

# Coupé

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IN WINTER, you get onto the train to Moscow at dusk or at first dark. From the Tallinn train station, you can almost see the lights of the harbor. The train station, though, smells nothing of the Baltic sea. It smells of the coal stoves used to heat the trains in winter. The gritty, brown smoke hangs over the station platforms and brings on the dusk even earlier. The train pulls out at 5:45 p.m., heading east towards the darkest part of the horizon and down into Russia.

The train coupé is small—almost cozy, if you are traveling with someone you know. In each coupé are four bunks, two below, two above, with rolls of bedding; a tiny table under the window; a narrow carpet runner down the middle of the floor. You sit, knee to knee with your traveling companion across from you, the little table to the side and the carpet runner between you. The attendant brings you boiling hot tea. The sugar cube sinks to the bottom of the tea glass and slowly dissolves. Stir. The metal teaspoon clinks intimately against the glass. Beyond the dark window, the iron wheels clank endlessly over their iron rails, and your time begins. Hours of waiting. The train jostles too much for reading or writing and the light is always bad. There is nothing to look at or to listen to except your traveling companion. Six hours of waiting before the border crossing to Russia, followed by another ten hours when you try, hopefully, to sleep.

In the past I have ridden the train when all four bunks were full, but this winter there are always only two in each coupé. Me, and twelve inches across from me on the other bunk, my mate. To spend so much time in such proximity with a stranger seems strained indeed, but by now it is a familiar social relationship that has its own familiar forms. In the first six hours, you drink tea and converse, or not, depending on your judgment of the situation. After the border crossing, you sleep, pretending to be unaware of the person sleeping on the bunk next to yours. In the morning, you wake, assemble your things, and nod the briefest of farewells before disappearing into the city.

I have had, as a coupé mate, a fat, middle-aged businessman who talked constantly, boasting of his adventures. He insisted on taking me to the dining car, a place I usually avoid. I have twice traveled with silent,

middle-aged men dressed in old, down at the heels Soviet suits. The first said only two things: "Good evening," at the beginning of our journey; and "Goodbye," at the end. The second said nothing at all.

I have had a dark-haired woman who talked and talked, though never on the same subject for more than two minutes. She told fascinating fragments of stories from which I pieced together that she had spent her working life as a nurse in a prison in the far north. She had also worked at a medical station in the south during the war in Chechenya. I wanted to ask more, but didn't know what to say without being inappropriate and prying.

And I had, once, a dark, unshaven man, who got on the train at the last minute before it left the Tallinn station and sat heavily, unmoving. After a while he stood and hung up his imitation leather jacket, took off his rough polyester necktie, and then sat again, slumped against the back wall. I sipped my tea and looked steadily at the same four items on the little tray table: teaspoon, mint green, paper tea packet, tiny white ceramic vase with tiny plastic flowers, all sitting on a green square of cloth.

"I just buried my father," he said.

"Oh?" I said. And I looked toward him, though not at him, in a courteous, distant way. I could feel the grief begin to seep out of him, filling the close air of the coupé. Grief closing in, settling heavily on the top of my head like a sediment of heavy ash, laying itself along my shoulders like a shawl. Grief wrapped around us both like a heavy blanket.

"He died last week." And then a long pause as the weariness drained from his body into the bunk. "And I had to come to Tallinn to bury him."

I picked up the teaspoon and put it into the tea glass as I thought of what to say.

"I'm very sorry," I said.

And another long silence, as I sat under the heavy shawl of pain, my unwilling share.

"I buried my mother, too. A few years ago."

The train rattled the handle of the standing teaspoon against the edge of the glass. I took the spoon out, carefully stopped the last drip from the bowl of the spoon against the glass rim, and placed the spoon onto the green square of cloth next to the white vase.

"Did your parents live long in Tallinn?" I finally thought to say.

Maybe he said yes, maybe he just shrugged, either gesture too weak to complete, and then he stared at the latch handle of the coupé door.

"It's not easy to bury your father," he said, his eyes still fixed on the latch handle.

A long pause.

"It's not easy to bury your parents," he said.

I held my hot tea glass as it sat on the table, and took my hand away, and then held the glass again.

"Of course it's not," I finally said.

We sat for another twenty minutes. And then he got up, slid open the coupé door, stepped out, slid the door shut.

A stranger on a train—the beginning of a missionary story. A death, the painful loss of a parent. If this were a missionary story, I should tell him, I have the remedy for your loss, the formula. But the spirit laid a hand across my mouth and said, keep silent. There is nothing you can do to help this stranger, nothing to take away his grief. Nor should you, nor can you escape it yourself. As foreign as he is to you—a nobody, a chance assignment to the same coupé—his fresh, burning grief will burn you as well. Though you have nothing else in common, you will have this.

When he came back, it was late. He was carrying a dark brown bottle of liquor and two beautiful, bright yellow-red apples. He had been in the dining car, dousing his hot grief in vodka. He set the apples heavily onto the little table, and stood the brown bottle beside them, and then sat heavily on his bunk. The jostling of the train counted out at least ten minutes.

"Here," he said to me, and pushed the bottle toward me. "Have a drink. Please."

The bottle was still unopened, and my tea glass had already gone back to the attendant. It was easy to refuse.

"No, thank you."

"Really," he said heavily. "Have a drink." But I shrank from his gestures toward me, his need to make contact. What he offered to share was too bitter, too strong.

"Here," he said to me and slid the bottle toward me another half inch. He spoke slowly, with long pauses as his exhausted words limped across the small table. "Take the whole bottle. You don't even have to open it now. You can save it for later." I shook my head, refusing.

Another long pause.

"I'm giving it to you as a present."

"No. Thank you," I said.

He sat wordlessly, staring at the carpet.

"Then have an apple," he finally offered.

"Thank you," I said, reluctantly, and I took the apple nearest to me. It was a beautiful apple, heavy and larger than my hand. Its yellow-red skin was perfect. I held it low in my lap, not sure what I was going to do.

"Are you going to take the other one?" I finally asked.

"Yes," he said. But he didn't move.

I ate the apple carefully, sucking the juice in each round bite so that it didn't drip. Inside the apple was sweet and white, with red veins near the center. I ate the apple down to the core, leaving the seeds in their cases. I laid the apple core on the green cloth of the table, and then stood up to unroll my bedding. It was finally late enough to go to sleep.

My companion also stood, his back to me. He put his left hand

against the upper bunk and leaned his forehead against it, and with his right hand laid out his bed with deliberation. Then he turned and pulled down the brown plastic window shade the last few inches. He fixed it tightly in the frame, against the ice-covered glass. He switched off the overhead light, leaving only the dim night light.

I lay down, covered myself with the blanket, and closed my eyes, thinking of the train moving through the snow, and me, motionless, moving along with it. I thought of myself lying straight on my hard narrow bed, the bunk above me close like a coffin lid, and of all the other bunks stacked row after row in the long train, and on each one, a person lying silent and still in the dark, like a cemetery.

I do not know when I fell asleep, but sometime later, I woke up, suffocating. The air in the coupé was stifling. I threw off the wool blanket. I opened the window shade, hoping to get a draft through a crack in the window frame. It was no help. I got up and opened the coupé door a couple of inches, but after a few minutes the jostling of the train slid it closed again and it latched shut. In the dark, I folded my wool blanket and wedged it over the heat vent, underneath the little table. I leaned back and tried to breathe. It was no better. I put my hand flat against the ice on the window, held it there. After half a minute I put my cold hand against my face. I did this over and over, wanting but unable to sleep.

Finally I got up, put on my boots, and went out into the little corridor. It was brightly lit but deserted. I pulled aside the flimsy nylon drapes and pressed my face and hands and arms against the window in the corridor, first one side of my face, then the other, hoping to cool off. But the hot air came out from the open coupé door, and I could feel it against my back, pushing against my shoulders.

I slid the coupé door shut behind me, and walked up the corridor. I went outside and stood alone on the platform at the end of the car where the winter air from outside came in through the joint to the next car. The snow sifted in from a crack above and fell in a white fan on the grey metal floor. I stood there in my shirt sleeves and jeans until I was shivering, and then I went back to my coupé and tried again to sleep. But every time I fell asleep, I woke up again. Over and over. My coupé mate slept heavily, darkly, on the next bunk. The heat streamed from underneath the little table, and I could not breathe. Half a dozen times, I went out to the platform and stood until I was chilled through. But always I had to return to my coupé. It was the deep of night, my knees were dropping with fatigue. I wanted to sleep, sleep, sleep. But I couldn't.

In the morning, the attendant woke everyone. Business-like, she knocked about from one coupé to the next, wrenching the coupé doors open one after another, then sliding them shut with a bang when she left. She slammed the door open, bringing unwanted tea, then slammed the door shut. Slammed the door open, dragging the bedding out, slammed

the door shut. Then she was back again, collecting the tea glasses and spoons. Slammed open; slammed shut. At every coupé, all along our car.

I was aching with sleeplessness. I sat on my bunk, leaning against the coupé wall, falling asleep and waking with each door slam. When we were already in the Moscow suburbs, the attendant came in for the final time. She handed me back my ticket. Then she turned to my companion and put his ticket onto the table and left. It was the first time I'd looked at him that morning. He was sitting just as I was, slumped against the coupé wall, just as he had sat the previous night. If I looked at anything, it would be unavoidable to see him too, but it was too much effort to keep my eyes open. I kept them closed until I heard my companion stand to gather his things, put on his jacket, collect the brown bottle standing on the table and shove it into his zippered bag. He collected the other apple, too. The train pulled up to the platform, and he walked out to stand in the corridor, to wait for the doors to open. I don't know if he nodded goodbye. I gathered my things, put on my long wool coat, my scarf and gloves. At the last minute, I looked back into the coupé and saw the apple core sitting on the table. Conscience weighed on me. I picked the apple core up and put it into my pocket. Then I stepped off the train and dragged myself into the city.

We speak in symbols, even when we are beyond speaking. I cannot say or know if this man loved his father, only that he grieved. And that I knew I had no wisdom to lift or lessen his grief. For him, a long night of inescapable isolation; for me, in the troubled hours of that same passage, an involuntary brotherhood. We travel, all of us, in a narrow coupé with wordless, well intentioned strangers, through stories that have no easy endings.