

Down the Line

Dewey Dabbar

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On a bright Saturday in 1962—the year before Beeching’s report on profit and peeling back rails—a train rattles along a single track between ripples in England’s ancient countryside. It is mild for late October, but the sole occupant of the rearmost compartment, a regular on the line, wears his cherry-and-white scarf out of habit and loyalty. His team is playing at home in a cup qualifier, captained by a childhood friend, Billy Jenkins. They might reach the first round proper this season. They might leave a legacy.

The man stares out of the window. He almost never dabbles in casual philosophy, but there is something different about this particular day. Maybe it’s the way that the low sun is penetrating the crimson-studded hawthorns and ivy-smothered oaks. Maybe it’s something else.

Straying near that most dangerous of questions—on life’s purpose—he dreams of a legacy of his own. *How can a roadsweeper put down a mark? They just pay me to tidy stuff up, not to leave things.* He gets a pang of jealousy. *I was a better centre-half than ‘Blowhard’ Jenkins. Everyone at school said so.* The man has no special talents, other than a knack for stabilizing wobbly pub tables with wedged beer mats.

He slips a hand into his jacket pocket, where his wife had earlier deposited an apple as she kissed him in the doorway. She loves him even though he is barren.

The man bites hungrily at the shining ruby-and-emerald globe. It might be the most delicious piece of fruit he’s ever eaten. Sated, and with a resolution to seek more, he spins the core out of the window.

Six decades pass. The cherry-and-whites are just a memory, known only to a few wrinkled souls in the armchairs of a backstreet inn. Billy Jenkins is just letters chiselled in a gravestone—a name without an epitaph. No one remembers that diving header at the back post in the dying minutes.

The railway is now a cyclepath, locally famous for a punctuated succession of trees that bear apples of a most exquisite flavour. Nobody knows quite why they are there.