

**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.

Matt Wilson



Matt Wilson is Head of Infrastructure for an Interactive Games Channel. Matt is 33 years old and this is the first writing competition he has entered having been inspired by his friend who has just had a travel book published. Matt has worked as a DJ and has DJ'ed to 10,000 people in Prague!

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.

MATT WILSON'S ENDING TO THE TUNNEL

His hands, proudly untainted in eight years, were enveloped in blood. Not fresh blood, but old and coagulated: in the creases of his fingers, under his fingernails and dotted across his palms like mercury. Between these clots, his skin was stained a dull russet, and every line and scar was exposed, like pink plaque-tablet stained teeth. Surely, Tate thought, this could not have been caused hitting the door?

As he stared at his hands in disbelief, flexing his fingers, looking for the laceration which would qualify such profuse bleeding, something caught his eye on the toilet wall beyond. Nestled amongst crudely daubed graffiti was a list of names, written in a deliberate hand.

To anyone but Tate, this list would have been mostly meaningless: “Peter Ashton, Adrian Kirkdale, Louise Allen,” but to Tate, every name was a life, a house, a time — and a trophy. Being a completist himself when it came to professional matters, Tate well appreciated that the list had no omissions.

His breath still held, and heart now accelerating, he turned away so as to make sense of what he had seen, opening the door to the buffet car. At the far end of the car, by the door, stood a uniformed but scruffy man. Now, at last, Tate allowed himself to exhale, a sigh of relief . . . or perhaps of redemption.

Tate strode past the rubbish-strewn plastic tables as he traversed the corridor. The figure appeared to be a conductor, although he wasn't wearing one of the low-slung ticket machines which would mark him out clearly as such. He looked curiously ancient, lips tattered like faded roll-up cigarettes, eyes deep-set and silver, glistening like fish skin, face sullen and drawn. There was no infirmity suggested by his stance, however. He looked intently at Tate as he approached with a disarming assurance and cleared his throat, the sound of fifty years of hardened tar rattling in a barrel.

“Tickets please.” He raised his hand and as he did so, his sleeve rolled back to reveal yellow skin dotted with tiny scabs like freckles.

Tate's normal composure deserted him and he grabbed the old man by his lapels. “If you don't want to be inspecting the underside of this train you'd better tell me what's going on. Where is everybody?”

“Threatening me won't get you anywhere,” replied the man in a dry croak. “Now, I suggest you calm down, take a deep breath and I'll see what I can do to assist — once I've seen your ticket.”

Against his better nature Tate relaxed his grip and lowered his hands, releasing the thick felt-like cloth of the old man's jacket. He had stained the yellow livery on the conductor's collars with blood. Whilst he knew that he could get information out of this old fool quickly by force, but he felt oddly compelled to listen to this dog-end of a person. He pulled his ticket from his jacket pocket and the conductor nodded.

“With regards to the people on this train, all will become clear, but for now,” the conductor narrowed his eyes, “I will try to answer your questions as best I can.”

“Just tell me what the fuck is going on.”

“What is going on,” he dropped the expletive, paused for emphasis and then lowered his face, his eyes glinting as the lights in the buffet car started to dim, “is that what comes around, goes around.”

Without warning the long, dark tunnel suddenly came to an end. Far-flung streetlights appeared and grey velvet roads blurred past as the train crossed the countryside.

“What is this train?” enquired Tate, not once averting his eyes from the man’s gaze.

“I think you know the answer to that, Frank Tate.” As he spoke, the uniformed man’s voice became more resonant, the carriage grew dark and his eyes glinted iridescently with the malice and allure of seams of ore. “Terribilis” with each word the carriage itself seemed to join in chorus, windows rattling in time, engine throbbing, seats creaking, “est locus iste”.

As the train slowed to a crawl, the man raised his head and pointed to the window. Tate turned as indicated.

It appeared that they were entering a station, and the train slowed further, beginning to glide with only a periodic engine heartbeat to sustain its momentum. The platform appeared vacant apart from a lone train that they passed alongside, which had a few late-night travellers on board. As Tate stared, he saw a man running down onto the platform from a slope above. Tate’s train slowed to a stop.

From his unlit carriage he stared into the carriage of the next train. There was the woman on her laptop, the man in the white shirt, the young man. From this angle Tate realised that he had seen their faces before, not just earlier when he had boarded the train, but in photographs, and darkened rooms, and deserted cul-de-sacs. They were the faces of his victims. He saw the running figure board the train as it began to pull away, and although the standing figure’s head was above the windows, he did not need to see the man’s face.

Behind, in Tate’s own carriage, he heard them enter and felt the air move — almost indiscernibly — across the nape of his neck. He turned and surveyed the carriage, now brightly lit, his victims seated at tables, opening cans of beer, laughing, playing cards, oblivious of his existence.

Tate welled up with fury. How dare they be here and make a mockery of him? Tate went to shout and disrupt the scene, but as his mouth opened, in an instant he realised he was separated from the scene by glass. He was in another train, travelling at the same speed, now diverging from the one he had stood in only moments before. He watched his last remnant of happiness shrink ever smaller and become a single lit carriage no bigger than a matchbox in a long, dark line.

Around him the carriage was dark but the walls glistened. The train re-entered the tunnel, and as it did so a final flash of light lit up the conductor, lending him a diabolical air.

“Are you the devil?” Tate asked.

The conductor laughed a dry laugh. “I would think you’re better qualified for that role,” he replied.

“Are you God?”

“It’s amazing how people adopt such a bipolar attitude when it comes down to it. So facile.”

“So who are you then?” Tate felt exasperated.

“My name is Charles Henry Aaron,” said the conductor. “You’ve made your choices, Frank Tate, and you’ve paid your fare.”

For a brief second Tate saw the conductor’s eyes take on an immaculate sadness. Further ahead on the line, deep within the tunnel, the points changed on the track, and in an instant the sadness was gone, replaced by a glowering sneer, which grew and grew.