

SUSAN SHUTER

The West Highland Line

“I HOPE YOU DIDN’T SKIMP on the tickets, Neil,” Violet said, as she struggled up the train’s one step. “First class is always worth the extra.”

“There is no first class on the West Highland Railway, Mother. It’s all coach.”

Turning around, Violet propped herself by the door to the carriage and started to fumble with her purse. “If it’s about the cost”

“It’s all coach, Mother. It’s the same train we took from Glasgow to Oban. Now we’re taking it back.”

“You were much too big for those seats. Too close. I almost suffocated.”

Before he could respond, his mother stepped onto the train platform and peered down the aisle. “Where is the conductor? There has to be special seating for pensioners.”

“There isn’t.”

“Oh, there he is.” Violet waggled her fingers in the air. “He won’t believe I’m seventy-five. No one ever does.” She touched the lapel of her tweed jacket, straightening her garnet brooch.

“Just leave him be, Mother. We can sit anywhere.” Unlike Violet, Neil had no need for preferential treatment. He merely wanted to move about unnoticed.



Taking his mother along on his annual birdwatching jaunt to the Isle of Mull had been a mistake. Instead of tramping through bogs at sunrise, Neil had spent his morning hours pacing, waiting for Violet as she dithered about. It was usually noon before he could edge their hired car along winding single-track roads in search of flat, dry sites. Places where he could spread

out his Sherland wool blanket and leave Violet to read about the *royals* and nibble on oatcakes and toffee, while he scouted about with his field glasses. But her complaints were endless—the dampness, the heat, the midges, her aching joints.

On their final, gloriously sunny June day, he'd been able to show her a soaring golden eagle as it swooped downwards. It soared up again, a small dark mass clutched in its talons.

"You're very lucky, Mother. Few people ever get to see a golden eagle. This is my first. And just before my fiftieth birthday. What a gift."

She looked up briefly from the *Daily Mirror*. "I've never understood your fascination with birds; though I am rather fond of kingfishers. Their turquoise feathers are lovely. I once had a scarf that colour."

Their seven tedious days together had reminded him why he'd left Birmingham thirty years ago. The days also filled him with guilt. He'd had no idea that Lucy, his year younger sister, had such a capacity for suffering. Saddled with two tiresome adult children and Roger, her square-headed oaf of a husband, she'd still had the decency, ten years ago, to invite their mother into her narrow semi-detached. Had even crammed Roger's telly into the master bedroom and converted her lounge into a bed-sitting room for Violet.



"Neil?"

He wedged himself into the carriage entrance, between his teetering mother and the elderly conductor.

"Neil?"

"I'm here, Mother, behind you."

Violet twisted her head and dropped one of the three straw satchels she'd insisted on carrying. She made a faltering attempt to kneel down and gather the foil packets that lay scattered all over the stained carpeting.

"You shouldn't have startled me like that, Neil. Creeping about like a thief. Now all my goodies will be ruined."

Before he could reply, the conductor patted her hand. "There, there," he said, crouching down to gather up the packets—leftover bits of food from their bed and breakfast. Half a hard-boiled egg, paper tubes of salt and pepper, a wedge of stale toast triangles and two bruised bananas.

"Don't fret, ma'am. I'll have this all tidied up in a wee moment. You just move along to that seat at the far end."

"Oh, such a gentleman."

Neil was glad he couldn't see Violet's face. It was hard enough to hear

that cloying voice without seeing his mother's version of the late Queen Mother's toothy smile.

Instead, he fixed his eyes on some graffiti scribbled on the far exit door as Violet groped her way down the aisle. Determined neither to observe, nor feel responsible for the grimaces of the passengers his mother might touch, graze and bump against during her parade through the carriage to their seats.



Visiting Birmingham once a year at Christmas, Neil liked to soothe himself with the belief that Violet and Lucy's living arrangement was actually quite successful. As everyone scrunched around Lucy's kitchen table, he'd do his bit for the festivities by donning the paper hat from his Christmas cracker and sharing amusing anecdotes from his Manchester accounting office or his birdwatching meetings. Light stories that eased the silence.

Each Boxing Day as he pecked his sister on the cheek, he thought it best to ignore the way she clung to him.

"Mother's looking well," he'd say. "I know she's somewhat difficult, but I do think with age, she's mellowed."

"She's not a bottle of wine, Neil," Lucy would answer, pushing strands of grey hair away from her eyes. "She's more like a bloody cactus. Prickly, with needles."

"Oh, there's my taxi, love. Take care."

He'd sink into his cab and later his train, pleased that things had gone so well, that there'd been no major blow-ups and that he'd done his duty for that year.

Thus, when Lucy phoned mere days after his last Christmas visit, he'd felt a quiver of unease.

"You have to take Mother with you to Mull next June, Neil. I need a break. We all do."

He'd hesitated. He so looked forward to the solitude of his annual trip. A selfish pleasure, perhaps. But one he relished.

Moved by the desperation in Lucy's plea and also by a rather pathetic desire to show Violet some of his treasured places, he'd agreed. But this past dreadful week had to be an anomaly. It was not to be repeated. He'd have to talk to Lucy about putting their mother somewhere. It wasn't like she didn't have funds. Along with her pension and a tidy inheritance from her parents, Violet had hinted at doing rather well from the sale of her house. Neither he, nor Lucy, knew how well.



He should never have put his sweatpants on over his walking shorts, Neil thought as he swiped at the perspiration rolling down his face and almost bumped up against his mother.

She was leaning against a double seat with a table. Perfect. He wouldn't have to sit next to her and breathe in her lily of the valley fumes. The scent reminded him of his childhood house and his mother's thrice weekly bath. Violet would emerge from the loo looking as if someone had sifted powdered sugar over her. He and his sister would go into fits of sneezing as the remnants of her talcum powder settled about the house.

At least they'd both have a window seat. Maybe his mother would stop her perpetual nattering long enough to appreciate the scenery. Look out and see the cascading mountain burns, the dark forests that opened to reveal sparkling lochs, and the picturesque villages with unpronounceable names. If she was interested, he'd point out the Great Glen and Loch Lomond. Or perhaps he'd just stay silent and pass the miles to Glasgow gazing out the window with that vague disconnected interest of the traveler. Watching people in the little villages and hamlets fade away. Forgotten, before they could even be remembered.



"Here, Mother, give me your bags while you settle in."

"There's no need to hiss."

"There was no need to bring those breakfast scraps onto the train, Mother. They have a food trolley."

"Crisps and chocolates. Just the kind of food you should be avoiding. All over-priced. Nothing substantial. We paid good money for that bed and breakfast and the toilet wasn't even fastened tightly to the floor."

Neil shoved the bags under the table, keeping his head down so his mother's words were muffled, easier to ignore.

"You might've wondered why I was in the loo so long this morning."

Struggling to raise his head from under the table, Neil said, "No, not really."

"Well, you know how I always take a little less time when I know it's a shared toilet."

"Mother, we've seldom traveled together. I have no idea what your usual routine around shared toilets might be."

"I'm always very conscious of the needs of others, so often I brush my teeth in the bedroom instead."

"Lovely, Mother," he said, watching as the conductor lifted his mother's satchel carefully over the heads of the other passengers and struggled down the aisle toward them.

"Well, when I sat on the toilet, it rocked. I felt as if I were at sea. And then when I was finished, there was this huge puddle on the floor."

Neil reached out to take the satchel from the conductor. His mother's voice droned on. "In the end, I had to get down on my hands and knees. I must've used up an entire roll of toilet paper sopping up that floor."

Neil smiled at the conductor as though neither of them could hear her.

"Here you go, sir. I'll just get on to checking the tickets now."

As he scuttled off and the train's engines started to rumble, Neil realized the couple across the aisle had looked up from their cribbage board and were staring at him. They looked away quickly but not before he saw their look of pity. He wanted to shake them, explain that he barely ever spent time with his mother, had actually escaped out of her clutches many years before. Had built a life for himself. A quiet, what some might even consider, lonely life in Manchester. But a life that suited him perfectly. Busy days at his mid-level accounting firm, but no overtime, no weekend work. His after hours were his own. He had the freedom to putter about, beholden to no one. His birders group gave him ample opportunity to be outdoors and provided acquaintances with a mutual interest. Other than the annual Christmas do and the mid-summer tea, members focused on their ornithological interests and didn't pry into the more personal aspects of each other's lives.

Neil had never cared much for the company of women; except once, years ago. He had several rather close men friends. Chaps he'd met at the university. Like him, they were happy to remain on the outskirts of life and all its entanglements; up for hill-walking in the Lake District or a week's vacation in Portugal. Taciturn men who made him feel at ease.



"I'm too warm," his mother said as she rustled through one of her satchels and pulled out a *News of the World*. With her bent arthritic fingers she fashioned it into a fan and started brandishing it wildly in front of her face.

"I warned you that it would be hot on the train, Mother."

"Well, you're one to talk, wearing that grotty sweatshirt."

"It breathes, Mother. It's pure cotton. And, you might've noticed, I'm layered. I have a tennis shirt on underneath."

"That's a bit of a joke. You, with a tennis shirt. I can't picture you waddling around a court swatting at a ball."

Neil turned away, looking through the passing trees for a glimmer of light.

"I'm thirsty."

This must be what it was like to travel with a young child, he thought. The incessant wants, the jumping from one inane topic to another. He'd been wise to avoid any thought of marriage or children.

"The drinks trolley will be along shortly."

"But I'm thirsty now." His mother's voice rose slightly, became a little shriller. The busybodies across the aisle cast sidelong glances.

"Do you see a drinks person, Mother? Anyone pushing a trolley?"

She craned her head backwards. "No."

Neil settled back into his seat. "Then we'll just have to wait, won't we."

His mother was still for a moment and then leaned across the table grasping his wrist in her claw-like grip. "I need a drink now, Neil."

He tried to peel off her fingers and didn't even notice the slight tapping on his shoulder at first.

"Would your wife like some water, sir? I have an extra bottle."

Neil presumed the man across the aisle was kind; that there was no malicious intent. But to be taken for his mother's spouse, to be considered the same age or worse still, the hapless half of a May-December romance, was almost more than he could bear.

"This woman is my mother."

The busybody looked embarrassed. And then made matters worse. "Really, she looks so youthful, I didn't realize." He thrust the bottle past Neil and handed it to Violet. "Please, take this."

As Neil expected, his mother fluttered her eyelashes and put on the voice she reserved for tea room hostesses. "Oh no, I couldn't. I'll just wait for the trolley."

"Just take it, Mother. This gentleman, like everyone else on this carriage, is tired of listening to you whine." He looked around, waiting for at least one pair of eyes to nod in agreement. But everyone developed a sudden interest in their papers or their purses. She's won again, he thought, as he watched her struggle with the cap.

As he expected, it was only a matter of minutes before his mother swallowed the last of the water and then said in an undertone, "I have to go to the loo."

Neil peered down the aisle. The occupied sign was lit up over the toilet door. He took more pleasure than he should have in saying, "Too bad, Mother. You'll have to wait. Someone's in there."

She didn't answer but drummed her fingers on the table top. "I really have to go."

"The sign still says occupied, Mother."

"Well what are they doing in there? Are they changing a nappy?"

"Given that I can't see through the ..."

"Because if they are, I won't be able to go in there. It's a disgrace. When you and your sister were young, babies were completely toilet-trained by nine months." A look of pride came into her face. She stopped drumming and rubbed his hand. "You, Neil, were trained by seven months."

"I doubt it, Mother. Babies can barely even sit by that age."

"What would you know about babies? Or childbirth?"

"Next to nothing. But I do know small babies are floppy and unable to sit on toilet seats."

But he'd lost his mother. She'd settled back on her seat and was grimacing as if in considerable pain. "You have no idea what I went through having you and your sister. And your father. Where was he during all those hours I was in agony?"

Neil shrugged. "I wouldn't know, Mother, seeing as he walked out of the house on my third birthday."

"Neil, I cannot wait a minute longer. Do something."

"The vacant sign's lit up, Mother. Go and pee to your heart's content."

"I should wash your mouth out with soap," she said as she started to push her way across the bench seat. As she pulled herself to a standing position, Neil could sense the silent disapproval from the couple beside him. The water bottle man laid down his cards and arched his neck, watching with a furrowed brow as Violet tottered her way down the aisle.

Neil picked up her *News of the World* and occasionally glanced toward the end of the car to monitor his mother's progress. She's having an excellent time, he thought. Even from this distance he could hear her shallow breathing and see her clutching at people's shoulders as she swayed from side to side. He didn't even feel embarrassed when a young woman stood up, took his mother's arm and guided her right into the loo. What the other passengers didn't realize was that he'd seen this act before. He grinned to himself. Frankly, he'd only give this afternoon's version three stars. She could do better.

He didn't consider himself a cruel man. And occasionally, when Violet's face lit up as she opened his carefully chosen Christmas presents,

he felt rather fond of her. But mostly, she irritated him rather like a pebble he couldn't dislodge from his shoe. In this, he realized, he was very much his mother's son.



"I was a beautiful child," she used to tell Lucy and him. "I could've been a regular model when I grew up, if I hadn't been so petite." She'd pat her auburn curls. "Instead I was a hat maker's model. All through the fifties. Hats went out about the same time as your father left."

They'd be flanking her as she sat at her dressing table. All three of them peering into her rectangular mirror with its border of twelve round pink bulbs. This was where Violet brushed her hair, drew on her lips and dabbed cologne behind her ears. Intent on her toilette, she didn't mind them crowding against her. He realized now that he and Lucy must have been drawn by the light. Warmed by its glow, basking in Violet's sense of well-being as she focused on her reflection.

Usually she was too busy for them. In spite of her beauty, she'd always had what she liked to call a *practical streak*. She became the hat maker's bookkeeper when the firm switched to making jeans. Before and after school, Neil and Lucy stayed with an elderly neighbour who seemed to be under the impression that Violet had once acted in films. Suppers were simple rushed affairs; often Violet was darting about getting ready for an evening out with one of a parade of *uncles* who courted her. Neil paid the men little heed. Violet babbled about each one for the first few outings, especially if there were flowers and perfume, but soon tired of each *uncle* and would amuse Lucy and him by imitating the current boyfriend's mannerisms and speech. Neil always laughed. His mother could be very funny, but then he'd feel rather sick afterwards. As if he'd gorged on Turkish delight, which he didn't even like.

Violet wasn't the type of mother one snuggled up against. She was always smoothing her skirt or adjusting her collar. Even when she stayed in, she had little time. "I've got to rinse out my stockings. Read to each other," she'd say.

Neil realized now that he'd never had any expectations of his mother. Instead he'd felt the weight of her sacrifice.

"I could've left too. Just like your father. Had a different sort of life," she'd say whenever Lucy or he particularly annoyed her.



“Helensburgh, next station,” the conductor called. Closer to Glasgow then he’d thought. Best to call Lucy and remind her what time Violet’s train would be arriving.

He pulled his mobile out of his sweatpants pocket and tapped Lucy’s number. After two short bleeps there was a sudden click and a computer-generated voice spoke. “This number is no longer in service.”

He redialed. Same message. Then he felt the tug on his sleeve. The water-bottle man pointed down the aisle. Violet was backing out of the toilet, as the solicitous young woman hovered nearby.

“Thanks for your interest, old chap. Mother looks like she’s in good hands.”

He redialed again. Conscious of murmurs and shuffling sounds as his mother worked her way back up the aisle. What was up with Lucy? He needed to connect with her now. Otherwise his mother would snatch the phone and use up all his minutes. Then he realized his sister had probably left a message on his machine. He dialed his own number and sure enough there was Lucy’s voice.

There was a new lilt in her tone. Obviously, the week off had given her a boost. Next year they’d have to send their mother to some kind of resort for the aged. If there was such a thing.

Panicking as the sound of his mother’s *pardon me* became distinct; he didn’t quite take in Lucy’s message at first. He pushed replay.

“Neil, I feel awful about this. But I can’t do it anymore. We sold our house just after Christmas. The moving date was while Mother was with you. I can’t share where we are or my new number, but I’ll be in touch.”

Neil heard what sounded like the clunk of coins. “Roger says to remind you that we’ve given her room and board and the best years of our lives. I’ve got to go. I don’t have any more change.”

Neil felt much the same way he’d felt the one time he’d played cricket. Expecting the ball to be hit in a certain direction, he was totally unprepared to see it come hurtling toward him and had just stood there, taking the full impact in his chest.



“Neil, take my handbag.”

He sat immobile. The protective stranger and his mother both glared at him. He dropped his mobile on the tabletop.

“Right. Sorry, Mother.” As Neil fumbled for the purse and his mother wriggled her way back in place, the woman hovered, an obvious look of

disapproval on her face. Whatever does she want, he wondered? Thanks or a tip perhaps. He started to dig into his sweatpants pocket for his wallet.

"Please," the woman said, shaking her head. "I'm a nursing sister. On vacation. But never really off duty."

"How conscientious of you. Many thanks." Neil turned away.

But Florence Nightingale wasn't finished. With a practiced bedside manner she bent down, her lips close to his ear. "Your mother does remarkably well, but she's very frail."

"Not to worry, she lives with my sister and her family."

His mother reached the mid-point of the bench and held out her arm to Florence, gazing into the nurse's eyes with a winsome look. "Thanks, my dear. I don't know how I would've managed without you."

As the nursing sister returned to her seat, Violet leaned across the table and spoke as if he were deaf. "It's a shame you never took up with someone like that, Neil. She would've been a great comfort to me."



Obviously, Neil thought, his mother had wiped all memory of Betty out of her mind. He'd met Betty at university in Manchester. Not in a lecture hall but in the cafeteria line-up. Betty was on the other side of the glass shield, dishing out mushy peas and mashed turnips. He'd first realized she was interested when he noticed his mounds of vegetables were much larger than those of his friends. After several months of weekend walks followed by shared tea and cakes in the Midland Hotel, he was absolutely besotted. And in a moment of reckless abandon, he'd brought Betty home to Birmingham. His mother had started in immediately.

Ever so curious about a girlhood spent on a farm, Violet couldn't ask enough about sheep, pigs or manure. She even clasped Betty's hands and examined them, complimenting her short clipped nails, "so practical, dear, good working hands. I've always had this silly weakness for polish, myself." His mother never let up all weekend. Every time Neil reached for a biscuit, she cuffed his hand and in her merry way asked Betty how she liked being with a boy who had bigger breasts than she did.

After the visit, Betty left the steam table for the kitchen, changed her telephone number and disappeared altogether after the Christmas break. For years Neil had puzzled over his mother's cruel behaviour. Eventually, he'd concluded that she must have been scared. Frightened that Betty's interest in him might mean there was a chance he wouldn't return home from university after all.

He had such a clear memory of standing once with Violet in the lounge; the two of them staring out the window as twelve-year-old Lucy wandered off with friends.

“Your sister’s nothing much to look at, Neil. Mousy with drab stringy hair, she’s the type that will find the wrong boy early and end up having to marry him.”

This harsh but, in the end, accurate assessment, had always made him wonder what thumbnail sketch of him she’d drawn for Lucy.



His mother pounced on his mobile. “Who were you calling?”

“Nigel. At the association. I wanted to tell him about the golden eagle we saw.”

“Let me see.” She started to fumble with the buttons and he grabbed the phone out of her hands. And ignored the throat clearing from across the aisle.

“You’re hiding something, aren’t you?”

“If you must know, I was talking to Lucy as well. Letting her know what time your train gets in.”

For the second time that day, his mother’s fingers curled over his wrist. He flinched, recalling yesterday and the small dark mass writhing in the eagle’s talons. Violet bent her heart-shaped face close to his, as if they were having a very private moment.

“Lucy’s gone, isn’t she?”

It wasn’t a question, he realized. It was a statement. His mother knew. Had she been part of the conspiracy?

“What makes you think that?”

Violet gave his hand a crushing squeeze and then dropped it. Her green eyes narrowed and her tight knowing smile appeared.

“I can sense things. I’ve always been able to. Your sister’s so transparent.”

Instead of responding, Neil focused on the unexpected blob of yellow yolk lodged in the left corner of Violet’s mouth. Had it been there since this morning? Or was it from this afternoon? He should tell her. But he didn’t.

Violet inched still closer. “I’m glad to see the end of her. And besides,” she said, sinking back into the cracked vinyl, “I’ve always preferred Manchester.”

Neil didn’t trust himself to speak. This morning’s full Scottish breakfast that had been sitting uncomfortably under his elasticized waistbands,

now threatened to revolt. His skin was clammy. And he smelt sour. Like a wet sock forgotten in a washing machine.

"Here," he said, handing her back the *News of the World*. Sticking his mobile in his pocket, he pulled his sweatshirt off and tossed it onto the seat.

He stood up and stretched his arms. "I need to use the toilet before we get to Glasgow. There's a bit of a line-up, so I'll be a few minutes."

As he spoke, his future flashed through his mind. He pictured himself perpetually standing before his mother; fibbing, exaggerating, snatching at any excuse to run an errand, do a chore. Anything, just so he could be alone, if only for a minute or two.

Smoothing a gnarled finger over a cover photo of Prince Harry, his mother didn't even look up. "*They* say Charles isn't his father."

Without answering, Neil made his way down the aisle, holding his arms crossed in front of him so as not to brush against protruding elbows. No one looked his way. Not even the conductor, intent on assembling his collected tickets into a tidy pile. And as the train crawled through the rail yard of the Glasgow Central station, Neil realized how easy it would be to push open the rear sliding door, jump down and disappear. By the time Violet realized he was actually gone, he could be settled onto the clockwork orange Glasgow tube. Circling the city, refining his disappearance. His skills were transferable, his home was a rental and there were ever so many obscure hamlets in Mull. Quiet places where his skills as a birdwatcher would quell anyone's curiosity about where he was from and who he had been. Perhaps he was his father's son after all.

He grasped the door handle and then noticed the disk of light reflecting off the carriage ceiling. As the circle darted about, he looked down the aisle. Sure enough, there was his mother's head, her still coppery curls bent down lower than usual. Had she discovered the yolk with her darting tongue? Pulled out her etched gold compact with its mother-of-pearl inlay?

"Your father gave me this," she used to say, patting her face with the compact's soft flattened puff. "The only thing he left behind. Except, of course, you two."



He wasn't his father. He let go of the handle. And walked with a heavy step back to their seat.

Violet looked up from the mirror. "Where have you been? I thought I'd been deserted."

"We're going back to Birmingham, Mother."

"Nonsense. Your sister's fled. I'm coming with you."

"No. I'll accompany you. We'll get a hotel room and in a matter of no more than a week, we'll settle you into a lovely retirement villa."

Looking around, Violet raised her voice. "I've never thought of you as cruel, Neil. Your sister, yes. But not you."

Neil raised his voice. "Don't be absurd, Mother. You have money. And," he said, certain now that he had everyone's attention, "you've always preferred strangers. They bring out the best in you."

With that, he picked up his sweatshirt from the seat and started to pull it over his head. He was in no hurry to re-emerge. Hidden in its soft folds, he felt the train jolt to a stop and heard the bustle of people surging toward the exit. Neil understood their eagerness to escape, to be away from him and Violet.

At last, he shrugged the sweatshirt down onto his shoulders. The carriage was almost empty.

"Mother, it's time to go."

Violet, intent on looping her maroon scarf into a bow, didn't answer.

"You'll be with people your own age, Mother. There'll be warm scones and chats over tea."

"I'll be dead within a month."

She'll like it in the end, Neil assured himself. And of course, he'd visit at Christmas.