

Tracks

by
Sarah Bartrum

Saturday 23rd May 2014

It was a regular Saturday, like any other in London. Ralph, a paramedic, had started his shift at eight as usual. Halima was on her way home with the shopping. Austin was doing overtime on a project that was behind schedule. Adam Rasheed had just played his last game of football. Ever.

Adam set the pace along the pavement, his football boots loud against the tarmac. He wanted to get back in time to watch West Ham play on their home ground.

'I still can't believe we beat them.' Johnny said, trying to keep up.

'You betcha. We were on fire today.'

'Well you were.'

'Can't believe they want me to go for the try outs. Johnny, just think, this could be my way in, a few years and I could be playing for England.' Adam leaped into the air and thrust his fist towards the sky as they approached the station.

Adam scanned the electronic departure screen.

'Platform one. Quick.' He beeped through the barriers and charged up the stairs. The train was waiting, its doors open wide. He leapt into the carriage, dropped his kitbag and turned around, breathing hard. Johnny had just made it to the top of the stairs and slowed down, looking left and right.

Adam waved, 'Over here!'

Johnny spotted him and sprinted forwards but the doors were closing. They shut tight with a clomp and Johnny slapped the glass with his palm.

Adam laughed at his friend through the window. Poor bugger, he would have to catch the next one. Still, they'd meet up again at the Boleyn ground. He waved cheerily to his best mate.

The train lurched forward, gathering speed towards Clapham Junction.

A few miles away, just before Battersea bridge crosses the Thames stands a tall mirrored building belonging to Thyredata Enterprises. Inside on the fifth floor, in an almost empty open-plan office, Austin was sitting at his computer with his colleague Tim hovering by his shoulder. They were analysing the results of the first upload of Transport Rail's data into the new test system.

'So what do you think?' Tim said.

'Rather more problems than I expected.' Eight hundred thousand and sixty four to be exact but maybe that wasn't unreasonable at this early stage of the project.

'We're going to be here all day.'

'Yeah I know, I'm not giving up my Sunday too. I promised Matt we'd get out of London for a change.'

Tim nodded at the photo on Austin's desk of a smartly dressed young man with dark hair. He was laughing at something off camera.

'Nice photo. How long has it been?'

'Three years pretty much.' Austin pulled the photograph closer.

Tim whistled, 'Must be true love.'

Close by, in the Lidl car park, an ambulance was standing with its back doors open. Ralph and Emma were two hours into their shift and had delivered only one casualty to A&E so far.

An elderly gentleman was sitting on the bed in the back while Ralph finished applying a dressing to his knee. Ralph encouraged him to ring his wife while a supermarket employee arrived and handed the gentleman a bottle of orange juice.

The man put his phone away. 'We only live around the corner. My wife's coming to get me.'

'How are you feeling now?' Ralph asked as he carefully lowered the man's leg back to the floor.

'Yes, better. I think I'll be fine.'

Ralph touched the old man's shoulder gently. He suspected there were bruises from the fall but nothing serious. It amazed him how some old people were so resilient. Just like his kids, putting a brave face on it, brushing the dirt off and getting on with it. Ralph smiled.

'We'll wait with you until she arrives.'

Beyond the car park was the train line and beyond that, on Falcon Road, Halima was carrying two bags. She had a variety of fruit and vegetables from the Battersea market which was even cheaper than Lidl. The bags were heavy and Halima paused to put them down. She was wearing a scarf pinned around her lined face and covering her hair. It helped to keep out the brisk wind that chased a polystyrene burger box across her path. Halima

rubbed her hands together where the plastic handles had left deep clefts. Ahead loomed the low tunnel under the train tracks. It was lit at regular intervals but the lights did very little to repel the oppressive dark. The sound of cars got louder as the brick walls closed in around her. She took a breath and held it, to keep out the smell of urine. She wouldn't stop in the tunnel, she'd keep going to the far side before she took another break from her load.

A bus came thundering past, the number forty-nine glowing orange. She should have taken it, saved her aching limbs, but the money from her cleaning job didn't stretch far. Halima clamped her lips together and stayed focused on the bright daylight at the far end. Some things simply had to be endured, and this was just one of many.

Adam didn't make it home, nor did he ever see that West Ham match.

Austin had a growing sense of doom. On Sunday he stayed home. Alone.

Ralph had the longest and busiest shift of his life.

Halima reached the end of the tunnel. Just. But without her shopping.

It started with a screech. One that didn't stop but kept increasing so that those waiting on the platform had to clamp their hands over their ears. Metal shearing against metal. Of course, it was joined by other sounds: the crumpling of the concrete platform, the screams of the people, the smashing of the roof as it toppled forwards onto the stricken train.

A group of tourists embarking at Putney pier looked behind them down the river Thames. One of them pointed at a gull assuming the screech had been from the swooping bird.

In Thyredata Enterprises, Austin glanced at the large windows. The building had shuddered as if a large lorry had rumbled past.

Those that were closer were under no illusions. Traffic stopped, pedestrians looked around them in fear. The vegetable seller at Battersea market, who had sold Halima five kilos of best British spuds, shut his mouth suddenly after the words 'Get your-!'

Ralph had his hand on the door handle of the ambulance. He looked towards the terrifying noise, his hand squeezing tighter and tighter until the metal left a groove on his palm.

Halima fell to the ground.

For a brief second before Adam lost consciousness, he wondered why his kitbag was rising off the train seat like some kind of levitating miracle.

The people on platform ten stepped back as the train carriage slid past on its side. The undercarriage was facing them, displaying all its pipes and wires. The wheels were still spinning as if gaining traction against the air, aiding its forward momentum. Sparks slashed the scene making one child wonder if there were fireworks. The smell of burning was acrid in his nose. A lady heading up the stairs to platform ten holding the hand of her two year old stopped and clung to the vibrating handrail. She scooped her child up, turned around and started walking back down again on shaking legs.

The carriage came to a stop leaning awkwardly across the end of platform nine. The screeching ceased, leaving the air smoky. Tiles and bricks rained down on to the carriage as it lay on its side like some huge felled beast. The objects bounced and clanged as if thrown by angry residents determined to keep on fighting, despite the monster being dead.

Soon even that noise stopped and the harsh reality of silence deafened those that could still see.