

**The Tunnel
by Shaun Hutson**



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Shaun Hutson alias 'The Godfather of Gore' made his name as a horror writer with novels like Slugs, Spawn and Relics. His first book, Slugs, sold more than 500,000 copies. Latterly, he's moved away from horror, penning what he describes as 'urban thrillers'. Shaun's consuming passion is football. A Liverpool supporter for more than 30 years, he never misses a game, home or away. He has appeared on stage thirteen times with heavy-metal band Iron Maiden. His latest book, Necessary Evil, is now available.

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THE TUNNEL: SHAUN HUTSON

THE BLEEDING HAD STOPPED within minutes of the thumb being severed.

Frank Tate dropped it into a small plastic bag then glanced impassively at the digit for a moment. There was a small tattoo on the lower knuckle that looked like a staring eye. Tate had been careful to cut around the base with the knife to ensure that the tattoo remained intact. He didn't want the skin torn too badly. It was the mark on the flesh that would identify the owner and that was important to the men who had hired Tate. They would want to be sure that the possessor of that tattoo was dead. Tate had considered taking them the whole hand but decided only the severed digit was necessary. It would be enough to get him his money.

Sometimes polaroids were sufficient. On other occasions, merely pieces of clothing. Once, a whole head. Tate didn't care. When he was hired to do a job he delivered. Literally. He looked once more at the hacked off thumb, swathed in clear-wrap inside the bag, then slid it into his jacket pocket.

The serrated kitchen knife he'd used for his makeshift surgery lay close to the body. It bore no fingerprints. Neither did the garotte of electrical flex fastened so tightly around the neck of the man who lay at Tate's feet.

It was Tate's favoured method. It was relatively quick and there was usually only a small amount of blood. Sometimes the victim would bite off their own tongue but he could only recall that happening twice. There was the usual voiding of bladder and bowels as death took them. But never more than specks of blood. Occasionally he got some on his gloves but it cleaned off easily enough. And if it didn't then he burned them and bought more. Always the finest leather that fitted his large hands like a second skin. When you were at the top of your profession, as Tate had been for eight years, he saw this kind of thing as a necessity rather than an indulgence. A reward for his prowess in his chosen field.

He took one last look around the room then walked unhurriedly down the stairs and out into the street where he hailed a cab.

As the taxi finally pulled up outside the station, Tate glanced at his watch. The train he wanted to catch left in less than five minutes. He glared at the back of the taxi driver's head, blaming the man for not having made better time through relatively light late night traffic. Tate stuffed a couple of notes into the man's outstretched hand and sprinted off without waiting for change.

As he reached the concourse he looked up at the electronic ARRIVALS and DEPARTURES board, checked the platform number he needed then increased his pace.

He began to think he wouldn't make it in time. He ran as fast as he could, legs churning, feet thundering on the tarmac ramp but, despite the fact that the slope favoured him by inclining down towards the platform, he still had doubts about his ability to reach the train before it pulled away.

Uniformed attendants, resplendent in brightly coloured jackets, waited. No members of the public were to be seen. Those who had come to say goodbye to travellers had now wandered off. Any tearful farewells had been concluded.

Tate ran on. Outside the blackness of the night was punctuated by street lights, the glow from shop signs and the headlamps of various passing vehicles but inside the terminus itself only the dull glow of bulbs high in the roof gave off any illumination.

Tate's breath rasped in his throat, his heart hammered hard against his ribs. His chest ached from the effort of sucking breath into lungs that were already burning and his mouth felt as if someone had filled it with chalk.

He saw the last remaining staff member on the platform turn to the nearest train door and clamber through it. The figure called something to him but he couldn't make out the words.

His grasping fingers finally closed over the cold metal of the handle and he twisted it, hauling himself inside. Slamming the door behind him, almost overbalancing.

Made it.

He felt the train lurch slightly as it began to move away, steadily building up speed. For a moment or two he stood with his hands on his hips, breathing heavily. Then he wiped perspiration from his forehead with the back of one hand, patted the jacket pocket where the severed thumb nestled and walked through into the first carriage.

As he made his way slowly up the aisle he counted three other occupants of the First Class compartment. A woman in her thirties was seated at one of the larger tables, tapping away at a laptop. Tate guessed she was a year or two younger than him. Further up from her, a balding man in a white shirt was reclining in his seat, listening to music on a portable CD player, his fingers tapping gently on the arm of his chair. The third traveller was younger. Mid-twenties. He was looking at a magazine and cast a cursory glance in Tate's direction before returning to his reading matter.

Tate sat down in one of the single seats and let out a deep sigh somewhere between relief and satisfaction. He settled into his seat, peering out into the blackness of the night, aware that the train was now increasing its speed as it left the station further behind. He could see the lights of houses on both sides of the tracks. To his right, vehicles moved along a stretch of road then disappeared out of sight. Tate stretched, the muscles of his legs aching from the sprint he'd been forced to make. A slight smile played on his lips and he caught sight of his reflection in the window. All he had to do now was sit there and let the train carry him on through the night.

He would make the delivery the following morning. And when the merchandise was approved he would pick up his money and leave. Until the next job.

He could hear the clicking of keys as the woman worked on her laptop and, more than once, he heard her voice as she answered a call on her mobile phone.

Tate lounged there a moment listening to the sound of the train and gazing absently out of the windows into the night.

He was startled from his aimless peering by the hiss of the hydraulic door leading into the carriage. A uniformed woman carrying two metal jugs walked in and stopped at each of the occupants of the compartment to ask if they wanted tea or coffee.

Tate hauled himself upright in his seat as she drew closer and he watched as she poured coffee into his cup. He thanked her then stirred the steaming beverage as she made her way back up the compartment and disappeared from view again.

Despite the coffee, he felt tired. His frantic rush to reach the train coupled with the comforting warmth inside the carriage made him feel pleasantly drowsy and he reclined his seat slightly, welcoming the onset of sleep.

Ahead of him, the tapping of the laptop keyboard had ceased momentarily as the woman sipped her own hot drink. Tate caught her eye and was pleasantly surprised when she smiled back at him. He returned the gesture and settled lower in his seat, his head lolling to one side, his eyes turned towards the darkness beyond the well-lit interior of the carriage. The night looked like a black towel thrown over the landscape. Tate couldn't even see street lights anymore. Or headlamps. He frowned slightly as he realized that they hadn't passed through a station yet.

Had they?

He looked at his watch. The train had been travelling at top speed for more than twenty minutes now. And yet, beyond the carriage windows, there were no lights of any kind. It was as if they were in a tunnel. But there was none of the familiar amplified noise that came with the passage of one of those subterranean shafts. In fact, it seemed almost unduly quiet within the compartment.

Tate looked away from the window in the direction of the woman at the laptop.

There was only empty space where she'd been sitting.

She must, he reasoned, have gone to the toilet or perhaps to the buffet car further up the train. He leaned to one side and looked up the aisle.

No fingers drumming on the arm of the chair in time to music. The man in the white shirt was missing too.

Tate stood up, trying to catch sight of the younger man at the far end of the carriage.

Three magazines and a mobile phone lay on the table but, of the younger passenger, there was no sign.

Tate sat down again and took to gazing back out of the window. His brow, already creased, acquired several more furrows as he noticed that there still seemed to be no respite from the tenebrous gloom outside. No sign of a light anywhere. If the train was indeed passing through a tunnel then it was one of quite astonishing length, thought Tate.

The ringing of a mobile phone interrupted his musings.

It took him a second to realize that it was the phone on the table near the carriage door. He rose from his seat again, as if expecting that the younger passenger who'd left the phone there would magically re-appear to answer it.

Tate stepped out into the aisle, the tune played by the musical ringtone now beginning to irritate him a little. Wondering where the phone's owner had got to, Tate began striding up the aisle. He passed the table where the woman with the laptop had been sitting. As he drew level he looked at the upturned screen. There were just four words on it;

Terribilis est locus iste

Tate looked more closely at the screen, the irritating phone still ringing in his ears.

He wasn't a stupid man but his knowledge of latin was certainly sparse. Tate glanced at the words once again then moved on up the aisle towards the ringing phone. He peered through into the next compartment, wondering if he might see the young man making his way back to his seat. There was no sign of him. In fact, as Tate stood beside the table, he could see no sign of movement at all in the carriage beyond.

He took a step towards the door which opened automatically. It was cold in the area between the carriages. One of the windows was slightly open and a chill breeze was whipping in. Tate swiftly crossed to the window and shut it. The door of the toilet closest to him was ajar. He placed two fingers tentatively on it and pushed, watching as it swung open to reveal an empty cubicle. He moved across towards the door of the next compartment, pausing a moment to tap lightly on the door of the other lavatory. The sign showed that it was vacant so Tate tapped once again and pushed it. The other toilet was also empty.

He continued into the next carriage, still able to hear the mobile from behind him. He stalked up the aisle, looking to his left and right.

At the first table there was a half empty cup of coffee, steam still rising from it. A little further up he found an overnight bag propped on a table, unzipped to reveal clothes inside. Beside it there was an open newspaper and another cup of coffee, also still steaming. At one of the larger tables he found a half eaten bar of chocolate and another newspaper. There was a biro lying on it, a crossword partially completed. There was a miniature bottle of wine, most of which had been decanted into the glass that rattled gently on the table. There was lipstick on the rim.

Tate saw a slim leather bound book lying next to the wine glass. It had a pen jammed between the pages to keep it open at this chosen place and Tate realized that it was a diary. He reached for it and picked it up, the pen dropping to the floor. Written across the two pages were four now familiar words;

Terribilis est locus iste

He threw the diary down and continued on up the aisle towards the door of the carriage. He moved through it, seeing more cups full of steaming tea or coffee. Other tables littered with crumbs of food or wrappers. He saw some half eaten sandwiches at one table. A can of fizzy drink standing next to a glass in which ice was melting.

Another two carriages and he would reach the buffet car. Then perhaps he could find some answers. There was no one in the two compartments leading to the buffet car either but Tate did pause in one of them to inspect the screen of another laptop and the words that flickered upon it.

Terribilis est locus iste

His initial feelings of mild bewilderment had given way rapidly to irritation and now to full blown annoyance.

Where the hell was everyone? Granted he didn't expect a night train to be full to the rafters with passengers, especially not in First Class but this was ridiculous. Why had they left their belongings at their tables? Why the half drunk beverages? Why the abandoned hot drinks? He knew there must be a good reason for it but, as he strode towards the buffet car, he was damned if he could think what that reason might be.

Even in his anger he had sufficient presence of mind to look up at the sign on the end wall of the compartment that proclaimed; TOILET ENGAGED. It glowed with a dull, sickly yellow light but, to Tate, it shone like a golden nugget in a dung heap. If the toilet was engaged there was someone inside. Simple logic. He would wait for the occupant to emerge then ask them a few questions, find out what the hell was going on.

He stood, arms folded, waiting. Five minutes passed. Tate moved closer to the door, listening for any sounds from inside. After another five minutes of silence and stillness elapsed, Tate stepped close to the door and banged hard on it.

Whether the lock was faulty or because of the force of his blows, the door cracked open a fraction.

Tate pushed it.

As it swung open to reveal the cubicle, Tate looked in. He'd been prepared to say something, to speak. To enquire of the occupant if they'd seen anyone else moving about on the train.

The cubicle was empty.

But what Tate saw froze the breath in his lungs.

SIMON STIRRUP'S ENDING TO THE TUNNEL

It was all there. Piled in the sink and on the floor, and rising up in a mound from the toilet bowl. Every token he had taken, every photo, every severed piece of flesh. He recognised them all — the hand cut from its owner last month, the locket stolen from the body of an old widow, the one head he had ever taken, mounted on the tap fitting, staring.

Everything looked fresh, just as it had.

Tate felt dizzy and sank to one knee, retching. He had never been squeamish, not even the first time, but being confronted with everything at once made his head reel. He knew he wasn't dreaming — perhaps his coffee had been spiked. Perhaps he was kneeling on the floor of an empty train toilet, vomiting at nothing.

And yet, his head felt clear.

"Quite an impressive CV," said a voice behind him.

Tate stood up and turned round quickly. Standing in the space beyond the toilet door was a middle-aged man wearing a neat, dark suit. He had neat, dark hair that was greying at the temples and his skin was very pale. He was holding out a packet of tissues.

Tate sheepishly took one and dabbed at his mouth. He was about to say something, something about the other passengers or the darkness outside or the blood pooling around his shoes, but the man suddenly stuck out his right hand and, reflexively, Tate shook it.

"Nice to meet you at last," said the man, "shall we go somewhere more private?"

The man turned and started walking, heading towards the front of the train. Tate lifted his foot from the sticky floor and began to follow. As he walked up the aisle of the next compartment he saw more evidence of suddenly departed passengers. He was beginning to feel deeply uneasy.

The man, the Banker as Tate had named him, for his suit and his hair and for the neat, dark briefcase he was carrying, had stopped now. He had reached a table that bore no evidence of habitation and laid his briefcase on the scuffed plastic.

"This will do," he said as Tate approached, "it's not ideal, but I'm sure we can manage".

He indicated that Tate should sit down and then sat opposite. He produced a business card and handed it to Tate. Four words were printed in understated black letters across the front: *Terribilis est locus iste*.

"Our slogan," said the Banker, "Bit old-fashioned now of course, but we haven't got around to changing it yet."

"Oh . . ." said Tate

"Now," said the Banker, briskly cutting Tate off, "before we get going I'd like to discuss exactly what each of us is looking to get out of this."

He sat back, steepling his fingers underneath his chin.

"You are ambitious, and we, if I may be frank, are hungry for ambitious people like yourself. But I think whenever you enter into a discussion like this it's not really about one side or the other - it's about the level of fit that exists between them."

Tate's expression remained blank. "I don't really understand," he ventured.

“Right,” said the Banker, sounding delighted, “let’s push on shall we? We’ve been following your progress for a while, and I have to say on paper you certainly have everything we’re looking for. Now it’s for me to just evaluate things a little bit more qualitatively. It’s all very well ticking boxes and so on, but . . .”

“Why . . .” said Tate, interrupting as his frustrations began to resurface, “I mean, do you think I arranged to meet you here? And what the hell’s going on in that toilet?”

The Banker unlaced his fingers and laid them flat on the table-top.

“We don’t usually do things like this,” he said “but recent circumstances have forced us to adopt a rather more, well, aggressive recruitment policy. People don’t just come to us any more you know. The toilet is, hmmm, well see it as a reminder. Of what you are.”

It suddenly dawned on Tate that the Banker knew exactly what was happening, and he didn’t. He became quiet, and clenched his fists tightly.

“Actually I think I have enough here,” said the Banker, “now it just comes down to you. I am offering you a position. A permanent position, with any salary you wish to name. In return I just need a little something from you. A token, nothing more. You have, I think, no more use for it anyway.”

Tate felt his blood being drawn in to his vital organs, any remaining colour draining out of his cheeks. He leaned forwards and squinted at the deathly pale face of the man sitting opposite him.

“Who are you?”

“You know my name. In your own way you’ve been working for me all your life. And you have about thirty seconds to make your decision.”

And suddenly Tate knew what that decision was. Imperceptibly a shadow lifted, as if the train had emerged from a tunnel, and glancing out of the window Tate could make out a moonlit scattering of fields. The train seemed to be moving incredibly slowly, but as Tate watched a rabbit lope across the glistening grass he realised that everything else was too. Around him in the compartment arms and heads and hands were appearing out of a coalescing fog that folded in on itself endlessly.

“We are returning to the world,” said the Banker, “and we are about to hit the truck that has stalled on the level crossing ahead. You need to think a little faster.”

Tate felt the impact as a dull reverberation in his legs. He sat still as around him the recently-returned passengers were being thrown forwards in slow-motion, their faces not yet registering shock. This carriage was at the very front of the train, and it was tilting upwards now, and twisting to the side. Tate tried to remember a time when he had loved life.

“Not long now Frank. Anyone in here without special reason will be smashed to pieces soon I’m afraid.” The walls were beginning to buckle. Spider-web fracture patterns spread through the safety glass of the window that separated Tate from the world. He thought about his childhood, about his parents, about everyone he had ever loved and hated. The compartment was compacting like an accordion, and the other passengers were beginning to collide with the walls and the seats and the tables. Blood arced gracefully.

Tate thought about the contents of the toilet, and he smiled.

The rescue teams were just arriving when he managed to squeeze himself out of a crushed window frame. His clothes had been torn by jagged metal, but the skin underneath was untouched. Several spotlit paramedics rushed up to him as he strode away from the wreckage, but he pushed them aside easily.

He felt strangely hollow, but then he'd felt like that most of his life. In his pocket his fingers closed over the cold surface of the business card. There was no number, but he did not need one. He had a feeling he would never be short of work again.