

The Passenger

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The Northern Express was seventeen minutes late when it finally groaned into Halcroft Station. Rain hammered the platform where I stood, the last passenger at the last stop on a miserable Tuesday night. Water dripped from my glasses and soaked through my supposedly waterproof jacket, the icy rivulets finding paths down my spine that made shivering an involuntary art form.

No conductor emerged to welcome me aboard, but the doors hissed open, offering shelter from the deluge. I climbed in, shaking off like a wet retriever, and made my way to the nearest empty seat. The train was nearly deserted—a handful of passengers scattered throughout the carriage, most asleep or hypnotized by their phones. I slumped into a window seat, my reflection a waterlogged ghost against the darkness outside.

Ten years of making this commute, and I still wasn't used to the loneliness of the late train. Ten years of watching the same rural English landscape slide by, a blur of hedgerows and distant farmhouse lights. Sometimes I wondered if I was actually going anywhere at all.

"Ticket?"

The voice startled me. I fumbled in my pocket for my monthly pass, presenting it to the conductor—a gray-haired woman who'd checked my ticket a thousand times before.

"Working late again, Mr. Collins?" she asked, the same question she always asked.

"The database doesn't update itself," I replied, my standard answer.

She nodded and moved on, checking the ticket of a teenager wearing headphones two rows ahead.

That's when I noticed him.

He sat directly across the aisle—a man who hadn't been there when I boarded. I was certain of it. He wore a charcoal suit that appeared perfectly pressed despite the downpour outside. His face was unremarkable in a peculiar way, as though designed to be forgotten the moment you looked away. But his eyes—they were attentive, curious, like a bird watching something it might either eat or flee from.

He caught me staring and smiled. "Dreadful weather," he said.

"Biblical," I agreed, turning back to my window, hoping to end the conversation before it began.

"It's good for the plants, though," he continued. "Or it would be, if there were any plants where we're going."

Something in his tone made me look back. "Pardon?"

"I said there aren't any plants where we're going." His smile remained fixed, pleasant but somehow empty of genuine emotion. "No rain either. No weather at all, really."

Great. A night train weirdo. I nodded politely and reached for my phone, the universal signal for "conversation over."

"Your device won't work soon," he said. "Once we cross the transition boundary."

I sighed. "Look, I've had a long day—"

"As have I. Seventeen years, to be precise." He adjusted his cuffs, revealing wrists that were oddly smooth, almost jointless. "That's how long I've been riding trains like this one, looking for the right passengers."

Against my better judgment, I engaged. "The right passengers for what?"

"For relocation." He gestured around the carriage. "You think this is the 10:42 Northern Express to Millborough, but it's not. Not anymore. It was rerouted approximately seven minutes ago."

I looked around at the other passengers—all still oblivious, asleep or absorbed in their devices. "Rerouted where, exactly?"

"We don't have a word for it in your language. The closest approximation would be 'elsewhere.'" He extended his hand. "I'm what you might call an immigration official. You can call me Phillips. It's not my name, but it will do for now."

I didn't take his hand. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"I'm not equipped for humor," Phillips said, withdrawing his hand without apparent offense. "I'm here to ease the transition for selected individuals. You're being relocated, Mr. Collins. You and everyone on this train."

"Relocated," I repeated flatly. "By aliens."

"That terminology is imprecise but functionally adequate." Phillips glanced at his watch—a complex instrument that didn't look like any timepiece I'd ever seen. "The transition completes in approximately twelve minutes. You may experience some discomfort. Nausea, existential dread, the sensation that reality is unraveling. This is normal."

I looked around for the conductor, but she had disappeared into another carriage. The rain outside had stopped, I realized. No—not stopped. The droplets hung suspended against the window, motionless, like tiny glass beads.

"What the hell?" I whispered.

"Time dilation," Phillips explained calmly. "A side effect of the transition process."

The teenager with headphones suddenly looked up, pulling them off. "My music stopped," he announced to no one in particular.

An elderly man across the carriage stood up, alarm spreading across his face. "The train—it's not on the tracks anymore!"

I pressed my face to the window. Where there should have been countryside, there was now... nothing. Not darkness, not light, just an absence that my eyes couldn't process, as if we were traveling through the space between thoughts.

"What's happening?" My voice sounded distant, even to myself.

"Your planet is dying," Phillips said simply. "Not immediately, but eventually. We've been authorized to preserve a sampling of Earth's population. You were selected based on various criteria—adaptability, resilience, genetic diversity."

"You're kidnapping us," I managed, my throat constricting with panic.

"We're saving you," he corrected. "And not just you—thousands of others on similar trains, buses, ferries. All in transition at this exact moment."

The carriage filled with the sound of panic—confused questions, phones that wouldn't work, a child beginning to cry. Phillips remained serene amid the chaos.

"Why trains?" I asked, surprising myself with the question.

"Psychological research indicated that humans adapt better when the transition mimics familiar transportation methods. Trains are particularly effective—the linear movement creates a narrative of departure and arrival that helps your minds process the transition."

The nothing outside the windows began to change, taking on texture, dimension. Impossible colors seeped in, forming patterns that hurt to look at directly.

"Eight minutes to arrival," Phillips announced, loud enough for everyone to hear. "The disorientation is temporary. You will be provided with accommodations and orientation upon arrival."

"Arrival where?" the teenager demanded, his face pale.

"Your new home," Phillips said. "One of many worlds where your species will continue."

"You can't just take people!" an outraged woman shouted from the back of the carriage.

Phillips tilted his head, considering her. "Would you prefer extinction? Because those are the options. Not today, not tomorrow, but eventually. We've seen it happen before."

Silence fell over the carriage, heavy with implication.

I looked at my fellow passengers—strangers united in this bizarre abduction. The elderly man had sat back down, shoulders slumped in resignation. The teenager was filming the impossible landscape with a phone that couldn't possibly be working. The woman who had protested was now staring out the window, transfixed.

"Why me?" I asked Phillips quietly. "I'm nobody special. I update databases. I live alone. No one will even miss me."

"Perhaps that's precisely why," Phillips replied. "Adaptability includes the ability to leave behind without excessive trauma." His expression softened slightly. "But if it helps, Mr. Collins, where we're going, 'nobody special' doesn't exist. Everyone is essential to the preservation project."

The train began to slow, though there were no tracks beneath us anymore, only the swirling, impossible landscape outside.

"Will we ever go back?" I asked.

Phillips met my eyes, and for the first time, I saw something genuinely human in his expression—compassion, perhaps, or regret.

"That," he said, "depends entirely on what you help us build in the elsewhere."

The doors hissed open to a world I had no words to describe, and together, we stepped off the train.