**A train journey**

**Elizabeth Shove and Caroline Shove**

I always have poached egg on toast for breakfast and today was no exception. I was anxious, no question about it. I gulped down my tea, keen to get the day underway. It was about a mile to the depot and after the first few weeks I decided that the best way to get there was by bike. I put on my helmet, tucked my trousers into my socks and slotted the lights into place, front and back.

We have lockers at the depot, and that’s where I keep the cycling gear when I’m at work. I put on my official driver’s jacket, clocked in, collected the key, signed the log book at that was it. I couldn’t back out now. My new-found friends were full of the joys of life. ‘Big day for you Shaun, out on your own for the first time’. They laughed. But it was true, it was my first solo journey and not an easy one at that – round the Selwood loop, two short platforms, a very tight bend, dozens of signals and a lot of concentration required. Normally I had Archie, my mentor, with me but today I was on my own.

It was raining and dark, but I knew about the lights and wipers, and although I’d learned the route by heart, I had my little notepad to hand.

The train was waiting for me and so was Nicky, the guard. We chatted for a moment, then I put the key in place and turned the switches on in sequence. After one false start that was it, I was out on the track and alone in the cab. My heart was racing: ’Focus’, I said to myself, ‘focus on the job in hand’. The controller spoke over the radio from Four Bridges. ‘Morning Shaun. Don’t forget about Norbiton and Harbury. Archie said I should keep a close eye on you today.’

The first two station stops went fine. I began to relax. Maybe this wasn’t such a hard job after all. That’s when the problems began. A red light flashed on the console. I’d never seen that before. That must have been what distracted me. The next station was Norbiton – with one of the short platforms that I’d been dreading. I forgot to check the distance and I overshot.

The controller was on the radio straight away. ‘Shaun, you’ve overshot. Don’t worry about it son, everyone does it sometimes – don’t wait for the passengers to walk through the carriages, just tell Nicky to shut the doors and go on, the 06.50 is right behind you’.

I felt awful. But I did as I was told. I couldn’t even say I was sorry. I started off again, trembling. ‘Deep breath’, I said to myself, ’take a deep breath. No one is hurt, just a few people ending up at the wrong station’. Little did I know that my small mistake would have such huge effects.

I still have her letter folded in my driver’s jacket pocket. This is what it says.

To the driver of the 06.30.

I am not given to writing letters like this, but I can’t thank you enough for changing the course of my life. I don’t know your name, but I found the address of the depot and I’m hoping this will reach you. On 28th January you overshot the short platform at Norbiton, and you didn’t wait to allow the passengers in the front carriage to walk down the train. Under normal circumstances, I would be writing to complain, but not in this case.

Let me explain. I have commuted to Norbiton for the last 35 years, always on the 06.30. When I found that I couldn’t get off, I went on to the next station, thinking I could walk back and still be at the office on time. I had my phone and I followed the little dots on google maps.

At first I was annoyed and in a rush, but as I walked I began to notice my surroundings. Google maps took me through a suburban area, along alleyways and around the back of gardens that I never knew existed. There were robins and a blackbird. After about 20 minutes the path opened out and to the left. There was a huge cemetery, with rows and rows of gravestones. I paused. The rain had stopped a while ago, but I could see my breath in the cold. That will be me one day, I thought. Just a stone in a graveyard, noticed by no one. A bit further on there was a bench. I sat down and looked at my watch. I was going to be late. But by then I didn’t care. What kind of future did I have anyway. Back and forth to the office, and back and forth and back and forth – and for what?

A wren was dipping in and out of the ivy at the edge of the rough tarmac pathway. No more, I said to myself, that’s it. I checked my phone. I wasn’t going to work. I was going to retrace my steps and get the next train back home. Who knows what next. But then who knew that the train would overshoot the station?

Whoever you are, and whatever the reason why you missed the platform, I am eternally grateful.

Yours sincerely

Siobhan Hughes