

The 7.22

Pavel checked once more. The letter was there, secure in the inside pocket of his jacket, along with his passport, which he wasn't sure he needed. Better to be safe than sorry. Was it? Is it? He'd been safe. Where had that got him? He entered the café.

It was the first time he had won anything. Nothing had ever landed in his lap or been pulled out of a hat or won in hard fought victory. No top of the class certificates in school, no triumphant bursting through the tape in the egg and spoon race, no employee of the month. Nothing. When it arrived - well he wasn't there when it arrived - when he arrived home and saw it, saw the official looking manila envelope grasped in his wife's hand, he felt worried. Officialdom carried with it the smell of death. He took it from his wife's hand and stared at it. He was tempted to sniff at it. He didn't. He stood looking at the letter whilst his wife stood looking at him.

It's not going to open itself

You never know. The government might have invented something else to make our lives better

Pavel laughed.

Just open it Pavel

Peering inside the envelope, he had no idea pulling out the meticulously folded white sheet would mean losing his wife.

Pavel was standing on the platform gazing at the train. He had watched the girl climb the three metal steps, beckoning to him before disappearing down the corridor. He wanted to

follow her, to climb up after those nimble legs. Steam poured from the engine's funnel. Pavel knew the train was about to depart. He also knew getting on the train was saying yes to sex with this young girl. This young girl who he had never met, this young girl who wanted him to follow, this young girl who wanted to have sex with him. Him. He knew it must be a dream. The stationmaster's whistle screamed in his ear, the girl was at the window, smiling, and waving at him to climb aboard. He looked at the stationmaster, holding the whistle to his mouth for the second and final blast. Their eyes met. The stationmaster was staring at him in disgust, sneering, thinking you're a fool, if that was me I'd have been up there five minutes ago, roaring and throwing my clothes off and – he doesn't want to think of the stationmaster without any clothes on. He resembles Pavel's father. The idea of his father naked, sagging belly pouring over his pelvis, slobbering over this beautiful young girl, revolted him. He turned to the girl, she gazed at him with love and hunger in her eyes. He knows he wants her. The whistle blows, the clunk of metal signals the train's departure. He still has time. Like in the film, where the protagonist arrives as the train is picking up speed, hurls himself at the handrail, hauls himself aboard, dusts himself down, and saunters along the corridor, suave and untroubled. The voice of self-restraint, of civilization, of fear perhaps, enters his head. He will not board – or hurl himself at - the train. As the carriages disappear, the girl no longer in sight, Pavel's chest inflates with pride and his feet lift a few inches from the platform's concrete.

He wakes, a broad smile stuck to his face, pleased with his self-restraint. He listens to his wife's sleeping breath, turns his head to look at her back, and rests his right hand, tenderly, on her shoulder.