

**The Tunnel
by Shaun Hutson**



© Copyright Charlie Hopkinson 2003

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.

Gillian Wellby



Gillian Wellby is 42 years old and is a tax advisor living in Bournemouth. Gillian has had a couple of short stories published and has just started up a writing group called the Fiction Forum. She hasn't read any of Shaun's books but was intrigued by his story and the possible endings.

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.

GILLIAN WELLBY'S ENDING TO THE TUNNEL

He was looking in the mirror. Where his reflection should have been was that of an old man; bald and hunched, his face like an unironed sheet. In the last hour he had aged thirty years. Tate felt his sphincter muscle loosening. His hands covered his mouth. He began to retch, and mauled at his face trying to smooth the creases. His hands touched his head willing them to feel hair but they touched disgusting flaky skin. He screamed. His skin was now rippling, ageing before his eyes. He had to get off this train before . . . Tate began to pant. He was going to die. He kicked the toilet door and staggered out of the cubicle. If he didn't look anymore maybe it would go away. He had to get off. He shuffled down the aisle, gasping, trying to think straight.

Tate reached the first class carriages. There were three occupants; a woman in her thirties with a laptop, a balding man in a white shirt with a portable CD player and a younger man reading a magazine. The same people as before. Tate felt as if he was outside of himself. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. Then laughed. It was a set up! Who hated him so much to set all this up? Plenty he chuckled. He could kick himself for being such a baby. As if anyone could age like that. Everything happened just as it had before. Well this time he hadn't had any coffee and he was going to watch like a hawk. They wouldn't get away with it this time.

His eyes were feeling heavy. They almost closed and he snapped them open. They closed again. He moistened them with his spit, cooling them. They shut again. When he forced them open, everyone was gone . . .

Tate laughed. He had to admit they were good. The laptop was still humming. *Terribilis est locus iste* it flashed. He'd soon get rid of that. He smashed at the screen with his fist, but all he felt was the air. His hand was embedded in the laptop, but it hadn't pushed through to the other side. He pushed his arm further in up to his elbow. Nothing. He withdrew. Tried it again. Same. The laptop wasn't real. The mobile began to ring. He tried to pick it up but all he grasped was his own fist. He began to shake, trying to make sense of it all. Coffee cups. His coffee had been real last time. He looked for an abandoned cup. Same thing. Not real. Tate tried to control his breathing, tried to quell the churning in his stomach and bowels. Then a thought struck him. He touched the carriage window. It was cold but reassuringly solid. He knew now what he had to do. He shuffled through the carriages. He pushed himself on and the door opened. No resistance. He saw a man at the controls wearing a uniform. The driver must have heard the door open but he was motionless. He's dead, thought Tate. Suddenly the driver spoke, "Hello, Tate". "How do you know my name?" "We met a long time ago. June 1983."

Tate didn't recognise the voice. "I'm not sure I . . ."
The driver interrupted. "Name's Marshall. You killed me."
Tate's ageing brain struggled to remember. Flashes came back to him.
An alleyway. A pub. Music.
"The thing is Tate. I need your help. And I think you need mine."

Tate was still trying to make sense of everything. "I just want you to stop the train."

"I will. But first we need to talk. I've been given a chance. Parole for good behaviour if you like!"

Marshall turned his head. He had no face. There was just a hole. Tate put his hands to his head and yelled. "Nooooo!"

"Tate! Stop it!" Marshall's voice emanated from the void. "You want your life back? Then all you've got to do is stop killing. I was your first wasn't I?" It was more of a statement than a question and he didn't wait for an answer. "You've got a chance too. We can both go back."

Tate was slumped against the side of the train, dazed. He couldn't take anymore of this nightmare. "This is the score, Tate. . . I have to stop dealing. And you . . . you have to let me live. When we met in the pub I was wearing a combat jacket, remember?

They.... your 'employers' told you that I'd be wearing that didn't they?" Again he didn't wait for an answer. "Well this time . . . if I've fulfilled my end of the bargain . . . I'll be wearing a suit. Get it? I'll be different. So you won't need to touch me. That's your turning point, Tate. You have to prove you want to change. You don't touch me, okay."

Tate tried to take in what Marshall was saying, "I just want to get off," he croaked.

"Sure you do. And you will. But you have to understand the deal. You have to change. This is your chance, Tate. You have to stop killing, otherwise you'll die and end up on this train going round and round. See any people on the train did you? Yes. Course you did. They're doing it. Round and round they go. Waiting for their turn. I'm only driving because it's my turn, my last chance, get it? And you are here because it's your only chance. Your crimes are too big to have last chances."

"Says who? Who's talking? You or . . ."

"Who, Tate? Who has ultimate power? Not God. He wouldn't be doing this would he? Terribilis est locus iste."

At that Tate shrank back.

"Get it? now Tate? All you have to do is let me live. Not so hard to do is it?"

* * *

Frank Tate watched as his daughter walked down the church aisle. He hadn't cried since . . . well best not think of that but he wanted to cry now. Beautiful, beautiful girl. His wife, ex-wife, shot him a glance and old bitterness was forgotten as they acknowledged the wonderful person they had produced together. Frank stayed at the reception until the couple departed then he took a taxi to the airport. He lived in Spain now.

He settled into his seat on the flight to Malaga satisfied with life. He had done well for himself; for his family. He'd made a good living from his profession. All he'd had to do was avoid trains for the rest of his life. He laughed. They, whoever they were, hadn't thought of that.

Tate dozed.

"Coffee sir?" asked the stewardess. Tate nodded too sleepy to speak. Then found his voice. Cleared his throat. "Yes please."

He turned to look out of the window. When he turned back everyone was gone. He was the only one on the plane. Then a mobile phone rang . . .