

*There are precious things*

*Alison MacLeod*

on the 4.38 out of Mile End.

In carriage three, Tanisha drops into a seat. Today, her mother arrived late to look after obi, and now she is worried she will be late for her shift for the third time this month. Each afternoon, when obi comes home from school, she looks at his new drawings or marvels over the words in English he has learned to spell. Then her mother comes – today bearing electric Christmas candles from the Pound Shop – and Tanisha sprints from her door to the Underground. Sometimes she wonders that so much of her life can pass below ground. Each day, she travels from her basement flat to the Central Line, from the Central Line to the Victoria Line and from the Victoria Line to the ladies' toilets beneath Victoria Station, where she is the evening attendant.

Last week, when her mother was laid low with flu, she had no choice but to take obi with her. She cleaned, then closed a stall, and obi sat inside, legs crossed on the toilet lid with his colouring book in his lap. But whenever she turned, he was out again, grinning over the Dyson Airblade, watching the flesh on his chubby hand ripple in the blast of air. The next day her

supervisor informed her that a woman had complained about a boy of ten in the ladies' loos. Tanisha explained that obi is only seven. She is on her final warning.

She opens her bag and takes out his letter to Father Christmas. It's written in tipsy purple letters, and he wants three things: a radio-control helicopter, a sledge and a Dyson Airblade. She told him that Father Christmas doesn't make air blades, but he shook his head earnestly and told her she was wrong. She cannot bring herself to say there is never snow for a sledge in Mile End, only dirty slush. Nor can she tell him that a radio-control helicopter needs a back garden.

In their language, obi means 'heart'. She cannot be late today.

As the train leaves the station, carriage three jolts as if it wants to leap the rails, and the square of obi's letter flutters to the floor, landing between the feet of the young man across from her. He's reading sheet music. Tanisha wonders whether she can pluck up the letter without disturbing him, but Edgar spots the bit of paper next to his oversized trainer and returns it with a smile.

At Bethnal Green, Edgar and Tanisha watch a nun board the train. For a moment it seems as if her brown habit will be caught in the closing doors, but she yanks it free just in time and meets Tanisha's eyes, smiling mischievously, like a white-haired child in her sixties.

It is standing room only. Edgar rises, shuffling his music, and offers Sister Kate his seat who thanks him, touching his shoulder lightly. Some part of the nun, Edgar cannot help but notice, is whistling in the key of D. He does not know that in the whorl of each of Sister Kate's ears sits a newly fitted hearingaid.

The harsh lighting makes bone and shadow of every face.

Sister Kate reaches up to adjust the tiny dial on each of her hearing aids, as her audiologist showed her, and she ceases to whistle. Each year she ventures just once out of the convent in Notting Hill to travel down the Central Line to the Bethnal Green clinic and back again. Each year she hears less and less, and curiously perhaps for a nun in a silent, cloistered order, she dreads the thought of being cut off from the song of the world.

She wakes each morning to the convent bell. Her room is next to the bakery, and as her eyes open, her heart remembers its rhythm in the automated thumps of the altar-bread press that resound through the party wall. She loves the soft shuffle of shoes as the women move towards morning prayer, and at teatime, the Prioress's voice rings out as delicately as a percussionist's triangle. Even the sound of Sister Martha taming the fruit trees in the garden with her electric hacksaw is somehow a delight to her ear.

There is so much to love.

A group of builders stands above her, joking – in Polish, she believes. She can smell the cool air of December coming off them. One – a husky man with bright apple cheeks – grins and bats his eyelashes at his friend, who, in reply, reaches towards the red lever of the passenger alarm.

Sister Kate thrills to their antics. Then she reaches into her carrier bag and takes out her knitting. The visitors' shop at the convent is selling hand-knit mobile phone covers, and the pattern is simple enough.

In the seats around her, many of her fellow travellers appear to be reading their phones. It is a concept she fails to understand.

She glances at the watch the Prioress has lent her. She must be back by vespers. The sweetness of those evening devotions is the closest she has come to joy, and she must be content with that. She has not felt a union with her god since the dream she had as a novice, age twenty, when she woke brimming with a love so unconditional, so full, her face streamed with tears. In those moments, there was no one and nothing of which she was not a part. But in her forty-four years of prayer and contemplation, that tidal wave of love has never picked her up again.

Two seats away, a woman holds a small dark-haired boy in her lap. He clutches a plastic toy. Sometimes, as now, Sister Kate tries to imagine the faces of the children she did not have.

The knitting needles tsssk and click between her fingers.

At Liverpool Street, the builders exit, the boy squirms in his mother's lap and shoppers with Christmas wrap poking from their bags settle into carriage three. Lionel is the last to board. He falls into a seat as the train lurches into motion.

To his left, a white guy about his own age grips the overhead rail; his other hand presses a sheaf of sheet music to his chest. Across the aisle, Lionel watches Tanisha, who is reading obi's Father Christmas letter again. Next to her, a nun is knitting something blue. When she looks up, he looks away and shifts in his seat.

Lionel feels odd sitting across from a nun with a semen sample in his shirt pocket. But Bart's Hospital is just a seven-minute walk from St Paul's Station. He timed it last week. The sample mustn't be more than an hour old. He is on track to hand it in to the Fertility Unit fifteen minutes before its expiry. The sample has to be kept at body temperature. They gave him what looked like a test tube and told him to travel with it as close to his person as possible.

Lionel has taken the past few hours off from the garden centre. His mouth dried up when his boss asked why – after all, they still have 500 Christmas wreaths to shift. On break, he tried to distract himself with November's issue of *Flowers R Us*, flipping to a random article about the common poppy. 'over seven years,' it said, 'a pair of poppies will produce 820,000 million million million descendants.'

Bloody show-off poppies.

He and Jacinta have been trying for three years.

The other night, they watched a documentary about human conception. It showed the epic journey of the sperm to the egg from the sperm's point of view. Inside Jacinta lay a vast and indomitable mountain range. If a sperm was a lone man, the territory was five miles deep, two miles wide and hostile. There was killer acid. There were ninja antibodies. The cervix, apparently, was every sperm's nightmare.

Jacinta turned to him on the settee, her eyes big and tearful at the miracle of creation.

Last month, she checked out fine.

Sometimes, in the small hours, Lionel dreams he's a tree. He is fine and strong until the wind blows and he topples, because he's only a trunk and not a tree after

all. He has no roots, and the falling sensation – always horrible – jolts him from sleep.

He doesn't know why he felt he should wear a suit and tie to deliver his sample.

Now, in the steel hum of carriage three, Lionel cups his hand over the bulge of the tube in his shirt pocket, as if he's cradling a small head against his chest.

The train hurtles through a tunnel, and the boy in his mother's lap starts to whimper.

Clifton can't remember how long he has been riding the Central Line. It is the longest journey possible on the Underground. Forty-six miles from Epping Station to West Ruislip. He remembers that.

He rode this line every day of his working life, getting off at Leytonstone and walking the mile to the school. He'd always wanted to be a history prof, not a senior schoolteacher hauling boys apart every lunch hour. All his life, dates and facts have roosted effortlessly in his head.

But this afternoon, he walked into the lounge and saw a strange woman sitting in the armchair next to their Christmas tree. She was reading a book by the glow of the lights, and she smiled at him as he passed.

Alice, his wife, was stripping the bed in their room. 'Who is that woman in our house?' he asked. 'What is she doing here?' His heart struck at his ribs.

'Ssssh now,' she said, squeezing his hand. 'That's Diane, our *fourth*. Our *baby*.'

She reached for the snap propped up on his chest of drawers. Four children grinned back at him: three boys and a girl. On the reverse was a list of names. The

final line read: 'our Diane. She has been in America for some years now but visits.' The handwriting was his.

His eyes filled. 'My God, Alice. What is *wrong* with me that I don't even know my own daughter?'

She sat him down on the bare mattress. She said the consultant had assured them that, along with the episodes of confusion, he would still experience *good* periods of lucidity. She explained that he forgets even the diagnosis, and that every other day she has to remind him. She said that each time she does, they go through the heartbreak of it all over again.

He pressed his fists to his eyes. He needed fresh air – 'to clear his head,' he said – but in that moment, he knew his head would never be clear again.

He clutches a ticket for Zone 6, the snap of their children and a photo-booth picture of Alice. On the back, in tiny letters, he sees his own writing again: 'Weekend at seaside, 1968. Alice in Kiss-Me-Quick hat.'

*Yes, quick, Alice, quick.* He imagines the softness of her lips. His thumbprint smudges her face. The carriage lurches sharply around a corner, and even now there are precious things.

Edgar has found a seat once more. The nun spotted it first, and, remembering that he gave up his seat for her, she nodded at him to take it – quick, quick, said her smile. Now he turns another page of music and follows the thread of his melody with his finger. Will the choir pull it off today?

He loves Tallis's six-part score. He can already hear the soaring harmonies and that vast tenderness of sound. He's one of the nine soloists, and in the fifth verse, the intervals must be perfect. He tries to remember where

syllables cluster intricately over a note; where the breath is divided into semibreves. He thought James, their conductor, pompous when he said it, but now he understands: the polyphonic antiphon is, literally, breathtaking.

Ahead, through the grubby window of the carriage door, he can just see the back of James's head in carriage two. At six feet four, he's hard to miss, and today, apparently, at the moment of truth, he'll don a bright red woolly hat. 'on that platform,' he announced to the group, 'I shall be your beacon!'

They groaned in unison.

His fellow choristers, Edgar reassures himself, are dotted through the other seven carriages.

He always feels naked in the first tremulous moments, with no organ for accompaniment; with just the power of one voice passing a line delicately to the next. Today, they will feel more naked than ever. No cathedral. No church. No stage. No formal wear. James is calling it the choir's 'gift of song'. Not that they can advertise it. The element of surprise will be everything. Edgar just hopes no one heckles or tries to shove him on to the rails for a laugh.

'Into the fray!' James had said, and Edgar's stomach had seized up.

He deepens his breathing and begins to shape the lyrics on his lips, one phrase at a time, unaware he's murmuring aloud: *Gaude gloriosa Dei Mater . . .* Rejoice, o glorious Mother of God . . .

He hears every syllable of song, every beat, every voice and breath. Nothing is excess. Nothing is stray. Just one more stop and—

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Clifton presses Alice's photo-booth picture to his chest.

Lionel shelters the sample in his shirt pocket.

Sister Kate looks up from her knitting and almost weeps at the sound of Edgar's gentle murmurings. (*Gaude gloriosa Dei Mater . . . Rejoice.*)

In Tanisha's bag, obi's letter to Father Christmas is safely stowed. When the little boy in the woman's lap squirms again and drops his toy, a plastic dinosaur, Tanisha bends quickly to retrieve it, jiggling his foot as she passes it to him.

The boy's mother turns, her face hard. 'Who said you could touch my son?'

'I'm sorry,' says Tanisha. 'I only—' She cannot get her English out quickly enough. She cannot say that, in Nigeria, children and old people are meant to be loved by everyone.

Edgar's eyes close. *Gaude Virgo Maria, cui angelicae turmae dulces in caelis resonant laudes . . . Rejoice, O Virgin Mary, to whom the hosts of angels in heaven sweetly sing praises . . .*

The mother's elbow nudges Tanisha in the ribs. 'Listen to yourself. You can't even speak English. What are you doing in this country?'

'I work,' says Tanisha. 'I do not take anything.'

'I used to work till' – she looks down the carriage and raises her voice – 'till you lot come over.'

'No British want my job,' says

Tanisha. 'Pull the other one.'

'Excuse me?'

Edgar's eyes snap open and he glares at the mother. 'Ignore her. She doesn't deserve a reply.'

Across the aisle, Lionel leans forward in his seat, still cradling the sample. 'Get this straight, yeah? I'm

British, lady. Most of the people on this train is British.’

‘And I’m Nelson Mandela!’

Clifton starts to rock in his seat, hands pressed to his ears. Who is this woman? And where *is* Alice?

Edgar cannot lose the words. *Gaude flos florum speciosissima . . .* Rejoice, most beautiful flower of flowers . . .

Clifton fumbles for his mobile phone. ‘Alice, Alice? Where am I? For Lord’s sake, tell me where I am . . .’ He forgets that the Central Line runs deep, and there is no signal.

*fessi cura . . .* succour of the weary . . .

Sister Kate bows her head, finds a still, innermost place and prays as the woman begins to rant.

‘I will ask you politely, yeah?’ says Lionel. ‘Would you please leave this train?’

‘Me? It’s you lot who need to leave!’ She eyeballs Lionel, Tanisha and Clifton.

Voices. Such noise, such terrifying noise. Clifton stumbles to his feet. He looks around the carriage, wild-eyed. Everyone is a stranger. ‘Stop!’ he cries out, ‘please stop!’ as the train pulls into St Paul’s, and Edgar, music in hand, leaps from the train to the platform, where James the conductor lifts his arm, and the voice of the first soloist rises.

The notes soar, like Lionel’s hope as he sprints away, palm pressed to his pocket; like the wave of love that lifts Sister Kate at last, there in the ugly light of carriage three, where Tanisha takes Clifton tenderly by the hand, as the voices swell and the harmonies surge, rising above the astonished crowd.