



The Plate-Layers' Hut

Peter Holdroyd

I've been able to smell it for years. It's a complex odour, and I still can't put a name to all its facets. It fills my nose every night. Like my fascination with the railway, it's something I can't escape.

I faced the high wall of the railway bridge: would I ever be tall enough to see over it? I scrambled up it, scuffing my old worn shoes until I could peer over the edge at the huge marshalling yard below. A pair of 0-4-0 saddle-tanks, clouds of steam bursting from their funnels in the moonlight, were shunting rolling stock around, clanking over the joins in the tracks, ready for the morning.

I slithered down through the shrubs and small trees which covered the bank, to the track-beds below. There was a plate-layers' hut not far away, where I had taken refuge the first time I got in it. It was an ancient goods wagon, minus wheels, and filled with old boxes, rags, the sort of stuff plate-layers would need. There was a little primus stove and someone had left a small box of Oxo cubes laying around. I think they were to make drinks on cold days.

The marshalling yard was a source of endless fascination. I'd always wanted to be an engine-driver: every small boy's wish in my childhood. I couldn't get a job on the railway until I got older, but I could dream about it, all the more so on those nights I spent in the plate-layers' hut.

By now, I knew where the little tank engines would pick up individual carriages or freight wagons, and where they would begin assembling them into the new trains required for the morning. Deep in the night, one of the locos stopped just outside my hiding place, filling the air with the scent of coal and steam, and the hissing of safety valves. Lit by the orange glow from the firebox, the Driver shook the dregs from his mug out of the cab window, and the Fireman leaned on his shovel.

I stared out from inside the old hut. There were slits in the walls, and iron reinforcing bars. I figured that once it might have been used for cattle. Maybe that was what caused the smell that lingered in my nose all the time.

There was something of the toilet about it. And straw. It was quite late in my life when I was taken into the countryside. It had been in the harvest season, and stooks of freshly-cut straw stood in lines across the fields not far away. Thus I learned the smell of straw. So, yes: the odour in my nostrils could have arisen from cattle dung and bedding in the truck, but after all this time? Surely it would have been cleaned out long ago? The truck was easily older than me, and I was born ten years ago.

The Driver and Fireman climb down from the footplate, just outside the hut. They're carrying lanterns and head towards me. I look round for somewhere to hide. Some planks in the floor seem as if they're loose: they look as if they might cover a space big enough for me to squeeze into, but when I try, I can't lift them. There are sacks in the gloom at the end away from the door. I manage to disappear under them as the two men enter the hut. They are deep in conversation. I have learned how to understand English since I've been here.

'... I'm telling you, Moshe,' says the Driver emphatically, 'I'm certain this is the one.'

The Fireman looks round, at the internal appearance of the former truck.

'You could be right, I suppose, Captain.'

'And you can stop that,' says the Driver, wagging his finger at Moshe, 'you know I only made Corporal.'

'Hitler only ever made Corporal, and I think you're better than 'e was.'

The Driver scowls. 'Even the lowest bleedin' Tommy was better than old Adolph, so it's not saying much.'

'I'm only trying to be nice, *schon!*' whines Moshe.

The Driver claps him on the shoulder. 'Ah! I know you are, old son.' He looks around, sees the Oxo cubes on the box I think of as a table.

'Eh, look. I haven't had a cup of Oxo for years. Go and run us off some hot water, Moshe, and we'll have these.'

'Okay, cap— I mean John.' He goes back to the soughing locomotive.

'Course you do,' says the Driver absently as he begins rooting through the clutter for something to sit on. For a moment, I think I am about to be discovered, but even though he glances my way, he doesn't see me in the gloom. The sacks cover me well. I feel safe.

He stubs the toe of his heavy boot on the planks I'd thought to hide under and curses softly. He pries at them with his fingers. They do not move. A pity, I think, because there might be something interesting beneath them.

Moshe reappears with two enamelled tin mugs, each containing steaming hot water. He puts them down on the table and unwraps the cubes, his large fingers fumbling as he tears the foil to open them. He crumbles a cube into each mug. The aroma drifts towards me and makes my mouth water.

I dare not make a sound for fear of discovery. Some tendril of memory drags at my mind: I've been in a situation like this before, but can't remember when, or where. The driver kicks at the uneven floorboards. They seem more bowed up than before. He frowns at them.

There is a noise. John glances up into Moshe's face, streaked with shadows by the lantern on the box. Streaked with tears now. I swallow hard and bite my lip. A grown man, crying?

'What's up, Moshe?' asks John. There is care and concern in his voice.

Moshe wipes the tears away with a coal-stained hand, leaving black smears. I've never really seen his face before. He has wide, dark eyes that look soulful in the eerie light and glitter wetly.

'You know,' he says.

John nods. 'I know you've been through a bad patch since you came back from the war,' he says. 'I've always believed that if something bothers you, you need to stand up to it and face it down. Then it'll never bother you again. You prove to yourself you're bigger than *it*.'

Moshe stares at him silently before letting his breath out. 'I don't know if I can,' he whispers.

'I thought this would be a good place to let it out,' says John.

Moshe continues to stare at him, as if trying to build up his courage, while John simply waits for him to say something. The moon is casting parallel beams through the slits in the hut walls. The other little shunting engine is chugging its way round the other side of the yard. I wait with John for Moshe to speak. The smell fills my nose.

Moshe's voice wavers. His speech, when it comes is slow, halting.

'I was there when we went into Auschwitz-Birkenau,' he says. He rests his face, his drawn and tear-stained face, in his hands. 'I was in the Polish Berlin Army. You can't believe what we found.'

'I've seen the newsreels,' says John.

'It was worse for us actually there. There were so many bodies. Men, women and children, in holes in the ground, some covered in quicklime. More bodies still were above ground, waiting to be thrown into the pits. Even after we went in, there were still men in those stripy clothes they had to wear, with the yellow stars, pulling the dead into the earth. The smell of the place was overwhelming.'

He pauses and sips his drink. Now he's started to unburden himself, it seems to be getting easier.

'You know how they were brought there?' Moshe asks.

John nods. 'Aye. In cattle trucks like this one. That's why I brought you here. I'm pretty certain this truck came back from Auschwitz. There were people who needed to be brought to Britain, and it seemed a train was the obvious way of doing it. It was my train. I drove it.' He stares at the bowed floor and picks up a huge screwdriver as he speaks. 'We brought them, secretly, to England, crossing the Channel on a rail ferry. After we got here, most of the trucks were destroyed. We couldn't use them here: even repainted to hide the marks the Nazis put on them, they were old stock.' He hesitates. 'Besides, nobody wanted them, not once they knew what they'd been used for.' He slips the blade between two planks.

My mind is in a whirl. The fear of discovery wars with the fear of going undiscovered. I need to be released from my hiding place. I should not be here. Maybe they won't hurt a small boy, not even tall enough to see over the parapet of the bridge? I draw the covering over me and hold on tight. Now I am in darkness. The voices are indistinct. From somewhere far away, I seem to hear men shouting in the old tongue: *Achtung! Juden! Schnell!* I cannot breath in the confined space. With a loud crack, old timbers splinter.

Suddenly, I am above and behind them, looking over John's shoulder into the gap in the floor which he has just opened. There are human remains in the hole. Bones and mummified flesh, still wearing short trousers and a blazer, bearing a yellow star. The body still clutches a small attaché case. *My* small attaché case.

'Dear God!' exclaimed John.

Moshe kneels, stretching out a shaking hand above the child's head.

He mutters, 'Baruch Dayan ha-Emet.'

Blessed in the Righteous Judge. I feel peace at last. The smell of the cattle truck and the people who had taken their last journey in it no longer saturates my senses.

I am free.

THE END