

In the air

War on terror, or divide and rule

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I am sitting in a train, travelling from Munich to Vienna. In our part of the carriage there is a double row of seats down one side; on the other, single seats, one behind the other. I have the aisle seat and G. the window.

The train is fairly full. But the two single seats opposite me are empty.

Between stations, a young Arab man appears suddenly alongside me in the aisle. He looks briefly round the carriage and sits down in one of the seats. He has a short dark beard and is wearing some sort of cap.

He brings out a pocket computer, stares into it, then takes out a small pointer and begins tapping on the screen. After some little time, he puts the pointer back in its holder, pockets the computer. He glances round the carriage again then takes out a cell-phone. He stares at it, pressing keys, pausing, scrolling, then presses a last key and puts it away.

He turns and gazes out of the window. He has a fat much-thumbed paperback on his lap.

The next station has been announced. He'll be getting out, I think to myself for some reason. He's just come here to wait.

He stands up and takes off his jacket. It is black and doesn't quite match his trousers. He sits down again and reads for a few moments. He is quite near the end. The book

has a big-lettered coloured cover. English. Can't read the title.

Then he gets up, puts on his jacket and goes. He leaves his book on the seat.

I return to my newspaper, but can't concentrate.

The station comes and goes. People get on and off.

Some minutes later, he is back, dragging a cumbersome suitcase, which he manoeuvres into the space between his seat and the luggage-bay. He is followed by a young Arab woman and he gestures to her to take the seat in front of him. She is carrying a large bag, which she places on the overhead rack. They converse briefly and sit down.

He takes out his cell-phone and starts pressing keys again.

Eventually, he leans forward, touches her shoulder and says something to her in a low voice. She stands up and reaches the bag down from the rack. She's wearing a vivid red flowery dress and a headscarf. She searches in the bag and brings out a cell-phone. She hands it to him; he presses keys for a few minutes and silently hands it back to her.

She now takes out a large plastic bottle half-full of clear liquid, resting it on her knees while she rearranges the contents of the bag.

She finally unscrews the cap and takes a sip, then another, and passes it round the seat behind her. He takes a brief swig and wedges the bottle down by his side.

He takes off his jacket, hangs it up and picks up the paperback again.

She takes a compact out of the bag and does something to her make-up; then she too brings out a paperback, less battered, leafs through until she finds her place, near the beginning, and starts to read.

I try to concentrate on my paper.

I gaze at page after page, so many show-cases in a chamber of horrors with all the usual „war on terror“ exhibits – suicide bombings, terrorist attacks, kidnappings, hijackings. Humanity divided, humans set one against the other, all of us victims ...

The man keeps glancing over towards me: there's not much room and my paper is partly out in the aisle; I have to turn my head in his direction to read it.

He must think ...

But he's right: I have been observing them, more or less automatically.

Just because they're young Arabs carrying cell-phones ...

I'm sitting there, vaguely uneasy, wondering whether we're about to be derailed, blown up, or taken hostage. And at the same time thinking how totally ridiculous I'm being.

This is the very stuff of prejudice! I'm totally ashamed of my lack of trust.

They're most probably just two ordinary young people, trying to lead normal lives in a world where people observe them, wondering whether they're terrorists.

But maybe ...

He glances over again and I find myself tweaking the neckline of my tee-shirt upwards, in case it offends against modesty and puts him against me. I ostentatiously take a long draft from our water-bottle: look, we're just like you, we have things in common ...

This is monstrous, I tell myself. I am helpless, conditioned, stuck inside some behavioural cage, reacting as I've been trained to react.

Monstrous, literally. I am behaving like a monster in a world of monsters.

As time goes by, anxiety loses its edge, dulls down into dim awareness.

The girl is leaning back, her eyes are closed, her book open on her lap.

He is still reading quietly, has almost finished his book.

Eventually, the next station is announced.

He looks at his watch, leans forward and gently touches the arm of his companion. She starts slightly, he whispers something and she nods.

He stretches himself and reaches up for his jacket. He goes to the suitcase and manoeuvring it out into the aisle, unzips a pocket and slips his book in.

He sits down again and stares out of the window.

The train lurches and the suitcase topples over against my seat.

He hears this and quickly leaps over to set it upright. I catch his eye and smile. To say thank you, no harm done; to say it's okay. He gives a curt smile in response.

The train slows down and they are getting ready to leave, she shouldering her big bag, he dragging the suitcase. Then they're gone.

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In my newspaper I read about some people in Albania who captured a wolf and shut it up in a cage. Then they put a donkey into the cage, for the wolf to eat for dinner.

But instead of eating and being eaten, as their captors had planned, the two animals became friends.

There is a photo of them, huddled together in their miserable cage, living, if not in perfect harmony, at least in peaceful cohabitation.

The two animals have sensed what humans ought by now to know:

In the words of Winston Churchill: „If we are together nothing is impossible, if we are divided all will fail.“



Photo: network.bestfriends.org

... the two animals became friends ...