

Episode 3



Strangers on a Train

Hello, I'm Richard Winterbottom.

Welcome to Season Two, Episode Three of Rick's Bite-Sized English.

Each week we examine a word or phrase that you can take away to try to build your English and your confidence.

There's a new episode every week, so make sure you follow so you don't miss out.

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Hugh looked out of the train window. The landscape stretched wide and silent, and white. A few trees stood out, silhouetted in white against the heavy grey sky, and a distant farmhouse seemed buried beneath the snow. This was the landscape that Hugh had been watching all his working life, familiar, but today displaying a rare beauty. He put down his newspaper and contemplated the serene view, feeling a sensation of time paused.



But by the following day the snow had cleared and the landscape that had seemed magical yesterday had returned to its dull, recognisable form. The green fields were now ordinary, the solitary oak trees, unnoticed. The monotonous suburbs, the grimy warehouses and factories, even the new gleaming glass offices in the city centre where he alighted, had become part of the background. All these years of making the same journey had numbed him to it all.

The carriage looked a bit worn. Had it been reupholstered in those thirty-three years? And the man opposite him! Incredibly, the same man had sat in the same seat almost invariably for nearly all the time Hugh had been commuting into the city centre.

What did he know about him? They read the same newspaper, though he usually spent little time reading

it and preferred his book. They were of a similar age. They both wore suits and had a professional demeanour, although Hugh had to admit the other man's appearance was smarter than his. Or at first sight it was.

What else? He bit his nails. His teeth were badly stained. He had recently taken to bringing a cup of coffee with him.

Had they ever spoken? No, he was pretty sure they never had, although he would have liked to. Now he remembered they had been on the point of speaking a few years ago. He had wanted to ask him about the book he was reading, by a German author that Hugh admired. But the moment had passed and nothing was said.

A few days later the man appeared with an expensive-looking suitcase at his feet. Hugh was intrigued. He must ask him about the suitcase. Although wasn't that



rather intrusive? After all these years he couldn't just ask the man why he had a suitcase, could he?

Hugh pondered how to begin the conversation. He tried a few sentences out in his head. Time was passing. Large, blackened warehouses stood on either side of the train, they'd be in the city soon. If I don't ask him something now, I'll have missed my chance, thought Hugh.

'Excuse me, if you don't mind me asking, are you going to work with that suitcase'?

'Oh', replied the man. He glanced down at the suitcase, 'I'm going away. I'm retiring'.

'Really', replied Hugh. 'So you won't be travelling on this train again'?

'That's right, today's my last day at work, the last time I catch this train'.

Hugh felt a snag in his throat.

'Yes, I'm going on a trip. All on my own. Can't wait'.

The man's station appeared, and he stood up.

'Well, nice meeting you'.

'Yes, nice meeting you', Hugh replied.

The man stepped onto the platform, the doors closed and the train pulled away.

Hugh looked across at the empty seat. All those years. All those journeys. He hadn't even asked the man his name.

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In the story, Hugh eventually speaks to his travelling companion, but we are perhaps left wondering why they had never spoken before, despite having travelled on the same train every day for so many years. We learn that they had been on the point of speaking a few years earlier but that the moment had passed.

'On the point of'. What do we mean by this phrase and why and how do we use it?

It's an idiomatic phrase used to show that something is about to happen soon or very soon.

It's often used with the verb to be and followed by a gerund form or a noun.

It's a great a piece of language to use when telling stories, and you should try to incorporate it into your writing too. It's also often used to express the idea of something being interrupted, not happening because of something else. In our story, for example, we heard that they were on the point of speaking, but the moment passed and nothing was said.

In more informal conversation, however, you could simply use an expression like 'about to'.

Let me know how you will use this language by leaving a rating and review wherever you listen to the podcast.

I'd love to hear from you.

Thanks for listening.

See you next week.

