

The Einstein express

by John Kessel

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“Whatever you do, don’t offend Mr. Solomon,” Monica said, pushing David up the stairs to the commuter platform. She tugged his five-inch-wide Windsor-knotted tie straight. Monica always took such a motherly interest in his appearance. She would never, she told him, let him embarrass either of them.

“I’m not a child, Monica.”

“You need this accounting job, David. It’s 1941. I can’t marry a man who fritters away his time on butterflies.”

“I know Monica.” David was impressed by the authority of her eyebrows. Monica had the eyebrows of a five-star general. “But you’re going to hate waiting for me while I make this long commute.”

She pinched his cheek. “I have ways to keep myself occupied. See you tonight.” As she turned to go David tried to kiss her, but she danced away. “David! Don’t be an animal!” She got into Lance’s Buick and drove off.

David stood amid the other commuters waiting for the train at the New Zion station. He really wanted to be a lepidopterologist, not an accountant, but nobody needed butterfly collectors. From his side pocket he pulled the folder containing the specimen Yabadaba flooglus he’d received in the mail the day before and examined it, dreaming of Amazonian jungles and the thrill of the hunt. The flooglus was very rare; he had spent fifteen dollars on it.

At the other end of the platform a young woman in an overcoat and sneakers was prowling around muttering to herself. She peered toward David, shielding her eyes with her hand, and stalked over to him. “Have you seen Mr. Smith?”

“Mr. Smith?”

“He should be here somewhere.”

“What does he look like?”

“Well actually, you can’t tell. He’s in a box.” She had a pale oval face and straight dark hair. Her coat was four sizes too large. “You have him, don’t you. What did you do with him?”

“What?”

“Did you open the box? Has there been a spontaneous decay? Did the bottle break?”

“My good woman - “

“I’m not a woman, I’m a physicist. You look like you could be a scientist - or an accountant.”

“I am an accountant - “

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“ - and I have no idea what I’d want with Mr. Smith or his box - “

“My box.”

The other people on the platform were staring at them. He supposed he had to humor this madwoman just so she’d shut up. And if somebody was indeed trapped in a box he really ought to help. “Maybe it’s in the baggage room.” They searched through the station’s baggage room. Ten minutes later she had him trapped behind a steamer trunk while the local for New York arrived, and left. “I’ve missed my train!” David shouted.

“So what? I’ve missed my dog.”

“Your dog! You kept me here looking for your dog? I have a meeting with one of the most important young executives in Manhattan today!”

“Well, you’re not likely to run into him here.”

David considered strangling her. “What time does the next train leave? I have to get there fast.”

“We’ll take the express. It should be arriving any time now.”

Sure enough, as soon as she spoke a streamlined train pulled into the station. The engine was sleek as a bullet, the cars burnished silver. David found a seat in a coach that hummed as if it were full of energy. The train pulled out, accelerating smoothly. David was pinned in his seat. Through the window the scenery began to blur.

“You know,” the crazy woman said, “the baggage handlers may have already loaded the experiment on board.” She turned to him. “My name is Susan. What’s yours?”

Back in New Zion a year passed, and still Monica had heard nothing from David. He was as gone as Judge Crater. “How could this happen to me?” Monica asked Lance. “Jilted by a man who doesn’t know how to tie his own necktie!”

Lance smoothed his mustache. “He’s probably just dodging the draft.”

Monica brushed away a tear. “The swine! Thank God you’re 4-F.”

“Yes, thank God - for your sake.” He touched her cheek. “But tempus fugit,

darling. You need to move on.”

“Don’t even think it, Lance - no amount of time will heal this wound!”

Doesn’t this train seem to be moving a little fast?” David asked.

“You wanted the express, didn’t you? This is the Einstein Express.”

“Yes, but how fast does it go?”

“Somewhere near the speed of light. Now let’s find Mr. Smith.”

“The speed of light! I guess I’ll be home early after all.”

Susan looked a little uncomfortable. “Actually, we may be a little late.”

David got out of his seat. “In that case I’d better telegram Monica.”

“Monica? She probably forgot all about you a long time ago.”

David thought this woman really was the most abrupt person he’d ever met. “Monica wouldn’t do that. We’re to be married.”

“A girl can’t wait forever. She has to seize the day.”

David blushed. “I’m not the sort of fellow who seizes things.”

“I can see that.”

He found the conductor, with Susan tagging along like a faithful terrier. “My good man, I need to send a telegram to Miss Monica Finch, 223 Swallow Lane, New Zion.”

“New Zion! We left there ages ago, pal. She’s not going to want to hear from you.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

The man handed David a yellow telegraph form. Susan shoved a pencil into his hand. “I’ll dictate,” she told him. “Take this down. Tell her - |Making very good time.”“ She leaned over his shoulder. He felt her warm breath on his cheek. “Events developing more rapidly than expected.”

“More rapidly - than expected,” David repeated. His heart fluttered like a *Marinera spasticus*. He felt a wisp of Susan’s hair on his cheek. She really was quite attractive, for a physicist wearing sneakers.

“Should be home for supper,” she continued. “Sign it, Love, David’ - no, make that, |Devotedly David.’ No, better make that |In haste, David.”“

She kissed his ear, took the form and handed it to the conductor. “Send that pronto, Jackson.”

It was a lovely wedding. Monica looked simply radiant, and everyone was so happy that she had finally gotten over her abandonment by that woolly brained butterfly nut who'd disappeared on the eve of their marriage.

The reception was an unqualified success. Champagne in barrels, the cake a feathery dream, with a swing band playing the latest Sinatra hits and everyone celebrating the end of wartime privation. Late in the evening a disquieting telegram arrived. MAKING VERY GOOD TIME, it said. EVENTS DEVELOPING MORE RAPIDLY THAN EXPECT SHOULD BE HOME FOR SUPPER. IN HASTE, DAVID.

Monica stewed about the prank for months. She and Lance honeymooned in California and settled into Lance's big Georgian house. Still, the telegram gnawed at her. Finally, a year and a half after the nuptials, on the day she found she was going to have a baby, she shot off a reply care of the Hudson Valley Railroad. TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: DROP DEAD.

The instant the conductor got done sending the message, the ticker chattered out a reply. He tore off the tape. "It's for you," he said, handing it to David.

David read. TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: DROP DEAD.

"What's that supposed to mean? Send a return telegram."

"That'll be sixty-two dollars."

"Sixty-two dollars!"

"A hundred twenty-four, total, with the first telegram."

"That's outrageous!"

"This is the Einstein Express, buddy. We got overhead. How much diesel fuel you think it takes to get a train up to the speed of light?"

"That depends entirely on how many liters you burn per unit of acceleration," Susan said. "Now if -"

"Excuse us," said David, dragging her off by the elbow. They went to the club car, where David slumped glumly in a lounge seat. "Now what?"

Susan picked up a heavy bronze ashtray. "David, look! We can tie a note to this ashtray, then throw it off when we pass the next station!"

David wondered why, at that moment, he felt the urge to flee.

Lance and Monica had three children, two boys and a girl. Lance worked hard and got a job in the office of that rising young congressman, Dick Nixon. If things broke right in the '52 election, they would be sitting pretty.

David stuck his head out of the hatchway in the baggage car roof. He balanced unsteadily on three cages of chickens they'd stacked up so he shone the flashlight ahead and glimpsed a blue reflection of masonry.

After Nixon lost the election in 1960 Lance got a job in advertising. "See the USA in your Chevrolet" - that was one of his. Also, "You'll wonder where the yellow went, when you brush your teeth with Pepsodent."

Monica gained twenty pounds and took up bridge. Lance gained thirty and played golf. Their daughter Amelie flipped out over some hairy boys from England. Youth, her parents said, was wasted on the young.

They struggled to untangle themselves from the explosion of broken cages, luggage, and chickens. "That was terrific. Got any more bright ideas?"

"I said tunnel!"

David found his glasses underneath her, the bridge of them snapped. "Say, didn't that station look rather squashed to you? Like maybe it was only three feet from one end of the platform to the other? Windows like slits in a wall? Roof peaked like a knife edge? Skinny station workers wearing skinny ties?"

"It's the Lorentz-FitzGerald contraction."

"Is that a design trend?"

The chickens fluttered and squawked. Suddenly they heard a growl, and a white terrier launched itself out of one of the upended boxes. "Mr. Smith!" Susan exclaimed. The dog chased chickens in frantic circles around the car. David and Susan fell over suitcases and each other trying to grab him. Finally David, diving over a trunk like an Olympic swimmer, seized the barking dog.

He wrestled grimly with the wriggling terrier. "Well, we found him."

Susan looked into Mr. Smith's box. "Before the bottle of patchouli broke. What a disaster that would have been!"

On her twentieth birthday, Amelie received a message meant for her mother. Her parents were in Cancun on their second honeymoon. The telegram read: ARRIVED NYC. CAN'T WAIT TO SEE YOU. DAVID.

After the Einstein Express pulled into Grand Central and David sent a telegram, they hurried along 42nd Street to Third Avenue. David couldn't get over how busy the city seemed. The place was full of long, low cars with rocketlike fins on their tails. Hatless men with skinny ties jostled through the streets.

The interview with Solomon started poorly. He had no record of an appointment, gawked openly at their clothing, and seemed more interested in his approaching retirement than in accountants. On his walls hung display cases of

butterflies. David, remembering, fumbled for the flooglus in his pocket. Miraculously, it was undamaged.

Solomon perked up. “Is that a Yabadaba flooglus?” David handed it over. “Why, I’ve been searching for this butterfly for twenty years. It’s almost extinct! Where did you get it?”

“I’ve had it for some time.”

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am, my boy.” He thrust a fistful of banknotes at David. “No, that’s not enough. Here, let me write you a check. Would ten thousand be fair?”

“That would be generous.”

“Better still, I’ll invest it for you. Some U.S. Steel? General Motors?”

“I don’t know much about those things.”

“What are you interested in?”

“Well, I’m an accountant. I could use a new adding machine.”

“Business machines! Perfect! We’ll get you a few hundred shares of IBM.”

The train ride back was uneventful. David sent Monica a series of telegrams. Susan played hide-the-stock-portfolio with Mr. Smith.

“Monica must be wondering what happened to me. We’re hours late. What a fool I’ve been!”

“It’s all my fault.”

“That’s easy for you to say. Everyone knows you’re just crazy.” He tried to figure out a way to repair the bridge of his glasses.

“You’re really quite handsome, you know, without your glasses.”

“Monica says I should wear them all the time.”

“You must just love Monica.”

“She has wonderful eyebrows.”

“I’ll bet she does. I bet strong men faint when they see her eyebrows.”

David put the broken halves of his glasses back in his pocket. “At least Monica never got me up on top of a train going at nine-tenths the speed of light to enter a tunnel.”

During the last five years, after forty years of silence, Monica had received a raft of messages from some trickster purporting to be David. INTERVIEW

SUCCESSFUL. THINKING OF YOU. CAN'T WAIT DO YOU LOVE ME?
ARRIVING SOON NEW ZION. MEET ME AT STATION. Monica ignored them.

It happened that Thanksgiving season, however, that Monica and Lance decided to meet their grandson Derek and his family when they came for the holidays. Lance and Monica drove to the station in the Lincoln. They stood on the platform and remembered the fateful day when she had been saved from an inappropriate match by the disappearance of that fool David.

The train slowed. At last, squealing, it pulled into the station. David, Susan and Mr. Smith got off. The sign below the eaves read, "New Zion," but the station was different. The outside was shabbier. The concession stand and restaurant were gone. Graffiti covered the walls: RELATIVITY IS SPECIAL.

On the platform loitered a boy and a girl. The boy wore fluorescent green sneakers as large as combat boots and an underwear shirt with writing on it: "Bo knows hacking." The girl's shirt read, "Just do it." The boy had four earrings in his left ear. The girl wore black tights and a stunningly short skirt. Her hair was orange. "Check that suit! Seriously damaged!"

"It's not damaged," David said. "Just rumped from the chickens."

"Rad!"

An old man and woman stepped forward. "Pardon me," the woman asked David, "is this the train from Hartford?"

"This is the Einstein Express." The woman looked vaguely familiar. Her eyebrows straggled out like the branches of a gnarled oak. For a moment David thought it might be Monica's grandmother. Then he felt a sinking feeling. "Monica?"

"I beg your pardon, young man. Do I know you?"

He looked at the old woman, the old man beside her. "No, I guess you don't."

The woman leaned forward and whispered, "You know, your tie is crooked."

He pulled it off and handed it to Lance. "Actually, you can have it."

David and Susan went into the station and had a cup of bad vending machine coffee, which cost a dollar. Susan bought a paper, which cost another. David stared disconsolately out the window at the sunny fall day. Mr. Smith watched the squirrels burying nuts. "Talk about a long commute!" David said. "Susan what will we do?"

"How about lepidopterology?"

"But everything's changed!"

"That's not necessarily bad," she said, examining the stock prices.

“I suppose we’ve missed some interesting developments,” David mused. Susan looked up, and he noticed for the first time what a lovely shade of brown her eyes were. “I don’t want to miss any more.”

The girl with the “Just do it” shirt walked by. “Carpe diem,” Susan said, and kissed him.