

The New Beginnings Express - Emma Rennison

‘Is this seat taken?’ he asks and points to the one opposite. I want to say ‘yes’. But I can’t. I shake my head and return to my book. He thumps the weight of his bag down.

I try to concentrate on the words in front of me, ignoring the fuss he makes sorting himself out. His backpack is huge, full as it could be. Each zip pulls hard at the seam fighting to contain whatever’s inside. He’s disorganised and battles with the hidden pockets, and there are so many.

I glance over at Audrey, wedged into her usual spot. She’s awake. I nod to her to say good morning. She forces a smile back, her lips clamped shut.

He pats his puffer vest up and down, a slight furrow in his brow. He opens and closes press studs. Reaches inside. Half pulls the contents out. Stuffs them back in. He shoves a hand into his jeans pocket and catches my eye, jolting my heart. I flash my gaze back to the words in front of me and curse my curiosity.

‘Phew! Thought I’d lost my ticket!’ he chuckles and flaps the stub creating a breeze that flutters his thick blonde hair.

I pull my book closer. He grunts when he lifts his bag into the overhead rack. Sits down hard blowing out the relief of being on his way. I wait for the unwanted conversation to begin.

‘Thanks for letting me sit here.’

I push my nose hard into my novel, making the letters blur. *Please don’t. Please.*

‘I nearly missed it. And I couldn’t afford to wait another week for the next one.’ Here we go. He’s leading me in. He wants me to ask why he couldn’t wait. He wants to share his whole sorry story with me.

‘Good you caught it then,’ I say and force myself to hold back from a conversational flow.

‘It really is. I was desperate to get away.’

I hear him stroke the front of his jeans, straightening them out, and I close my eyes. *I should have said the seat was taken.*

I look up. He can’t be much more than twenty. Twenty-five tops. *Is it even possible to have serious problems by this point?* He’ll be off in no time.

‘It was my girlfriend. Well, my ex-girlfriend,’ he corrected himself with a shrug.

Not this again. Is this a problem worth getting on the train for? I can’t let a nothing-story of a twenty-something broken heart get to me today. I really can’t. I lower my book, raising my palm to the sign above the window, and watch his eyes follow the line of my fingers: *People on the train are processing their own troubles. Please don’t burden them with yours.*

His eyes flicker back and forth across the words. He presses his lips together, nodding in understanding.

‘Sorry,’ he whispers, the bottom side of his mouth drawn down. His hands up in surrender.

I instantly feel the weight of guilt plunge down on me like a sandbag. I place my book down on the table, spine up and fanned open, forcing the existing crease down the centre to dig deeper.

‘It’s ok,’ I reply, searching for the right balance between helping and maintaining distance. ‘Some need to talk, and some don’t. Some need to hear other’s problems to escape from their own. It’s just a case of finding out what works.’

He nods.

It's clear he's wedged between that lost age of adulthood and needing mothering. A foot in each place with the constant pull to choose where he fits.

'And how do I find out what works?'

'You just do.'

I turn my pale face towards the window, absorbing the heat of the streaming rays as the sun peeks in and out from behind the trail of passing clouds.

'It takes a few days. If you're here that long. Or you discover you don't need to tell your story after all. Time will tell.'

He nods again, frowns and averts his eyes to the blurred spring view of yellows and greens.

I hope I've given him enough kindness. He needs to understand I am not the person he's looking for.

A tinny speaker crackles on and off. I wince and try to ignore it.

'Welcome aboard to our new passengers,' the gentle recording begins. *'We hope you enjoy your time with us on the New Beginnings Express and learn to look forward to the life that awaits you.'*

'Now is the time to put your troubles behind you and look to a future free from pain. You were strong and brave to make this first step. We will know when it's time for your departure.'

He flashes me a smile and settles into the high-backed seat. I flick my gaze downwards.

The New Beginnings Express
Emma Rennison

'Please help yourself to tea, coffee and hot meals in the dining cart. Indulge in our daily complimentary meditation sessions. Enjoy the journey to your own personal enlightenment. Your new beginning is just a few stops away.'

'Next station. Kimberley Stewart.'

I glance up. My companion slept through the announcement. His head rolled back against the window. His open mouth releases small regular snores.

I check on Audrey. A lady of indeterminate age who has been on the train for as long as I can remember. I don't know why she got on board. I'd be amazed if *she* even knows anymore. We've all taken on the responsibility to see she is fed, watered and breathing at regular intervals. She despises us for it.

Her chin is down, hiding everything between it and the shelf of her bust. Glasses still perched on the end of her nose threatening to lose their balance at any point. Her movement is in line with the rock and roll of the train. I strain my eyes to see if her chest rises and falls as it should. Watch for the twitch of a finger. I shuffle into the aisle seat. My heart speeds up a fraction. I perch on the tip of my tailbone, lean forward enough for one last check. As if the tension of my thoughts disturb her, she splutters and her head pushes out of her body. I breathe out the breath I didn't realise I was holding.

'What?' she snaps, irritated I've interrupted her peace. 'What is it?'

'Nothing, nothing,' I mutter, and return to my warm spot by the window.

The mechanical hum that thrusts the train forward winds down to a lower pitch in preparation to stop. The sound is always there, mixed with the regular clackity-clack that rocks everyone to sleep. But it's only noticeable when it reaches this frequency.

The glass doors behind me, separating this carriage from the neighbouring one, slide open. A slight woman in her forties pushes through with her weekender bag leading the way. The bag is so big in comparison to her frame that she looks like a child playing dress-up with her mother's oversized accessories.

She makes her way down the narrow aisle, excusing herself in as many different ways as she can, as the train lurches and breaks on its way into the station.

She meets a railway rep on the platform. His eyes wide and voice loud as he bounces on his heels. They only seem to employ excitable youths for this part of the program. There's no consideration for passenger needs or individuality. They are all greeted with a puppy dog in human form.

He hands her a glossy folder. Her welcome pack. Her new life.

'Good luck, Kimberley Stewart,' I whisper. Audrey glances at me. Her hearing is better than she pretends it is.

'What's happening? Is it time to get off?' My sleeping companion stretches back into life and rushes to gather the things he's flung around him.

'Not yet,' I answer.

He kicks his legs under the table, pushing mine aside as he crosses his feet.

'Good. I need this nap.' He smiles across at me, as if sharing the joy of a holiday cocktail by the pool.

The train leans slightly to the right, encouraging my gaze to follow what the view offers. The sun is low, ready to hand over to the night. We speed through a countryside filled with nothing more than heathland and irregular clusters of trees. No houses or roads, and not a person in sight.

In the distance, a deer, no two, graze between me and the trees. They look up as we pass. Follow us for a moment with their heads before returning to the grass, content there is no threat. I need to share this rare sight with someone. My smile drops. I turn back towards the window. My reward is more deer, ten, eleven, twelve. I pass the time with my crepuscular friends until it's too dark to see them.

My stomach rumbles. It's these grumbling echoes that tell me the time. It's the rotating menu in the dining cart that tells me the day. I leave the new passenger sleeping and make my way to dinner.

I lift two fingers to the server as I pass the counter. My need for both meals is all the news he needs. Audrey's still with us.

There's a table at the back in the corner. I take it.

'Here you are,' my sleeping companion says with a smile, running his fingers through his hair to brush it out of his eyes.

I attempt a smile back, and he accepts it as an invitation to join me. I'm tempted to stand and find another table. He would just follow, like a puppy with its new master. I stay, and the words seem to tumble out of him like a small waterfall.

‘Shepherds pie on Thursdays! With crumble for dessert! I hope I’m still here for that!’ he says with bright eyes. ‘Do they have beer?’

He flips the menu over to find a drink list forgetting, with excitement, we are not on the Orient Express.

‘I’m afraid not,’ I reply.

‘That’s a shame. Although it’ll do me good to give it a miss for a few days.’

I nod and mmm as his words float over my head, carried down the carriage by the steam of the hot water urn. I pretend to sip my tea. It’s too hot, but it gives me something to do.

‘So, what’s your name?’ he asks with a sparkle in his eye I’ve seen too many times before. ‘I’m James.’

The bell behind the counter rings. Our food is ready.

I run my tongue over the roof of my mouth. Its patchy burnt smoothness a reminder of how fast I ate tonight’s special.

Audrey is asleep again. I place the plastic filmed platter in front of her with napkin wrapped cutlery and sauce sachets.

The giant backpack catches my eye, its belongings spilling out across the chair as well as the table now. James. I wish he hadn’t told me.

It's pitch black. Fluorescents line each side of the carriage. I stifle a yawn, press the button for the glass doors and head to the dormitory section.

Unlocking my cabin I perch on the hard bed and remove my shoes. There's a bunk above, but no one sleeps there. I requested single occupancy.

I leave my t-shirt on and pull the blankets up to my chin. I'm asleep in minutes.

The morning light flashes through my thin eyelids, forcing me to start the day. A welcome tunnel offers darkness again. I draw my knees to my chest and lie still for a moment.

The alarm buzzes and my eyes spring open. The reality of the day ahead sinks in. The sun returns and the conductor releases a joyous whistle to join it. Why shouldn't he celebrate? He gets to clock off soon.

Sitting up I stretch my arms out to release my spine through an orchestra of cracks and rub the familiar spot on my neck. My reminder of this journey long after I depart.

The first few weeks on board, I must have smashed the same spot on my head at least a hundred times in this cabin, each making me curse worse than the last. It's still delicate to touch. I've mastered manoeuvring in this space by muscle memory, ducking or stooping in all the right places.

I bend to slurp messily from the tap and splash my face with the cold water before running my fingers through my hair to try and straighten it out a little. Another day, another dollar.

The cupboard opens with a push and a click. I almost dislocate my elbow reaching for fresh clothes. Smart but comfortable.

I dress and head down the train, collecting two steaming teas. The caffeine should offer some sort of wake-up after another restless night. I stride through carriage after carriage, forcing the upright, the slumped-over-the-table and the lying-in-the-aisles sleepers to stay in my peripheral vision. I don't know them. I don't want to know them.

I check my watch, but don't process the time and have to check again - 6.25 am.

By the time I reach the cab, the grogginess is starting to slip away, but not enough to allow me to punch the code correctly. I try again, slower this time. The keypad confirms I've got it right with a long protracted beep.

The solid door slides open. I am welcomed by the panoramic landscape from the full glass windscreen at the front of the train, obscured slightly by the conductor's silhouette as he packs his bag ready to leave.

'Morning! Sleep well?' he asks, feeding each arm through his backpack and taking the mug with a 'Ta' as I hand it to him.

'Oh, you know,' I shrug in reply, hanging my bag up. 'Any stops today?'

'Just one,' he answers. 'Drop off.'

I glance at the screen above for details.

'He's going to the "other place,"' he flicks his head to the side a couple of times. 'You know.'

'The other place? How come? Does he know?' I ask.

'No idea. Thinks he's going to start his wonderful new life,' he answers.

I shake my head. I still can't decide if it's best if they know or not.

'Hope he had the meal of the day for dinner!' he says with a chuckle. 'May as well enjoy your last supper, eh?'

I offer a limp smile. I thought I could help people to get their new life. A fresh start somewhere free from pain. But like they told me when I signed the contract, this is still an option for a life free from pain.

'Thanks for the brew. I was ready for it,' he says as he heads through the sliding door, raising his cup to me.

My stomach flips. I thought this part of the job would get easier. That keeping my distance would help.

'You're welcome,' I mumble and settle into the chair trying to ignore the young man with the thick blond hair on the screen staring down at me. His face will haunt my dreams, along with so many others I've known across the years.

I fill my lungs and raise my eyes. The clouds are thin and stretched high across the sky. It won't be long until they've burnt away to nothing. Autumn will creep in soon, bringing the darker days with it. I sip my tea as the single track pulls us into the horizon.