The Reserved Seat

David checked his watch again as he power-walked down the crowded platform. 7:52 a.m. The 8:15 express to the city was boarding, and he still needed to find carriage six. His laptop bag kept slipping off his shoulder while he juggled a rapidly cooling coffee, his phone displaying the train ticket, and a folder containing printed backup slides for the presentation. Today mattered. Really mattered. The agency had been hinting at promoting him, and this pitch with Meridian Retail could seal the deal. He had rehearsed his opening line at least twenty times on the walk from the car park.

He stepped onto the train, immediately hit by the familiar morning commuter aroma: burnt coffee, faint bleach, and that unmistakable undertone of someone's tuna sandwich. David moved through the carriage, scanning the seat numbers. 12… 13… There it was. Seat 14A, window seat, reserved for him since last night.

A man in a wrinkled grey suit was already there, sprawled diagonally across both 14A and 14B. Shoes off. Socks exposed. One arm draped over the back of David's seat, mouth half-open, producing a low, rhythmic snore.

David stood politely for a moment. "Excuse me," he said, keeping his voice calm and professional. "I have a reservation for 14A."

No response.

He tried again, a little louder. "Sir? That's my booked seat."

The man cracked one eye open, looked David up and down as if he were a minor inconvenience like a slow Wi-Fi connection, grunted “I was here first,” rolled toward the window, and resumed snoring.

David stood frozen, heat rising in his face. He could insist. He could fetch the conductor. But the train was already humming, ready to depart, and starting an argument with a stranger felt like a terrible way to begin the most important day of his month. With a quiet sigh of defeat, he squeezed into the narrow remaining space in 14B, pressing his legs against the armrest to avoid contact with the man’s outstretched foot.

The train pulled smoothly out of the station right on time. David opened his laptop and tried to review his slides. Ten minutes later, a cheerful voice cut through his concentration.

“Beautiful morning for travelling, don’t you think?”

An elderly gentleman with silver hair, thick glasses, and a neatly buttoned wool cardigan was leaning across the aisle from seat 13A, smiling broadly as though they had known each other for years.

“I’m Gerald,” he announced. “Retired railway engineer. Forty-three years on the tracks, and now I spend my days building miniature versions of them. Trains have been my life. Did you know this particular line once ran those lovely old InterCity 125s? Absolute beauties. The way the engines sounded when they accelerated — pure music.”

David offered a polite smile. “That’s interesting. I’m actually trying to finish some work before we arrive, so—”

But Gerald was already reaching for his phone. “Let me show you my latest project. HO scale. Took me nine months. Look at the detailing on the bogies. Hand-painted, every single one.” For the next twenty-five minutes, David endured an enthusiastic lecture covering wheel configurations, historical liveries, the proper way to weather tracks to look realistic, and why certain glues were superior for scenery. Gerald spoke with the passion of a man who had waited decades for a captive audience.

Behind David, another drama was unfolding at full volume.

“No, Jake, you cannot keep doing this!” a woman in her late twenties was saying loudly on a video call. “We’ve been together three years and you still treat our flat like a hotel. Wet towels on the bed every single morning. It’s disrespectful. Yes, I’m on the train — so what? Let them hear it. Maybe someone here will learn how to be a proper adult.”

The entire carriage could hear every word. A few passengers exchanged awkward glances. David tried to focus on his slides, but the conversation kept escalating into intimate territory. He learned far more about Jake’s shortcomings than he ever wanted to know.

Two rows ahead, an invisible passenger kept opening and closing a large bag of crisps with military precision every ninety seconds. Crinkle. Crunch. Crinkle. Crunch. The faint but persistent smell of tuna suggested someone nearby had brought breakfast, lunch, and possibly dinner on board.

At 8:47, the train began to slow down unexpectedly. It came to a gentle stop in the middle of open countryside. Green fields stretched away on both sides under a grey sky. The overhead speakers crackled to life.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we apologise for this short delay. This is due to operational reasons ahead. We hope to be moving again shortly. Thank you for your patience.”

David checked the time. He still had a decent buffer, but it was shrinking. He refreshed his emails. Nothing. The sleeping man beside him had now claimed even more territory, one socked foot resting dangerously close to David’s thigh. David shifted uncomfortably and tried to breathe through his mouth as the tuna smell intensified.

Gerald leaned over again, completely unbothered by the delay. “This happens more often than you’d think. Once in 1987 we were stuck for six hours near Crewe. I used the time to sketch my first proper layout. Patience, young man. That’s the secret of train travel.”

David nodded weakly and stared out the window. His laptop battery was already down to 38%. He distinctly remembered putting the charger in his bag last night, but this morning’s rush had clearly betrayed him. It was probably sitting on the kitchen counter, or worse — left in the Uber.

Twenty minutes passed. Then thirty. The crisp-eater continued their relentless rhythm. The relationship argument behind him reached new heights when the woman began listing every grievance from the past twelve months. David considered moving carriages, but every time he stood up, the sleeping man spread out further, effectively guarding the row like territory.

Finally, David got up and walked toward the end of the carriage, hoping for a power socket or at least a change of scenery. The vestibule between carriages offered no escape. A young couple was having what appeared to be a complete relationship meltdown.

“You never listen!” the woman hissed, tears in her eyes.

“I do listen! You just never stop talking!” the man fired back.

David turned around immediately and pretended to study the safety information poster on the wall. He stood there for nearly ten minutes, trapped between their escalating argument and the crowded carriage, feeling like an unwilling witness to something deeply personal. When the woman started crying properly, he gave up and retreated to his seat.

The sleeping man had finally woken up. He was now sitting upright, conducting a loud work call on speakerphone.

“Yeah, Steve, the Q3 numbers are concerning. Down 18% in the Midwest. No, I’m still on the bloody train. What do you expect me to do about it from here?”

David squeezed back into his half-seat. His right leg had gone numb from the awkward position. Gerald, sensing another opportunity, continued his monologue, this time moving on to the merits of different types of model grass and how to create realistic puddles using resin.

At 9:35 the train finally lurched forward again. David felt a wave of relief that lasted approximately four minutes — until he noticed his laptop battery had dropped to 11%. Panic set in. He still needed to email the updated slides and run through his closing remarks. He turned to Gerald with desperate politeness.

“Excuse me… I don’t suppose you have a phone charger I could borrow for a few minutes? Mine’s completely dead and I have a very important meeting.”

Gerald’s eyes lit up with genuine delight. “Of course! Always happy to help a fellow traveller.” He rummaged in his worn leather bag and produced a tangled white

charger. “It’s a reliable one. Just needs to be held at precisely 47 degrees or the connection drops. You’ll get used to it quickly.”

David plugged it in. Nothing happened. He tilted the cable. Still nothing. He adjusted his wrist until the angle felt ridiculous, arm raised like he was saluting. A tiny green light finally flickered on. He held the position carefully while trying to type one-handed. Gerald watched with the pride of a grandfather whose grandchild had just learned to ride a bike.

“That’s it,” Gerald encouraged. “Steady now. Don’t move it suddenly.”

David’s wrist began to ache. His phone buzzed angrily with new messages — the client had moved the meeting forward by fifteen minutes. The train, meanwhile, seemed to have adopted a leisurely pace through the suburbs. Every station brought fresh passengers and more noise.

By the time the train finally pulled into the city station, David was forty-eight minutes late. He sprinted through the concourse, dodging commuters, tie flapping wildly, hair dishevelled, laptop bag thumping against his hip. He arrived at the Meridian Retail offices flushed and apologising before he had even sat down.

To his surprise, the marketing director — a sharp woman named Rachel — burst out laughing when he gave a quick, slightly embarrassed summary of his journey: the stolen seat, the endless model train lecture, the public breakup, and the 47-degree charger ritual.

“That might be the best excuse I’ve heard in years,” she said, still smiling. “Most people just blame traffic. Shall we start? And don’t worry — we’re running a little behind ourselves.”

The pitch, against all odds, went remarkably well. The relaxed storytelling at the beginning seemed to break the ice completely. Rachel and her team asked thoughtful questions, laughed in the right places, and by the end of the meeting they were shaking hands on a six-month trial campaign. David left the building feeling lighter than he had in months, the morning's frustrations already fading into an anecdote.

That evening, exhausted but quietly triumphant, he boarded the 17:42 return train. Out of habit he headed for carriage six. When he reached row 14, there was the same man from the morning journey — shoes off again, already claiming both seats, eyes closed in familiar repose.

David paused for a long moment. Then, instead of arguing, he simply took the aisle seat across from him.

"Rough morning?" he asked casually.

The man opened one eye, studied David for a second, and grunted, "You have no idea."

David smiled to himself, leaned back in his seat, and watched the city lights streak past the window. The carriage was quieter now. No loud calls. No crisp packets. Even Gerald was nowhere to be seen. As the train rocked gently along the tracks, David reflected on the small, ridiculous battles that made up everyday life.

Some fights simply weren't worth the energy. Especially on a Tuesday morning train.

He closed his eyes and allowed himself a quiet laugh. Tomorrow, he decided, he would reserve two seats — just in case.