

the

wrong

Train

Jeremy de Groot

illustrated by Dave Shelton

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David Fickling Books

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*THE BOY DIDN'T REALIZE WHAT HE'D DONE AT FIRST, BECAUSE the train was where the last train should have been—a little two-car diesel at the end of the platform at Parkside—and he'd run flat out to catch it.*

*Putting his feet up on the seat opposite and getting his breath back, he sat looking down the car at the long black line of windows and the strip lights reflected in the glass, and even then the penny didn't drop. There were usually at least half a dozen other people on the last train, but the car was empty. It was just him.*

*There was enough charge left on his phone to call his dad to tell him he'd caught the train, so his dad could pick him up, and then the phone died. But that didn't matter, because his dad would be at the station, and it was only three stops.*

*It dawned on him only slowly that something was wrong—a thought that there should have been a station by now began to rise up through his head, like a child tugging at his sleeve for attention, and he sat up in the seat. Cupping his hands to the window and blanking out the lights of the car, all he could see was dark, and that was what was wrong. Breath condensing against the cold glass, he rubbed it clear and looked again, but there was nothing to see. Only dark.*

*What started as suspicion became certainty as the train rolled on and no familiar lights drifted past the window—not the overpass across the road nor the floodlights of the gas station.*

*This wasn't the right train.*

*He stuck his face to the glass and stared, trying to figure out where he was, but there were no clues, not one—no station, no sign, nothing. He desperately wanted the train to stop so he could get off, but it just kept on going. Fifteen minutes—twenty? He sat looking helplessly at the empty car and the dark mirrors of the windows while the sound of the diesel droned on, taking him he hadn't a clue where.*

*At last, the train began to slow. For several minutes it crawled along as though on the point of stopping, but never actually did, and each time he thought it would, it began to pick up speed again. 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 when he cupped 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 before he'd even really thought through whether that was a good idea or not.*

*As he heard the doors of the train close behind him, and the engine revving up and pulling away, leaving him 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 anymore, 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 three lamps on poles, but the light from them was thin and weak. There were no houses, no streetlights. 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 around 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 realized it was a flashlight.*

*No, not a flashlight.*

*A lantern.*

*A glass lantern.*

*Someone carrying a lantern was walking along the railway tracks, out of the darkness, toward 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 leash 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 gray 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—singsong, 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 leash 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.”*

*The boy didn’t understand what the man meant by that either, but the man sat himself down on the bench next to him and smiled reassuringly, so he smiled back. Up close, the man’s clothes smelled of laundry detergent and old cloth—it was a homey smell, like cups of tea and corner shops. The man put the lantern on the ground between his feet. It lit his socks and his shoes and the grubby, gray coat of the little dog. The boy could see the man’s eyes now; they were watering in the cold night air. The man smiled again.*

*“If you’re stuck here,” he said. “Toby and me better keep you company. Least, until your train comes. We’ve got plenty of time, me and Toby.”*

*The little dog looked up and wagged his tail.*

*The boy pulled his coat tighter, pressed out the cold pockets of air, and folded his arms around himself to keep the warmth in.*

*“It’s all right,” he said. “Really, I’m fine—as long as I know there’s another train going to come.”*

*But as he said it, he looked along the empty platform and, if he was honest with himself, he thought he'd be glad of the company.*

*"Wouldn't dream of leaving you," said the old man. "Not now you've got off the train. Wouldn't be right for me to leave you, would it?" He smiled and, bending forward, stroked the little dog's ears.*

*The boy frowned. "It will stop, won't it?" he asked, looking along the bare platform.*

*"Course it will," the man said. "Just wave it down, and you'll be all right."*

*They sat quietly for a while. The man didn't say anything; he sat looking into the dark at the end of the platform, tapping his shoes on the cold ground, one then the other, as though drumming a little tune to himself while he watched for the lights of the train. The boy began to think that things hadn't worked out so badly. All he had to do was wait for the train. If he'd only been able to call his dad, he wouldn't have minded at all.*

*He breathed out, making clouds with his breath, trying to pile one breath on top of the other.*

*The novelty of doing that was just beginning to wear thin when the man turned and looked at him.*

*"I'll tell you what we'll do," he said. "I'll tell you a story while we wait for your train—help pass the time, a nice little*

*story will. It's a long time since I've told anyone one of my stories."*

*"You don't have to," the boy said. "Really, I'm all right."*

*But the man smiled, only this time it seemed he was smiling more to himself than to the boy.*

*"Got a little brother, do you?" he asked.*

*There was something so penetrating about the eyes that looked out of that old face that the boy didn't need to answer.*

*"I thought so," the man said. "I know a story about a girl and her baby brother. I'll tell you that one if you like—help pass the time, it will."*

*The boy shook his head resignedly.*

*"All right, then," he said.*

*"Tickety-boo," said the old man brightly, and sitting back on the bench, he took a quiet breath, and began.*

*It happened so seamlessly as the man spoke that the boy couldn't say when the platform stopped and the small house started, but once it had happened, there wasn't a platform around him anymore—there was only the sense of a summer sky, and green leaves, and a girl standing on a dirt path that led to a small house.*