

Tall Tales on the Iron Horse

a short story

by **Colin P Davies**

Two kilometres inland from the equatorial Sumatran port of Padang the train turns sharply, plunges into the mountain, and clatters down through a darkness relieved only by the occasional glimmer of St. Elmo's fire, finally emerging, after three days by the clock, into the icy, orange daylight of Saturn's moon, Titan.

At least, that's what Gillian said.

I'd sat silently opposite the large, chattering woman for far too long when I eventually decided to speak. "Historical facts and figures are indigestible...hence the saying, *History repeats itself*." I stroked my beak-like nose (I have no illusions about anything anymore).

She smiled, apparently relieved. "My name is Gillian." Ringlets of black hair obscured her eyes, but a sparkle of mischief escaped.

"So you said."

Three days to go.

The train had just entered the tunnel. Beyond the windows, nothing could be seen. We rocked and rattled, always downhill.

"You're a teacher then, Mr. Hanover?" Gillian had one of those hurried voices which always sound breathless, as if it took a major effort to hold back the next flurry of words.

I nodded. "History."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Yes, apart from the kids."

"I did a bit of teaching."

"Before you became a talker?"

She shifted in her seat, sweeping up her huge, ruby silk skirt so that it settled across my knees. "I've always been a talker," she said. "Science. I used to teach science, in the broadest and most basic terms possible."

I nodded. "I wish I could understand that sort of thing. Like this train. To me it's just magic."

She laughed, revealing ruby implants in alternate teeth. "If I was a real bore, I'd explain exactly how all this works. But I'm not and I won't."

I nodded.

"At least not now."

The Manchester hotel pool that morning had been as cool and sharp as a revelation. The vodkas of the night before had only obscured the truth, strung a thin net across the void. Now I plunged in. *Mary... Mary!* She was gone. Everything was gone. Everything. Her call from Australia left no doubt. She was looking for God.

I slipped below the surface. The guts of the hotel rumbled in my ears. Could I drown myself? No, I hadn't the courage...if that was what it took. I surfaced, spat water.

I'd take the suborbital to Sydney -- track Ortega down. It was all I could do for Mary now.

"I don't consider origami to be a survival skill," I said.

Gillian tossed the newly made paper cup into my lap. "It'll hold water."

"Which is more than can be said for your story."

"Many passengers have a problem with that story -- - the animated paper doll of Chez Malloy. I suppose I can't blame them. I mean, what sort of name is that for a hotel anyway! I should have stayed at the Titan Imperial. I did meet him though...Angus Malloy. We didn't have relations, but I did license him into my virtual world. When I left him, his eyes were glazed and his face held a huge grin. I suppose I was flattered."

"So he'd smuggled the doll into your luggage," I said.

"Look...." I stroked my nose. "The paper doll crawling out of your bag I can live with. The doll rampaging around this carriage doesn't upset me overmuch. Even the part about it having your face doesn't quite stretch credibility to breaking point." I sat back in my soft seat. "But don't tell me Malloy powered it by harnessing the latent energy contained in paper folds. That's pure bull!"

She struggled to her feet. Her skirt rustled like pigs in the undergrowth. "I'm going to the dining car," she said, a little haughtily. "I suggest you follow." Then she left.

We walked down the centre of the next carriage, Gillian in the lead, squeezing down the narrow aisle, both hips brushing the seats. I tried not to tread on her skirt. The chatter was oppressive; lots of passengers, a talker with each. The rocking of the train made it hard to keep to a steady line and I had to clutch at the seats. The track clatter seemed louder in here.

For the first time I noticed the oddly empty luggage racks, and the garish wall posters proclaiming the latest participation-simulation movies. *The only limit is your own imagination*. Smellovision and Toucharama, neural triggers: why live in the real world, I thought, when you can immerse yourself in a controlled dream?

That thought was somehow important, I was certain. But my attempts to conceptualise beyond the confined world of this train left me with nothing -- hands grasping at fog.

"So what happened with the doll?" I asked as we passed through into the dining car.

"Didn't I tell you?"

"No."

She glanced back at me. "I refolded it into an airplane and slipped it out through a window, while we were still in the tunnel. Set off all sorts of alarms and earned me a fine. You should have seen the fireworks. I got my fingers singed. But the plane survived and somehow limped home."

"The plane *limped* home?"

"Malloy was very surprised. He'd intended it to be a gift."

I laughed -- what else could I do? "You tell a good story."

She winked at me. "Telling stories is my business."

"It isn't that I don't understand your pain," the Reverend Ortega had said. He'd sipped his blue vermouth. "It's simply that I don't care." A constellation of chandeliers glimmered on his polished skull.

I stood beside his dining table in the exclusive Ocean Tapestry restaurant in Sydney. My body was trembling. I wanted to kill him. The bald girl sitting opposite him giggled into her hands.

My fingers were flexing as I imagined them around his neck. But while there was the slightest chance I could still help Mary, I could not let my anger off the leash.

"I don't believe that Mary knew what she was doing," I said. "She was sick."

"She had been depressed," the Reverend said. "She'd just lost her business empire."

"She owned three shops!"

He sipped at his drink again. "It's not unusual for people to turn to God at these times."

"The Mary I knew didn't even believe in God. She needed medical help...and you took advantage of her."

He shrugged. "Speak to my lawyer. Besides, where were you when she needed this help?"

"You're a fraud, and a murderer!"

"That's slanderous. I've got a witness."

I snatched up the girl's glass and tossed red wine into his face. He sprang to his feet. I thought he was going to lose control. Then the momentary lines of fury were gone from his face and his skin regained its unblemished smooth superiority. He dabbed himself clean with a napkin.

I was grabbed from behind by two men and hauled outside into the cold rain. They dumped me on the kerbside.

I sat and steamed for fifteen minutes, then caught a cab.

Again I sat opposite Gillian. The table between us held a 3D image of Saturn as viewed from the Holiday Inn on Titan. Closer examination revealed an improbable train circumnavigating the rings every five seconds.

"*The Flying Scotsman*, a mythical engine," Gillian said. "Here's our coffees."

"I didn't order any."

An autotrolley pulled up beside the table. Gillian transferred two full mugs to Saturn's flattened pole. "I always get coffees."

"So what's next?"

"Next?"

"Your next story." I tried the coffee. It was too hot and too strong. "Or are you going to let me sleep?"

"You know better than that."

I wiped coffee from my moustache with a finger. The hot liquid made me more aware that I was feeling warm already, in spite of the cool air blowing around my ankles from the under-seat ventilator.

Gillian slurped her coffee, then smiled. "Three days isn't so long to stay awake."

"It's one Hell of a lot of stories."

"We're travelling on the principle of suspension of disbelief -- a time-honoured method of empowering the imagination. It's a talker's job to maintain the fictional aura, and to stop you sleeping."

"You said you weren't going to explain."

"Sorry...was that an explanation?"

"I told you I'm not good at science."

Gillian pulled the ringlets of hair from her eyes. "As I understand it, the train is enfolded in a field wherein the suppression of disbelief charms the pants off all the quarks which, in their excitement, jump about with their tachyons spinning so fast that their watches go backwards and then they party all night until it's time to feed Schrodinger's cat. Makes an odd kind of sense, don't you think?"

I rubbed my forehead. I'd never noticed how the veins stood out before. "Could you stop talking?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Well then, let's talk about something else. Have you ever been to Europe?"

"Funny you should ask that...."

The sun had been rising when I'd spotted the Reverend Ortega finally arriving back at his apartment -- -

a penthouse above the temple. His MG Micro soft-top hissed to a halt before the temple doors. He emerged alone. He clattered up the steel staircase and went inside.

I remained on the bench where I'd spent the cold night. I felt too brittle to get up.

Just one minute ago the sun had crested the dockside Herald building and was now in my eyes. I stroked the black cat which had joined me during the night and slowly began to thaw.

I'd never been the bravest of men, but I knew I had to go through with this. Mary deserved my best shot. If she hadn't fallen for the young man she saw regularly at the Retrospective Commune -- - if she hadn't smuggled me out in her bakery truck - -- I'd still be living in the past.

She'd paid for the mind-flushing drugs and got me a post at the regional sub-university. I owed her everything, and repaid her by shutting her out as I succumbed to obsessive research disorder. I could not expect her to understand. History had been in control of me...but now I was controlling History. She'd been gone forty eight hours before I even noticed.

The cat shrugged away my hand and jumped to the ground.

Yes.... It was time to save Mary.

"*You can't just lope in here and make cheese!* And with that, Carlo picked up the cleaver and ended the short and unique career of Angus, the Chimpanzee Chef." Gillian sank back into her skirt.

I sipped my coffee. It was cold. "How about if I just promise to stay awake?"

"Try to enjoy it."

"I read a lot of fiction when I was younger, but then real life began to intrude."

"We try not to think about real life on the train," she said. "We, the talkers, call it the *Lying Scotsman*."

"Tell me something," I said. I examined her face. Would she give me a straight answer? "Have you heard of the Church of the Busy God?"

She frowned. "I've heard it mentioned."

"What do you know?"

"I know they tell better stories than mine."

I fumbled in my jacket pocket and pulled out a pair of heavy-framed spectacles. I put them on.

"Antiques, eh?" She laughed. "Admit it! You like playing the part of the History Professor."

"I like being able to read."

I took a brochure from my pocket. *TITAN -- A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE*. "Does that sound like Titan to you?" I asked.

"I've only stayed at the hotels...taken in the usual sights."

The autotrolley returned to collect the mugs. It scooted off leaving behind a tinny 'thank you' and a faint odour of creosote.

I rubbed my nose. "So you've eaten the Infinite Alien? The sentient fungus that's the size of a cathedral?"

"Me? No, no...I don't even like mushrooms."

I smirked. "Doesn't that make you a bit of a fraud? All these stories, supposed adventures, and yet you've avoided the most unusual and bizarre experience of all. Communion with the unhuman. To eat alien flesh." I shook my head. "Don't you feel bad?"

She sighed and smoothed out her skirt. "My sins pain me, but only slightly, like grazed knees."

I felt a little sorry for her. "Tell me another story."

She brightened. "At first, this one didn't look like much of a story -- just an advertisement I spotted in a newspaper: *Erstwhile Saviours Wanted: Immortality an Advantage.*"

I felt an odd sort of satisfaction. I'd put her on the spot, which was ungentlemanly of me. I felt a responsibility for her. Silly, I knew. But I tended to gather responsibilities like a hypochondriac gathers medicines. I blame my mother, for putting me in charge of the chickens.

Mary had understood me, but I'd let her down. I'd completely, unquestionably, and fatally failed to understand her.

The temple doors had loomed over me as I'd climbed the wide steps. I found a small white button labelled *press*. I did just that. To the hiss of compressed air, the doors swung open. Cautiously, I went forward into the dark. The doors closed and immediately a light flared above me. "You are being scanned for weapons," a soft, automated voice said. I noticed a door directly ahead of me.

"You are being scanned for malice."

Malice! I had my fill of that. It seemed I would get no further. Then the door ahead of me swung open.

"You are obsessed by hatred," the voice told me -- as if I didn't already know. "But there is no malice towards the saints. You may enter, and we pray you find peace here amongst the peaceful ones."

The light over my head died and I hurried through into a harshly lit hall. My footsteps echoed as I walked over the stained polished concrete.

The place must have previously been a warehouse. The painted walls still displayed scars from stripped-out shelving. Sunlight seeped around makeshift boarding over the high-level windows. From the smell it was clear it had been used to store creosote, back in the recent days before nanotechnology had killed off the wood preservation market.

The hall ahead of me was packed with people, yet no-one moved. No-one made a sound. They stood as statues -- long white robes, relaxed poses and Godward eyes, smiling in the sure knowledge of the rapture to come.

Their robes swayed gently as I walked amongst them.

The air was cool in here, circulated by scattered portable fan units at floor level.

There must have been a hundred people. I felt awe and revulsion. Was this the pinnacle of the new nanotechnology? To maintain the human body in a living death. To service and repair while the lonely soul waits to be scooped up by a busy God's once-a-century trawl -- a God who might overlook them should

they be anything other than dead still.

What was going on behind their eyes? Were they dreaming, or thinking?

This tall woman with the black hair. What might she have been? Or have become? The young man with the freckles. Why was he here? Did he need to run away from life? And this small woman.... Not young, not even beautiful in the media sense, but she was beautiful to me.

This was Mary.

"I'm not saying the glasses make you look unattractive," Gillian said. "I'm saying they make you look like Groucho Marx. It's in the eye of the beholder."

I returned the glasses to my pocket and sat back.

The train clattered and rocked. For a while I let the rhythm flow through me, comforting, soothing. I attempted not to hear Gillian.

An age had dragged by since we'd come back from the dining car and hunger was beginning to prod at my stomach again. I yawned.

"You can cut that out," said Gillian. Then she laughed. It was an attractive laugh, comfortable and chubby.

"I think I'd better eat," I said.

My attention was caught by a disturbance further up the carriage. People were standing. Chatter became whispers became weeping.

Someone had fallen asleep.

Gillian got to her feet -- surprisingly fast, I thought. "You'll want to see this," she said. She parted the crowd as easily as a knife cuts gateau. I followed.

A steward in a blue lycra uniform reached the incident first. "How could you let it happen, Algie? Did you stop talking? This'll finish you for sure. You'll be redesigned." He tugged at his own hair. "Why on my shift? Why?"

A seated young man was sobbing.

Gillian grabbed my shoulder and pushed me through between the onlookers. "Look at the other seat!"

The seat opposite him was unoccupied, but my gaze was drawn to the dark window where my own reflection looked back at me. I could see Gillian also, and all the others...and one more.

In the reflection of the unoccupied seat, a grey-haired woman dozed. She was there in the glass. I could see her. Yet here in the carriage she did not exist.

"Now you see why we talk." Gillian wrapped her heavy arm around my shoulders and guided me back to my seat. "She won't be coming back. That's just a memory, and memories don't last."

"Okay," I said. "Feel free to explain now."

She pressed a finger to my lips. "I remember my mother used to say, *If you observe the impossible,*

then it's quite clearly not impossible."

I gave her what I hoped was a blank look.

"I know..." she said. "Lovely woman, but daft as a wax coffee-spoon." Gillian settled herself in her seat. "She wasn't always like that though. As a teenager she was hard and hard-faced -- the leader of a gang of sorts. She carried a knife and sharpened her wit on the younger boys. Mind you, they bore it happily. They didn't understand most of it and, besides, the girl had breasts!"

As she talked, her words became background distraction. I was struggling to retrieve a memory, a hazy image of a place and events so much more solid than this. There had been a woman and pain.... Unbelievable pain.

I tried to get comfortable, but not too comfortable. I knew I had to hang onto this precarious reality. Sleeping now seemed too easy and too frightening.

"There are two ways of looking at anything, Mr. Hanover." The Reverend had stepped out into my view. "Eyes open, or eyes closed."

I slumped to my knees. I felt weak, useless. "She is dead, isn't she? This is...death?"

"Open your eyes, Mr. Hanover. This is only a means of transportation. No, she's not dead. She's sharing a communal vision. It's how we keep the mind active and maintain sanity."

"So she's asleep?"

"No. The nanomachines can't handle sleep. They're basically stupid...just machines. They mistake sleep for brain death and close down maintenance functions."

He moved closer. I got to my feet.

"Your Mary has not yet reached her destination."

"Where is that? Titan? Isn't that what you believe? That God is on Titan?"

"God travels throughout the universe, Mr. Hanover. However, it's true that we have seen His face on Titan."

"The famous picture from the probe!"

"The spacecraft was only a messenger."

"I've seen that picture. Cloud patterns, that's all. Freak cloud patterns."

"Those eyes are closed again, Mr. Hanover. Look at your wife."

I examined her face. Her eyes gazed, but she did not see. On one of her perfect cheeks I saw a dark smudge, like a fingerprint. I shuddered at the thought of Ortega touching her. I rubbed at the mark gently with my thumb. Her skin was warm. "...the heat?"

"The little machines work hard -- they generate heat."

Tears hazed my eyesight. "And how long can your nanomedics keep her preserved?"

"They're not exactly medics -- more like travelling companions."

"How long?"

"Indefinitely...or until she's spotted by God."

"The Busy God."

"Not too busy for those who prepare themselves, who are waiting when he glances our way."

"History repeating itself again. Why can't I escape from History? How many have to be slaughtered this time in the name of Religion?"

Ortega gestured towards the rigid figure of a young girl. "Does she look slaughtered to you?"

"You could wait a hundred years to be spotted. Isn't that what you preach? Has even a single person been taken yet by God?"

"Patience is a virtue."

"No, staying alive is a virtue. Now, will you release Mary?"

His silence was my answer.

I stepped towards him; he backed away. "I'm going to take her to the hospital," I said.

He shook his head.

"And If you try to stop me...I'll kill you."

"I've no doubt that you would."

I positioned myself between him and Mary, turned, took her firmly by the shoulders.

"But you're not going to the hospital, Mr. Hanover. You're going to God. The machines are already in your blood."

I heard his words, but they seemed to draw out, deepen...blend into a drawl. Time stretched. The smudge.... I tried to turn. Nothing happened. Then there was movement, but so slow. My thoughts struggled for speed, for clarity. Pain began above my eyes, burned down my face, and boiled along my veins. I tried to open my mouth, needed to cry out, could see I had lost balance. The floor was floating up towards my face. I ordered my hands to rise to cushion my fall....

I heard a distant slow voice.

"Mr. Hanover. Your eyes are closed."

I jerked alert. I'd nearly dozed then.

"It wasn't that my mother was a difficult child," Gillian said. "It was just that she was difficult to find. She liked to travel."

I was getting a headache.

"By the age of fourteen, she was travelling all over Europe, usually by train."

"Wasn't that dangerous at only fourteen?"

"She was taller than I am and had muscle where I've got...ballast. But she wasn't all brawn. No, by no means. She believed it was vital, while travelling great distances, to keep the mind occupied. That was how she came to be a talker. She could talk to people for hours, for days. She'd go without sleep for...."

But I was no longer hearing Gillian. I was remembering a hall and a priest and a woman so beautiful....

"She came to believe that sleep and death were the same."

...and a hatred so corrupting that even love could not be saved.

My head was pounding. "How long till we reach Titan?"

"Nearly three days."

The clatter of the coach was a sharp pain in my forehead.

"Three days? How long since we entered the tunnel?" I asked. Panic closed upon my throat.

Gillian pointed a finger across the aisle at a wall-clock I'd not noticed before.

"...five minutes."

And now the first day has finally, grudgingly passed and I feel so, so much older. Gillian has gone. She walked off while I was theorizing on the nature of time. I suspect I was beginning to like her -- becoming too comfortable. Her effectiveness had diminished.

A new talker has joined me now -- a grey-haired stick of a man with a faith in the good sense of mankind which sets my teeth on edge.

I can't face another minute with him.

I hope God spots me soon.

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