



On the Orient North, Ray Bradbury

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It was on the Orient Express heading away from Venice to Paris to Calais that the old woman noticed the ghastly passenger. He was a traveler obviously dying of some dread disease.

He occupied compartment 22 on the third car back and had his meals sent in, and only at twilight did he rouse to come sit in the dining car surrounded by the false electric lights and the sound of tinkling crystal and women's laughter.

He arrived this night, moving with a terrible slowness, to sit across the aisle from this woman of some years, her bosom like a fortress, her brow serene, her eyes filled with a kindness that had mellowed with time.

There was a black medical bag at her side, and a thermometer tucked in her mannish lapel pocket.

The ghastly man's paleness caused her left hand to crawl up along her lapel to touch the thermometer.

"Oh, dear," whispered Miss Minerva Halliday.

The maitre d' was passing. She touched his elbow and nodded across the aisle.

"Pardon, but where is that poor man going?"

"Calais and London, madam. If God is willing."

And he hurried off.

Minerva Halliday, her appetite gone, stared across at that skeleton made of snow.

The man and the cutlery laid before him seemed one. The knives, forks, and spoons jingled with a silvery cold sound. He listened, fascinated, as if to the voice of his inner soul as the cutlery crept, touched, chimed; a tintinnabulation from another sphere. His hands lay in his lap like lonely

pets, and when the train swerved around a long curve his body, mindless, swayed now this way, now that, toppling.

At which moment the train took a greater curve and knocked the silverware chittering. A woman at a far table, laughing, cried out: "I don't believe it!"

To which a man with a louder laugh shouted:
"Nor do I!"

This coincidence caused, in the ghastly passenger, a terrible melting. The doubting laughter had pierced his ears.

He visibly shrank. His eyes hollowed and one could almost imagine a cold vapor gasped from his mouth.

Miss Minerva Halliday, shocked, leaned forward and put out one hand. She heard herself whisper:

"I believe!"

The effect was instantaneous.

The ghastly passenger sat up. Color returned to his white cheeks. His eyes glowed with a rebirth of fire. His head swiveled and he stared across the aisle at this miraculous woman with words that cured. Blushing furiously, the old nurse with the great warm bosom flinched, rose, and hurried off.

Not five minutes later, Miss Minerva Halliday heard the maitre d' hurrying along the corridor, tapping on doors, whispering. As he passed her open door, he glanced at her.

"Could it be that you are"

"No," she guessed, "not a doctor. But a registered nurse. Is it that old man in the dining car?"

"Yes, yes! Please, madam, this way!"

The ghastly man had been carried back to his own compartment. Reaching it, Miss Minerva Halliday peered within.

And there the strange man lay, his eyes wilted shut, his mouth a bloodless wound, the only life in him the joggle of his head as the train swerved.

My God, she thought, he's dead!

Out loud she said, "I'll call if I need you."

The maitre d' went away.

Miss Minerva Halliday quietly shut the sliding door and turned to examine the dead man for surely he was dead. And yet ...

But at last she dared to reach out and to touch the wrists in which so much ice water ran. She pulled back, as if her fingers had been burned by dry ice. Then she leaned forward to whisper into the pale man's face.

"Listen very carefully. Yes?"

For answer, she thought she heard the coldest throb of a single heartbeat.

She continued. "I do not know how I guess this. I know who you are, and what you are sick of"

The train curved. His head lolled as if his neck had been broken.

"I'll tell you what you're dying from!" she whispered. "You suffer a disease of people!"

His eyes popped wide, as if he had been shot through the heart. She said: "The people on this train are killing you. They are your affliction." Something like a breath stirred behind the shut wound of the man's mouth.

"Yessss ... sss."

Her grip tightened on his wrist, probing for some pulse:

"You are from some Middle European country, yes? Somewhere where the nights are long and when the wind blows, people listen? But now things have changed, and you have tried to escape by travel, but ... "

Just then, a party of young, wine-filled tourists bustled along the outer corridor, firing off their laughter.

The ghastly passenger withered.

"How do ... you ... " he whispered, " ... know ... thisss?"

"I am a special nurse with a special memory. I saw, I met, someone like you when I was six"

"Saw?" the pale man exhaled.

"In Ireland, near Kileshandra. My uncle's house, a hundred years old, full of rain and fog and there was walking on the roof late at night, and sounds in the hall as if the storm had come in, and then at last this shadow entered my room. It sat on my bed and the cold from his body made me cold. I remember and know it was no dream, for the shadow who came to sit on my bed and whisper ... was much ... like you."

Eyes shut, from the depths of his arctic soul, the old sick man mourned in response:

"And who ... and what ... am I?"

"You are not sick. And you are not dying ... You are"

The whistle on the Orient Express wailed a long way off.

"a ghost," she said.

"Yessss!" he cried.

It was a vast shout of need, recognition, assurance. He almost bolted upright.

"Yes!"

At which moment there arrived in the doorway a young priest, eager to perform. Eyes bright, lips moist, one hand clutching his crucifix, he stared at the collapsed figure of the ghastly passenger and cried, "May I?"

"Last rites?" The ancient passenger opened one eye like the lid on a silver box. "From you? No." His eye shifted to the nurse. "Her!"

"Sir!" cried the young priest.

He stepped back, seized his crucifix as if it were a parachute ripcord, spun, and scurried off.

Leaving the old nurse to sit examining her now even more strange patient until at last he said:

"How," he gasped, "can you nurse me?"

"Why" She gave a small self-deprecating laugh. "We must find a way." With yet another wail, the Orient Express encountered more mileages of night, fog, mist, and cut through it with a shriek.

"You are going to Calais?" she said.

"And beyond, to Dover, London, and perhaps a castle outside Edinburgh, where I will be safe"

"That's almost impossible" She might as well have shot him through the heart. "No, no, wait, wait!" she cried. "Impossible ... without me! I will travel with you to Calais and across to Dover."

"But you do not know me!"

"Oh, but I dreamed you as a child, long before I met someone like you, in the mists and rains of Ireland. At age nine I searched the moors for the Baskerville Hound."

"Yes," said the ghastly passenger. "You are English and the English believe!"

"True. Better than Americans, who doubt. French? Cynics! English is best. There is hardly an old London house that does not have its sad lady of mists crying before dawn."

At which moment, the compartment door, shaken by a long curve of track, sprang wide. An onslaught of poisonous talk, of delirious chatter, of what could only be irreligious laughter poured in from the corridor. The ghastly passenger wilted.

Springing to her feet, Minerva Halliday slammed the door and turned to look with the familiarity of a lifetime of sleep-tossed encounters at her traveling companion.

"You, now," she asked, "who exactly are you?"

The ghastly passenger, seeing in her face the face of a sad child he might have encountered long ago, now described his life:

"I have 'lived' in one place outside Vienna for two hundred years. To survive, assaulted by atheists as well as true believers, I have hid in

libraries, in dust-filled stacks, there to dine on myths and moundyard tales.

I have taken mid-night feasts of panic and terror from bolting horses, baying dogs, catapulting tomcats ... crumbs shaken from tomb lids. As the years passed, my compatriots of the unseen world vanished one by one as castles tumbled or lords rented out their haunted gardens to women's clubs or bed-and-breakfast entrepreneurs.

Evicted, we ghastly wanderers of the world have sunk in tar, bog, and fields of disbelief, doubt, scorn, or outright derision. With the populations and disbeliefs doubling by the day, all of my specter friends have fled. Where, I know not. I am the last, trying to train across Europe to some safe, rain-drenched castle keep where men are properly frightened by soots and smokes of wandering souls. England and Scotland for me!"

His voice faded into silence.

"And your name?" she said, at last.

"I have no name," he whispered. "A thousand fogs have visited my family plot. A thousand rains have drenched my tombstone. The chisel marks were erased by mist and water and sun. My name has vanished with the flowers and the grass and the marble dust." He opened his eyes.

"Why are you doing this?" he said. "Helping me?"

And at last she smiled, for she heard the right answer fall from her lips:

"I have never in my life had a lark."

"Lark!?"

"My life was that of a stuffed owl. I was not a nun, yet never married. Treating an invalid mother and a half-blind father, I gave myself to hospitals, tombstone beds, cries at night, and medicines that are not perfume to passing men. So, I am something of a ghost myself, yes? And now, tonight, sixty-six years on, I have at last found in you a patient! Magnificently different, fresh, absolutely new. Oh, Lord, what a

challenge. I will pace you, to face people off the train, through the crowds in Paris, then the trip to the sea, off the train, onto the ferry! It will indeed be a"

"Lark!" cried the ghastly passenger. Spasms of laughter shook him.

"Larks? Yes, that is what we are!"

"But," she said, "in Paris, do they not eat larks even while they roast priests?"

He shut his eyes and whispered, "Paris? Ah, yes."

The train wailed. The night passed.

And they arrived in Paris.

And even as they arrived, a boy, no more than six, ran past and froze. He stared at the ghastly passenger and the ghastly passenger shot back a remembrance of Antarctic ice floes. The boy gave a cry and fled. The old nurse flung the door wide to peer out.

The boy was gibbering to his father at the far end of the corridor. The father charged along the corridor, crying:

"What goes on here? Who has frightened my?"

The man stopped. Outside the door he now fixed his gaze on this bleak occupant on the slowing braking Orient Express. He braked his own tongue, "my son."

The ghastly passenger looked at him quietly with fog-gray eyes.

"I" The Frenchman drew back, sucking his teeth in disbelief. "Forgive me!" he gasped. "Regrets!"

And turned to shove at his son. "Troublemaker. Get!" Their door slammed.

"Paris!" echoed through the train.

"Hush and hurry!" advised Minerva Halliday as she bustled her ancient friend out onto a platform milling with bad tempers and misplaced luggage.

"I am melting!" cried the ghastly passenger.

"Not where I'm taking you!" She displayed a picnic hamper and flung him forth to the miracle of a single remaining taxicab. And they arrived under a stormy sky at the Pere Lachaise cemetery. The great gates were swinging shut. The nurse waved a handful of francs. The gate froze.

Inside, they wandered off-balance but at peace amongst ten thousand monuments. So much cold marble was there, and so many hidden souls, that the old nurse felt a sudden dizziness, a pain in one wrist, and a swift coldness on the left side of her face. She shook her head, refusing this. And they stumbled on among the stones.

"Where do we picnic?" he said.

"Anywhere," she said. "But carefully! For this is a French cemetery! Packed with disbelief. Armies of egotists who burned people for their faith one year only to be burned for their faith the next! Pick! Choose!" They walked. The ghastly passenger nodded. "This first stone. Beneath it: nothing. Death final, not a whisper of time. The second stone: a woman, a secret believer because she loved her husband and hoped to see him again in eternity ... a murmur of spirit here, the turning of a heart. Better.

Now this third gravestone: a writer of thrillers for a French magazine. But he loved his nights, his fogs, his castles. This stone is a proper temperature, like a good wine. Here we shall sit, dear lady, as you decant the champagne and we wait to catch our train."

She offered a glass. "Can you drink?"

"One can try." He took it. "One can only try."

The ghastly passenger almost "died" as they left Paris. A group of intellectuals, fresh from seminars about Sartre's "nausea," and hot-air-ballooning about Simone de Beauvoir, streamed through the corridors, leaving the air behind them boiled and empty. The pale passenger became paler.

The second stop beyond Paris, another invasion! A group of Germans surged aboard, loud in their disbelief of ancestral spirits, doubtful of politics, some even carrying books titled Was God Ever Home? The Orient ghost sank deeper in his X-ray-image bones.

"Oh, dear," cried Miss Minerva Halliday, and ran to her own compartment to plunge back and toss down a cascade of books.

"Hamlet!" she cried, "his father, yes? A Christmas Carol. Four ghosts! Wuthering Heights. Kathy returns, yes? To haunt the snows? Ah, The Turn of the Screw, and ... Rebecca! Then my favorite! The Monkey's Paw! Which?"

But the Orient ghost said not a Marley word. His eyes were locked, his mouth sewn with icicles.

"Wait!" she cried.

And opened the first book ...

Where Hamlet stood on the castle wall and heard his ghost of a father moan, and so she said these words:

" 'Mark me ... my hour is almost come ... when I to sulphurous and tormenting flames ... must render up myself..

And then she read:

" 'I am thy father's spirit, Doomed for a certain term to walk the night ...
' "

And again:

" ' ... if thou didst ever thy dear father love ... O, God! ... Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder' "

And yet again:

" ' ... Murder most foul' "

And the train ran in the night as she spoke the last words of Hamlet's father's ghost:

" ' ... Fare thee well at once ... ' "

" ' ... Adieu, adieu! Remember me.' "

And she repeated:

" ' ... remember me!' "

And the Orient ghost quivered. She seized a further book:

" ' ... Marley was dead, to begin with ... ' "

As the Orient train thundered across a twilight bridge above an unseen stream.

Her hands flew like birds.

" 'I am the Ghost of Christmas Past!' "

Then:

" 'The Phantom Rickshaw glided from the mist and clop-clopped off into the fog' "

And wasn't there the faintest echo of a horse's hooves behind, within the Orient ghost's mouth?

" 'The beating beating beating, under the floorboards, of the old man's Tell-tale Heart!' " she cried, softly.

And there! like the leap of a frog. The first pulse of the Orient ghost's heart in more than an hour.

The Germans down the corridor fired off a cannon of disbelief.

But she poured the medicine:

" 'The Hound bayed out on the Moor' "

And the echo of that bay, that most forlorn cry, came from her traveling companion's soul, wailed from his throat.

As the night grew on and the moon arose and a Woman in White crossed a landscape, as the old nurse said and told, a bat that became a wolf that became a lizard scaled a wall on the ghastly passenger's brow.

And at last the train was silent with sleeping, and Miss Minerva Halliday let the last book drop with the thump of a body to the floor.

"Requiescat in pace?" whispered the Orient traveler, eyes shut.

"Yes." She smiled, nodding. "Requiescat in pace." And they slept.

And at last they reached the sea.

And there was mist, which became fog, which became scatters of rain, like a proper drench of tears from a seamless sky.

Which made the ghastly passenger open, ungum his mouth, and murmur thanks for the haunted sky and the shore visited by phantoms

of tide as the train slid into the shed where the mobbed exchange would be made, a full train becoming a full boat.

The Orient ghost stood well back, the last figure on a now self-haunted train.

"Wait," he cried, softly, piteously. "That boat! There's no place on it to hide! And the customs!"

But the customs men took one look at the pale face snowed under the dark cap and ear muffs, and swiftly flagged the wintry soul onto the ferry.

To be surrounded by dumb voices, ignorant elbows, layers of people shoving as the boat shuddered and moved and the nurse saw her fragile icicle melt yet again.

It was a mob of children shrieking by that made her say: "Quickly!"

And she all but carried the wicker man in the wake of the boys and girls.

"No," cried the old passenger. "The noise!"

"It's special!" The nurse hustled him through a door. "A medicine! Here!"

The old man stared.

"Why," he murmured. "This is a playroom."

She steered him into the midst of all the screams.

"Children! Storytelling time!"

They were about to run again when she added, "Ghost-story-telling time!"

She pointed casually to the ghastly passenger, whose pale moth fingers grasped the scarf about his icy throat.

"All fall down!" said the nurse.

The children plummeted with squeals all about the Orient traveler, like Indians around a teepee. They stared up along his body to where blizzards ran odd temperatures in his gaping mouth.

"You do believe in ghosts, yes?" she said.

"Oh, yes!" was the shout. "Yes!"

It was as if a ramrod had shot up his spine. The Orient traveler stiffened. The most brittle of tiny flinty sparks fired his eyes. Winter roses budded in his cheeks. And the more the children leaned, the taller he grew, and the warmer his complexion. With one icicle finger he pointed at their faces.

"I," he whispered, "I," a pause. "Shall tell you a fright-full tale. About a real ghost!"

"Oh, yes!" cried the children.

And he began to talk and as the fever of his tongue conjured fogs, lured mists, and invited rains, the children hugged and crowded close, a bed of charcoals on which he happily baked. And as he talked Nurse Halliday, backed off near the door, saw what he saw across the haunted sea, the ghost cliffs, the chalk cliffs, the safe cliffs of Dover and not so far beyond, waiting, the whispering towers, the murmuring castle deeps, where phantoms were as they had always been, with the still attics waiting. And staring, the old nurse felt her hand creep up her lapel toward her thermometer. She felt her own pulse. A brief darkness touched her eyes.

And then one child said: "Who are you?"

And gathering his gossamer shroud, the ghastly passenger whetted his imagination, and replied.

It was only the sound of the ferry landing whistle that cut short the long telling of midnight tales. And the parents poured in to seize their lost children, away from the Orient gentleman with the frozen eyes whose gently raving mouth shivered their marrows as he whispered and whispered until the ferry nudged the dock and the last boy was dragged, protesting, away, leaving the old man and his nurse alone in the children's playroom as the ferry stopped shuddering its delicious shudders, as if it had listened, heard, and deliriously enjoyed the long-before-dawn tales.

At the gangplank, the Orient traveler said, with a touch of briskness, "No. I'll need no help going down. Watch!"

And he strode down the plank. And even as the children had been tonic for his color, height, and vocal cords, so the closer he came to England, pacing, the firmer his stride, and when he actually touched the dock, a small happy burst of sound erupted from his thin lips and the nurse, behind him, stopped frowning, and let him run toward the train.

And seeing him dash like a child before her, she could only stand, riven with delight and something more than delight. And he ran and her heart ran with him and suddenly knew a stab of amazing pain, and a lid of darkness struck her and she swooned.

Hurrying, the ghastly passenger did not notice that the old nurse was not beside or behind him, so eagerly did he go.

At the train he gasped, "There!" safely grasping the compartment handle. Only then did he sense a loss, and turned.

Minerva Halliday was not there.

And yet, an instant later, she arrived, looking paler than before, but with an incredibly radiant smile. She wavered and almost fell. This time it was he who reached out.

"Dear lady," he said, "you have been so kind."

"But," she said, quietly, looking at him, waiting for him to truly see her, "I am not leaving."

"You ... ?"

"I am going with you," she said.

"But your plans?"

"Have changed. Now, I have nowhere else to go."

She half turned to look over her shoulder.

At the dock, a swiftly gathering crowd peered down at someone lying on the planks. Voices murmured and cried out. The word "doctor" was called several times.

The ghastly passenger looked at Minerva Halliday.

Then he looked at the crowd and the object of the crowd's alarm lying on the dock: a medical thermometer lay broken under their feet. He looked back at Minerva Halliday, who still stared at the broken thermometer.

"Oh, my dear kind lady," he said, at last. "Come."
She looked into his face. "Larks?" she said.
He nodded. "Larks!"

And he helped her up into the train, which soon jolted and then dinned and whistled away along the tracks toward London and Edinburgh and moors and castles and dark nights and long years.

"I wonder who she was?" said the ghastly passenger, looking back at the crowd on the dock.

"Oh, Lord," said the old nurse. "I never really knew."
And the train was gone.

It took a full twenty seconds for the tracks to stop trembling.

The End