

In this extract a boy has rushed to get a train. As he travels he realises that something is wrong: the train has been travelling for longer than it should have been and he doesn't recognise where he is.

The Wrong Train

Finally, the train juddered to a halt in the dark, and he didn't even know whether it was at a station or not, because, cupping his hands to the glass, there were only a few lights and a low concrete wall to be seen out of the window. But the light on the door button came on, and being off the train seemed a better deal than being on it. So, getting out of his seat, he stepped onto the cold, dark platform.

Hearing the doors of the train close behind him, and the engine revving up and pulling away leaving him there in the dark and the cold, he wasn't so sure it had been a good idea at all. There was no one else on the platform, but by then it was too late to do anything except watch the lights of the train disappear. When the sound of it couldn't be heard any more, there was no sound at all. Just silence.

It didn't even look like a real station. The slab concrete of the wall ran along the back of it and there was a little shelter with a bench, but nothing else – not a ticket office or a machine. Not even a sign to say where it was. He could see the ends of the platform sloping down to the tracks and there were three lamps on poles, but the light from them was thin and weak. There were no houses, no street lights. So far as he could see, there wasn't a road, not even steps down to one. It was just a platform, dark and still, in the middle of nowhere.

Pulling his coat round him he tried laughing at the dumbness of what he'd done, but in the cold silence his laughter fell from his lips like a shot bird, and that made him feel more alone. Sitting down on the bench, he turned up his collar against the cold and wondered what on earth he was going to do.

He'd been sitting like that for a while before he noticed the light. At first it was so small that he wasn't sure what it was – just a tiny dot swinging to and fro. But as it came slowly nearer, grew larger, he realised it was a torch. No, not a torch. A lantern. A glass lantern.

Someone carrying a lantern was walking along the railway tracks, out of the darkness, towards him. He sat up, not quite sure what to make of this. But as the light came closer, came slowly up the slope of the platform's end, any concerns he might have had evaporated as he saw that it was carried by an old man. The man held the lantern in one hand, and a shopping bag and a lead attached to a small dog in the other. He came unhurriedly along the platform and, stopping by the bench, looked down at the boy and then up and back along the platform in that vague, undecided way that small children and elderly people do. The little dog sniffed at the boy's shoes.

The boy sat looking at the man – at the frayed collar and thumb-greased tie, the thin raincoat, the cheap, split plastic leatherette of the shopping bag, the worn shoes and the scruffy little grey dog. A bunch of dead leaves and withered flowers poked out of the top of the bag and that didn't seem quite right. The boy grinned apologetically.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'But could you tell me when the next train's going to be? I got on the wrong one and I need to get on one going back the other way.'

The old man glanced down at him, but didn't say anything and the boy wasn't sure whether he'd heard or not, so he said it again, and this time the man turned his head and looked at him.

'It's not a station,' he said brightly. 'It's a Permanent Way Post. You're on a Permanent Way Post.'

He had an odd voice – sing-song, and brittle like a reed. Without seeing the face it could have been a man's or a woman's.

'I'm sorry, I don't understand,' said the boy.

The man looked back along the track and, lifting the hand that held the lead and the bag, he pointed at the rails.

'It's what the railway workers use when they mend the tracks,' he said. 'It's not a station.'

'But the train stopped here,' the boy objected. 'I got off it.'

'Well, you shouldn't have done that,' the man laughed. 'You shouldn't have done that at all. I wouldn't have come along if you hadn't done that.'