

Arrivals and Departures

by Foster Trecost

1. Waiting on a Train

Because of her I got there early, and like I figured, the train was late. I paced the platform to pass the time, then settled in a quiet corner, but gave up on solitude when someone settled next to me. I sized him up, he seemed feeble, safe enough, so I spoke: "I bet if we'd been late, the train would've been on time, and we would've missed it."

"That's not how it works," he said, his voice wrinkled like the rest of him.

I questioned his response, but only to myself. Then, when I'd thought of something to say, I soaked it in sarcasm, and said, "Okay Mr. Train, then tell me, just how does it work?"

"Trains get here when they get here," he said. "And we get here when we get here. But these things have nothing to do with each other."

As much as I wished it didn't, his answer made sense, and I was unsure if I should say anything. Then, like sentence-ending punctuation, a whistle burst onto the platform, making it clear there was nothing left to say.

2. An Hour Earlier

"You better go, you'll miss your train."

"If I leave now, I'll be too early. I hate waiting for trains. And they're never on time anyway.

"This one might be."

"I'll get stuck talking to someone. I never know what to say."

"Maybe you'll learn something."

"To keep my mouth shut, that's what I'll learn."

3. On the Train

I claimed the first seat I saw, happy to leave our conversation on the platform, but when he wedged next to me, it seemed certain to continue. I decided to speak first, and shifted to a less-lofty subject.

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"How far you going?" It was a simple enough question and I anticipated a simple enough answer.

"I'm taking this train to the end of the line," he said. "And if this one doesn't get me there, I'll take the next."

So much for simplicity. To think about it now, this was my cue to switch seats, walk to a less crowded car, but I hesitated, frozen in my phobias.

"I came into this world on a train," he said.

4. 82 Years Earlier

It mattered little where they were. It could've been a hospital or even at sea, but as it happened, they were on a train. Miles from the next stop, she birthed a baby boy into a moving world, but through the windows, terrain raced by in such a way, it felt like the train sat still and everything else moved.

"I'll call him Pullman," she said.

The gentle sway relaxed Pullman. He slept and stayed asleep until they reached the next station. When the train came to a stop, he woke and began to cry.

5. Back on the Train

"And I reckon I'll leave on one, too."

More than my palms began to sweat. I opted against asking for clarification, but sensed it was coming.

"Maybe this one will get me there," he said, "maybe the next. I don't have much control over the when, but I can sure as hell dictate the where."

With this, I spilled into the aisle before he could say anything else. I got off at the next stop and caught the first train going in the same direction.

Later that night and all the next day, and for many days after, I scanned the news. I searched headlines and obits, but never found anything. I suppose he's still looking for the end of the line, hoping he's riding the rails when he gets there. If I ever see him waiting for a train, to be on the safe side, I'll wait for the next.

6. The Obituary

Pullman Smith, 82, was found dead on a local train. Written on a page folded in in wallet were the words, "I came into this world on a train, and I reckon I'll leave on one, too." That he did. Family members have yet to come forward.

