

The Train of Inertia

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An extract

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1

When I opened my eyes again, I observed that the entire compartment was asleep. The young woman opposite me, with her not unappealing face but dirty nails, was still holding her crochet. It was now lying inert—insofar as anything could ever be inert in a moving train—on the grubby handkerchief on her lap. On the girl's meticulously rubified, pouting lips, I observed a smudge of chocolate, still waiting to be licked away. Oh, how voluptuously and leisurely she sucked on those pieces, which, one by one, she surreptitiously broke off the bar in her handbag and placed in her mouth!

The young man in his loud spring suit sitting beside her—apparently a fellow-commuter—was now slumped against her. His head was nodding and it occasionally touched her shoulder and her reddish, voluminous hair. But now she didn't shrink back in her unfriendly, aloof manner as she had the first time he had dozed off. This happened, I recalled, just before the conductor arrived to check our tickets.

I was still wedged in my corner, my back facing the locomotive, on the first bench on that side of the carriage. Due to the door, the benches on either side of it are less wide. At the station, I sat on it alone for a long time as the compartment slowly filled up. The passengers obviously preferred not to share that narrow space with my rather stocky figure. Then, at the last moment, another well-fed gentleman, who hadn't been able to find a vacant seat elsewhere, boarded. And so it was that we two voluminaries shared that meager board.

The gentleman was wearing glasses whose frame must have cost a whole tortoise, and he had been reading a French newspaper. At a certain point he lit a cigar. He simply bit off the cap, probably, given our awkward position, in order to avoid having to reach for the scissors in his vest pocket. He was still holding the newspaper in his jovial, managerial hands. His head was now inclining somewhat forwards, while his glasses had slid a little bit down his nose. The cigar was protruding between the fingers of his hand on my side, and it was by sheer willpower that he kept his meaty though not puffy lips closed.

The cigar was half-finished and out. I was sorry about that, because I suddenly felt a strong urge to smoke. I could easily reach my cigarettes, because I had happened to put them into the inside pocket of my raincoat, but because of my confined posture I couldn't possibly get to the matches in my trousers. Had the cigar been burning, I could have effortlessly leaned over to borrow a light.

All the other passengers, whom I could discern only partially and obliquely because of the high wooden backrests between the benches, appeared to have dozed off as well. This provided an amusing, albeit somewhat surprising spectacle. The degree of surprise, however, was tempered by a feeling of familiarity,

due to my recognizing most of the faces from the moment just before I had closed my eyes. Also, their expressions had for the most remained unchanged, as far as I could remember.

The dapper, middle-aged NCO was sleeping steadfastly and the jelly-jowled lady's features hadn't got any firmer. That there weren't any more faces with relaxed features, could possibly be attributed to the fact that sleeping in a train when seated upright offers a very limited state of rest.

Another obstacle to what could have been a remarkable sight was provided by the lighting. Not a single lamp was yet burning in our carriage. This gave everything a rather hazy quality, which kept one's eyes from penetrating any further and which seemed more appropriate, what with all the snoozing going on. After all, outside, twilight had already settled.

In fact, the absence of light wasn't that surprising. Although the war had already been over for a couple of years, we had apparently got so used to riding in dark trains that, since then, I have travelled in dusky compartments many times without hearing a single person raise their voice against what nowadays would only be the consequence of a minor malfunction or of an oversight.

2

I was, however, somewhat astonished by the early onset of twilight. A week earlier—I used to travel this route once every eight days, you see—evening hadn't fallen until we had reached our destination. And today too, the train had left precisely on time.

It startled me. Could it be that, asleep, I had missed my station? I hurriedly looked at my wristwatch. The light falling in through the window was just enough to allow me to see the position of the hands. Quite the usual hour, a bit past half the time between departure and arrival. Of course, spring is a capricious season, in which the length of the day, perhaps more than in other seasons, is subject to a variety of circumstances that tend to escape a fairly dreamy nature lover.

I pressed my face against the window, after wiping a bit of it clean with my stiff arm. I thought I recognized the landscape; it seemed familiar, in any case, with its pleasantly tidy fields, pastures and meadows, rolling gently though no longer appearing as hilly as at the start of the journey, in the environs of the city from which the train had departed.

The railway embankment shoulder shot up now and again and blocked the view. But it still pleased my eye in an adventurous manner. With some fantasy—namely, by imagining oneself to shrink—one can easily spot in the ridges of scorched foliage a steep mountain decor, which a camera could make grateful use of for a Western. After that, the landscape appeared again as a gigantic turntable, revolving in the opposite direction. The white blossoms of the orchards surrounding the homesteads stood out in the middle distance against the dark blue horizon. Occasionally, a bunch of small provincial houses belonging to some village would fly by, with their still few lit windows.

Which village, I couldn't say. All of them seemed familiar to me; they all look so dreadfully the same, in any case the same as so many others. I know their names too, but I could never connect the names with the views, even though I've been travelling through this landscape since my childhood. This must also be the result of being a fairly dreamy nature lover. I don't believe it implies indifference; it is rather a form of love that prefers broadly embracing totality to worshipping a detail.

3

I therefore stopped worrying, for the time being, about what could perhaps be regarded as somewhat remarkable about all those sleepers and the twilight. To be sure, this insouciance must also be partially attributed to my state of mind; a pleasing state of mind, very familiar to me, although, regrettably, I have the pleasure of experiencing it only on occasion.

I always benefit from a daytime nap, even when partaken during a train journey. It rekindles my strength and reinvigorates my soul. But the freshness of spirit with which I now awoke is a rare gift in the life of an almost perpetually overstrung intellectual.

Lucidity, a very supple and compliant yet simultaneously taut attentiveness, coupled with a profound and earnest feeling of happiness—I'd be hard put to describe that blessed mood more accurately than as a sensation as if, all of a sudden, all the residue which a constantly sitting, reading or writing, excessively smoking and coffee-drinking person accumulates within himself night and day, had disappeared as if by magic from the tongue, the kidneys, the eyes and the head.

I noticed that what I usually call my accountant's disposition now too, in that inner lucidity, was asking itself, although more exaltedly, what I could possibly have done to deserve it. I am not in the habit of considering the Lord and His Hereafter a curious banker at the helm of a tremendous institution of reward and punishment, but due to an innate reverence for the alien intelligence that happens to control the universe, I find it hard to imagine anything that doesn't find its *raison d'être* in something else.

Then I remembered that, before falling asleep, I had been engaged in possibly praiseworthy contemplation. I had been sitting in my cramped corner, across from the not ugly, but filthy-fingered, crocheting girl, who with clandestine sensual pleasure was sucking on her pieces of chocolate; and across from the young man in the blinding spring suit, who, following the conductor's visit, had quickly dropped off again. The gentleman next to me was smoking his cigar and reading his newspaper; next to them were the gallant NCO and the lady with the sagging cheeks. I had looked at all these people and observed within myself a feeling of being trapped. The train was sultry; the heating was still on and oblique sunrays were falling through the windows. This caused the stuffy air, full of old tobacco odor and new smoke, to seem even more laden. Those passengers looked so workaday, I mean: so long since their last bath day, and I was sitting so close to them!

Besides, I felt full of residue, the residue of my habitual fatigue, plus that of every spring. Because for certain natures, it's a stinking lie that spring is the season of rebirth. I never feel as decrepit and as lame as in the blossomy season, and it usually takes till fall, oh august autumn, before I, late rose, feel myself finally, but then oh so delightfully lucid and attentive, about to bloom in you!

There was nevertheless no need for me to wear myself out that day: many would have even considered it one of repose. Maybe it was so, in essence, to me, but at that moment I couldn't yet determine its effects.

I hold a rather singular position in my city, in the sense that my Sunday is in the middle of the week. The museum is shut then. This means that I never have a Sunday—except in the vacation—

because, during the school year, I make use of this free day to teach a couple of hours in another city. That pays for my journey there, where I almost always have some shopping to do or a visit to pay.

It so happens there was nothing that needed to be done that day. After a few calls, it looked like everything had been taken care of. The rest of the time, I behaved myself loafing around, looking at the bookstore window displays and reading on a park bench. I felt quite adrift and bored and made a firm decision to never go there again having such an insubstantial schedule. During slack weeks I would think hard beforehand, pencil poised; I was sure I could always find something to do there.

So I didn't go to any coffee houses or other random establishments—today that would have struck me as disrespectful towards the spring and possibly towards something else—but strolled around and made notes in my textbook. I derived an unexpected measure of moral satisfaction from this, which—as a hard worker I couldn't actually say: in a habit-breaking manner, although from the standpoint of virtue this was indeed the case—inexplicably appeared to me as a small but favorable omen.
