

**THE KING OF
INFINITE
SPACE**



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The King of Infinite Space

To his relief, the train was nowhere near full. Towards the middle of the carriage, there was a group of four empty seats either side of a table. He chose one of the seats nearest the window, putting his bag down on the seat next to it.

Other people did not always seem to like making long journeys on their own. It was as if they were afraid to be left alone with their thoughts for too long. But not him. What was that quotation from “Hamlet”? It was something about being confined in a nutshell, yet feeling that you had an infinite amount of space at your disposal. Or that was the gist of it, anyway. He could not recall it exactly. But he had always felt that it summed up his own attitude to being alone with his thoughts.

The journey was supposed to last about an hour and three quarters; a generous expanse of time. He had bought a newspaper and had an interesting book to read. Or maybe he would do some more work on the novel he was writing. Yes, he would start with that.

The guard blew his whistle and a high-pitched bleeping signalled that the train doors were about to close. From further down the carriage, he heard someone panting heavily as they hauled their luggage onto the train. Evidently they had only

just managed to board in time. He got out his notebook and pen.

The passenger was now advancing rather clumsily down the aisle in his direction, his suitcase bumping against the arms of the seats. At first, the man seemed to be heading for one of the four empty seats directly across from him. There was more panting and grunting as he lifted the suitcase onto the overhead luggage rack. He turned and was just about to sit down when a look of sudden recognition crossed his features:

“Excuse me,” he said, “but are you Peter Cranston?”

“Er, yes, I am,” he replied, feeling embarrassed, because he could not place this man who seemed to know his name.

“Long time, no see!” replied the man. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” he said. “Look, I’m really sorry – have we met before?”

The man grinned and ran his hand over his head. “Ah! I probably look a bit different now – got a lot less hair these days. And put on a bit of weight, as the wife keeps reminding me. I’m Tony Goodman – we were at school together, remember?”

Peter did remember him – but they had never had a great deal to do with one another. Tony had been good at sport, but not much else. The longest conversation he could remember having with him had been in the school library, where Tony was – uncharacteristically for him – trying to do his homework. He had exhaled deeply, shoved his books to one side and said:

“Cranston, how do you get such good marks all the time? I mean, tell me, how do you do it? What’s the secret?”

He remembered being at somewhat of a loss to know what to reply. He had mumbled something about there being no secret, it was mostly hard work.

“Bollocks,” said Tony. “It’s that you’re brainy and I’m not. I don’t know why I bother with all this,” he said, gesturing at his books. “I’m rubbish at it. I’m never going to amount to anything. It’s so unfair, you know, ‘cos there’s nothing I can do about it. It’s alright for you. You don’t know how lucky you are.”

“Mind if I sit down here?” asked Tony, drawing Peter back to the present.

“No, of course not – please do.” Although he was rather dreading the conversation which was bound to follow.

“Thought I wasn’t going to make this train – traffic on the way to the station was terrible. So,” said Tony, spreading his hands wide, “what are you up to these days?”

“Oh, I’m between jobs at the moment,” said Peter, doing his best to sound casual about it. “I’m having a sort of career break, while I think about what to do next.”

Tony nodded understandingly.

“Well, it was obvious to everyone at school that you were always going to be a high flyer. And these days, if you’re not careful, you can burn yourself out by your early thirties – I’ve seen it happen. So if you ask me, it’s sensible to take a bit of

time out every once in a while. I'd do it myself if I didn't think I'd lose all my clients."

"What is it that you do for a living?" asked Peter, anxious to shift the focus away from himself.

"Remember how at school, the only thing I was any good at was sport?" He reached into his pocket and handed Peter a business card which read: "Tony Goodman, Player's Agent. Licensed by the Football Association of England."

"Wow," said Peter, genuinely impressed. "D'you act for any of the big names?"

"Not anyone in the Premier League – mostly I act for players in the Championship and League One. Although a couple of former clients of mine have gone on to play for Premier League sides." He mentioned a couple of names, but Peter hadn't heard of them.

Tony shrugged. "Anyway," he continued, "there's plenty of action below the Premier League – enough to keep me in business, that's for sure."

Peter felt that he ought to take up the slack in the conversation but couldn't think of anything to say. He didn't know much about football agents, except that some of them were rumoured to take bribes and backhanders - but that didn't seem a particularly diplomatic thing to raise at this point.

"You know, it's funny bumping into you like this," said Tony. "I bumped into Giles Warren, the other day – remember him? I'd lost touch with him but guess what? He's managing

partner at a firm of lawyers in Guildford. I mean, Giles Warren - who'd have thought it? He was such a joker at school. But in the end, we've all done pretty well for ourselves, haven't we? So tell me, what were you up to before you decided to have this career break?"

Peter explained in a slightly guarded fashion how he had been working at a well known firm of management consultants. This was true, although he omitted to mention that his job there had been a temporary one, largely consisting of editing spreadsheets along with other tasks of similarly mind-numbing tedium. He knew from experience that people tended to assume that he had been doing something rather more high-powered. He also omitted to mention how, prior to that, he had dropped out of medical school, tried but failed to become a TV scriptwriter and then re-trained as a teacher, before realising that it wasn't for him. After that, he had worked in a succession of temporary office jobs while he attempted to finish a novel. He was now thirty four years old and no nearer being able to say that he had a "career" than when he left school.

"So what's next?" asked Tony.

"I'm not sure, to be honest. There are a few possibilities I'm mulling over. I'd quite like a complete change of direction."

"You know, I was always jealous of you at school," said Tony. "It was because you were so bloody good at everything – well, maybe not sport, but pretty much anything on the

academic side. But I can see that it makes things more complicated when it comes to working out what you want to do for a living. I mean, sport was the only thing I was any good at – so that made it a lot simpler for me on the job front. And ‘cos I never expected to amount to much, I’ve always felt a bit surprised at how well things turned out for me.”

Peter nodded. There were suddenly lots of things he wanted to say to Tony.

He wanted to tell him that he was on his way back to his parents’ house, because he could no longer afford the rent on his own flat. They would do their best to hide their disappointment, as they had for many years now, but he knew that they had expected better of him.

He wanted to tell him that school had not prepared him for the real world, where you needed to know what you wanted – and be prepared to focus on it. It was true that he had been good at lots of different subjects, but the world had no use for a jack-of-all-trades; you were much better off if you could find one thing you were really good at and specialise.

He wanted to tell him that he felt as if he had been born at the wrong time and in the wrong place. In the past, possession of a wide range of abilities might have been celebrated as a sign of accomplishment – but now it was more of a liability. It marked him out as a mere dilettante, flitting distractedly from one thing to the next.

And most of all, he wanted to tell him that despite his academic success, he had never been happy at school; that in fact, he had always been jealous of Tony and others like him, who were popular with the other pupils and never seemed to be at a loss for things to say.

But he didn't say any of those things. There was another awkward silence.

“So, are you married? Got any kids?”

Peter shook his head.

Tony got out his smartphone and showed him pictures of his three children.

“You're very lucky,” said Peter, his voice sounding slightly hoarse. He cleared his throat.

“Yeah, I know,” said Tony, beaming as he flicked back through the photos.

At this point, Peter excused himself, saying that he needed to go to the toilet. By the time he came back, the train was pulling into the next station.

“You alright, mate?” asked Tony. “You look a bit off colour.”

Peter assured him that he was fine.

“Well, here's where I get off,” said Tony. “Got to go see a man about a footballer.” He held out his hand. “Nice seeing you again though. And good luck with the new career. A man of your many talents is bound to find something sooner or later, eh?”

Peter watched him walk along the platform to the station exit, pulling his suitcase behind him. There was still over an hour of the journey left. He felt relieved that Tony had gone. It meant that he would not have to face any more questions. But he no longer relished the prospect of being left alone with his thoughts for the remainder of the journey.

He thought of the quotation from “Hamlet” again. He must have mis-remembered it somehow. He logged onto the train’s wifi so that he could look it up on his smartphone.

It turned out to be largely as he had thought.

But not quite:

*Oh God, I could be bounded in a nut shell and count
myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I
have bad dreams.*

About the author

Paul Samael lives in the UK. He is the author of a novel, “In the future this will not be necessary” and several short stories. These are available to download free of charge as ebooks from Smashwords.com and Scribd.

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