about Jewish noisiness. I'll have you know that I myself am married to a gentile. I have two daughters waiting for me at the station; and even so, I haven't the slightest wish to deny my origins. I even said as much to my husband."

"We didn't come here to listen to confessions. The first-class coach is not for confessions. If there's to be any order here, I can see I'll have to call the chief steward."

The chief steward appeared in the doorway, and, catching sight of the quarreling women, raised his right hand and said, "I am asking for order here."

"Ask her then, if you please," said the laughing woman.

"Me?"

"I'll have you know, steward, that this elegant woman is Jewish through and through. She ignored the explicit summons and did not register in the office. She's ashamed. What's there to be ashamed of? Aren't we the same as other people?"

At such bluntness, there was quiet.

The woman drew herself up to her full height and said, "It's none of your business. As for my administrative transgressions, I'm prepared to give a full accounting. I still don't consider myself in the same basket with you."

"There's nothing to hide, madame. People are people."

"Not in the same basket with you."

"At least I'm not hiding anything."

"Silence!" the chief steward shouted. His voice was strong and decisive, like falling metal. And immediately the car was silent. From then on, not a whisper was to be heard. The coach was given over to the rhythmical bouncing of its springs. People stayed in their seats and did not utter a sound. The laughing woman, as though chastened, laid her heavy head on the armrest. A pall of weary smoke hung in the air. Mother took my hand and said, "We have a long way to go. Why don't you sleep a bit?"

I was awake, wide awake. The sadness that had lain dormant inside me since our departure was now revived. Mother's good hands tried in vain to shield me. I knew: what had been was gone forever. Even the place where we had been was dead.

The young baroness, who was sitting across from us in the adjoining compartment, took off her scarf, and tears now trickled

slowly from her beautiful, deep blue eyes. Mother sat upright. Her face was cold. The night wind, passing through, had frozen her expression. The chief steward no longer stirred from his post in the entryway. As though he had ceased being a chief steward at all and become a guard instead, appointed to keep order. The stewardesses stopped serving.

"What happened?" I heard a woman's voice whisper.

"Nothing. Bureaucratic insanity."

"It gave me quite a scare."

"It's nothing. Nothing to be scared about."

One by one, the lights went out. A thin, nocturnal chill penetrated the coach, enfolding its occupants in their sleep.

And while the coach was embalmed in sleep, the laughing woman got up, stretched the muscles of her face, drew a package of sweets from her purse, went over to the crippled boy, and said, "For you."

"Thanks," said the boy, leaning forward on his hands as if trying to stand up.

"Where are you going, my boy?"

"To have another operation."

"My poor boy. I gather you've already had an operation."

"Two so far."

"And this is the third?"

"The third."

"And your parents?"

"My parents have been separated," the boy said in a clear voice. "Since then I've been in a sanitarium, the Jewish Sanitarium for Paralytics."

"And now you're about to undergo your third operation. What courage. What heroism. I'm so glad I met you. The people in this coach drive me crazy. I can't stand cowards. Now they're asleep. It's as though nothing had happened. And you, my boy, are about to have your third operation. Is there hope? What did they tell you?"

"They didn't promise anything."

"And yet you take it so calmly, with such heroism."

"To tell you the truth, it's because I've got no choice."

The train began slowing down, and the laughing woman, who for some reason now seemed very fat, put her hands to her head and said, "What can I give this dear boy? I haven't anything. Here, take this medallion. It's mine." And without asking him, she hung the medallion around his neck. The bewildered boy, who all this time had been trying to lean forward on his hands, now made a strange, distorted sound in his throat, a sound which, had he not been sunk in humiliation, might have been taken for a laugh. At last, he regained control of his voice and said, "I don't want such an expensive present. I'd be obliged to you for the rest of my life."

"Nonsense, child. It's just a simple token of my love. If I had more, I'd give it to you. You're a heroic young man."

Without waiting for an answer, she hurried back to her seat, picked up a suitcase that seemed too small for the proportions of her body, bustled toward the door, and said, "I'm getting off here." The boy was still trying to get out some word of refusal, but his voice stuck in his throat.

The train began to chug, as if down a slope, toward the south.

The boy sat erect now, somehow petrified, the gold medallion on his chest. As though a title had been bestowed upon him that he was not entirely sure he wanted.

His custodian, who had kept out of the entire conversation, now opened her mouth and spoke. "Quite a find you got yourself. It's worth a fortune."

"I didn't ask for it."

"I hope you know enough to appreciate such generosity."

"I don't feel obliged," the boy said angrily.

"Admit it, you didn't want to make the trip in the first place."

"I'm not afraid. A person who's been through two operations is no longer afraid."

"Admit it, you refused to make the trip. And now look how you've been rewarded."

"What do you want from me?"

"Nothing. I'm just reminding you."

The boy lowered his head, and, for a moment, the reflection of the medallion distorted his chin, which was boyish and soft.

The clatter faded to a hush. And had it not been for the gaze of the chief steward standing guard in the entryway, it might have seemed like just another night on an ordinary late-summer train. All were tired, saturated with sun and water. Their sole desire was to be left to themselves, to their slumber.

Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, the woman whose husband looked like a diplomat turned quietly to him and said, "You were wrong."

"About what?"

"You know perfectly well."

"I don't understand."

"Wait and see."

"I haven't embezzled anything from the firm. I pay my taxes on time. What's my crime?"

"You're ignoring the main point."

"My questionable ancestry? I'm not proud of it, but I'm also not ashamed."

"But one shouldn't have anything to do with the likes of that fatso."

"My conscience is clear."

"I see you're finding it hard to admit."

"I admit it, I admit it," he said contemptuously.

The chief steward cast a sharp glance in their direction, and for some reason they stopped talking. The morning light began to glow, and I recalled the other summer vacations, the dim light that would pierce my sleep and summon me to wakefulness. Something had happened this year. Perhaps because we had lived without a father. Or perhaps because of the alien sweetness of that god-forsaken spot that had brought me so close to Mother, yet filled me with a sense that everything was doomed.

The morning light prevailed, and everyone was aroused. People folded up their blankets and exchanged glances, as if after a bad dream which brings a certain relief in its wake. Mother awoke too, took the suitcase down off the rack, and absent-mindedly said to herself, "Vacation is over."

"Will Father come to the station?" I asked.

"I doubt it," Mother said.

We still had time to look around at each other. The young baroness couldn't take her eyes off the crippled boy. A fine wrinkle had appeared on her chin. She was still lovely, but now the softness was gone. The man who looked like a diplomat, and his wife, also stood contemplating the boy. And for a moment there was a kind of peaceful intimacy among us. As though we had gotten to know each other.

Mother took out a box of chocolates and said, "Give some to the boy."

The boy looked sharply at me and said, "I don't need that."

"Take it," Mother called from where she was standing.

"I've had quite enough presents."

"But he's happy to give it to you," said Mother, coming to my aid.

"I don't enjoy being pitied."

"You're being unfair to the boy - that's not what he meant," Mother said cajolingly.

"I'm not here to arouse people's good intentions."

I stood by, covered with shame.

The train slowed again, and we approached our station, approached home. As we stood in the entryway, people tried to alleviate my little disgrace. The young baroness, too, cast a kindly glance in my direction. No one but us got off at that stop. The small snack bar was shuttered. The thin morning light did not conceal the neglect.

"Don't be angry with the boy. He's very sick," Mother said.

"He's on his way to have a third operation."

We walked toward the Hapsburg boulevard. There was not a soul the whole length of the way. The city was fast asleep.

"That laughing woman," Mother remembered aloud.

And I still felt in my legs the rhythm of our trek, the people. As if we were still there in the night mist, covered with stares. But above all, the stare of the boy, as though riveted to my brow.

translated from the Hebrew
by Michael Swirsky

