

Tate stared at this reflection in the grimy, stained cubicle mirror, a scream building deep in his bowels. For the demonic face staring back at him, contorted in horror, was branded with the wounds of the tattooed priest whom Tate had violently murdered an hour ago. There were angry deep purple welds around his neck and, as he lifted his hands to his face, the tense Neanderthal howl finally escaped as he saw the ragged bloody stump where his left thumb had once been.

Eyes bugging, he recognised the symbol on the cubicle wall, painted in bloody smears, the staring eye which had once marked his prey for death, now taunted him in this insane nightmare. Tate ripped the severed thumb from the bag in his pocket and threw the digit into the waste bowl.

He fell back away from the toilet, throwing his gaze frantically up and down the deserted carriages. The malevolent liting train sped faster and faster. Still he could see no one.

*Terribilis est locus iste*

He wasn't sure what it meant exactly, but he could guess. And he agreed - this place was terrible; a purgatory hell-train. He had never been a religious man - his order was one of perpetual chaos. But in his final murder had he crossed a moral line and been condemned to ride this *terribilis* train as an act of damnation?

His body lurched, swaying with the lilt of the vehicle, its mechanical rumblings thundering in his head. The interior lights had extinguished but he could see forward through the window at the bottom of this carriage. The empty compartments seemed to go on forever like a reflection of mirror in mirror. Tate paused at the gangway. He had always hated the swaying floor and the corrugated rubber walls that swelled and squeezed like a dark pulsing heart.

He pressed open the carriage door, breathing in the heavy dark air, and stepped out. Suddenly gripped with a blinding vertigo he swooped down to the floor, hugging the filthy rubber. The blackness was smothering and he sensed there was no bottom to the compartment, no ground beneath the tracks.

He could feel the air play around him from above and below, from side to side, almost knocking his stocky figure off kilter.

Tate was frantic as this new panic took hold of him. He had seen terror before: on the face of a young girl he had stabbed outside a nightclub, blood draining from her cool body; and on the face of an elderly grandfather, whom he strangled in his own lounge beside a table holding family photographs; but he had never experienced the raw and relentless emotion of primal fear.

Surging forward he grabbed the handle of the next carriage door and, with all the strength he possessed, vaulted through in one fluid move.

Again he listed with the train as it rocked along. His eyes constantly stretching ahead, looking for someone, anyone. His ears straining to hear any sounds.

At the end of the carriage, Tate paused. He had moved into the economy wagons and each was separated by a gangway link like the one he had just traversed - the shields bellowing with the breath of the train as it rocked perilously forward. He was getting hotter and the sweat, combined with his heavy clothes, made every movement cumbersome and every breath deep.

Tate leaned against a bench seat, nauseous and reluctant to move again. He was exhausted, both physically and mentally, something he often experienced in the hours after a kill. This time though, his fatigue was coupled with terror and desperation and unwillingly his heavy eyes began to droop.

Just before his eyelashes touched the hot flesh of his cheeks, Tate heard a noise. That damn mobile phone again! Its incessant ringing was driving him crazy. He gritted his teeth, amazed that the tinny mechanical ring could be heard from such a distance. Swinging his head around in the direction of the noise, Tate had the foreboding sense that he should answer the call. Perhaps it was his final chance for redemption? He almost laughed imagining an 0800 CONFSSIONAL.

Pulling his body up, Tate struggled back in the direction he had come. The ringing had become stereophonic and, merged with the screech of the train, it scored deep into his bones. He could visualise the bench seats he passed, their blue velour abstract pattern ripped and stained from years of abuse.

Formica tabletops marked with cup rings and old newspapers stuffed down between seats or left behind on the floor.

In the darkness, Tate's senses had ripened. He could feel his fellow passengers all around him now and he knew them for what they were. Their bodies had been a facade, a parade of regurgitated limbs: but remembering the faces of each he realised with abject horror that they too had been his sorry victims. The ringing became their voices; the language extra-terrestrial and the sentences confused. Tate's recoiling body sending acrid bile to settle in the pit of his mouth.

If not an assassin for hire, Tate could have been London's most brazen serial killer. Perhaps even globally (he had killed over 80 people in his 37 years). His job had been to seek and destroy - sometimes helpless citizens, sometimes flagrant. But his revere as a hostile executioner held no esteem on this joyride.

He recalled the young woman's smile then remembered her fragile silent scream as he mercilessly executed her with her own telephone cord.

The young man had been more difficult. The tendons and muscles in his strong neck refusing to surrender to death until the garrotte had pressured his tanned throat so intensely that one of his eyeballs had burst, gushing hot, sticky fluid down his face.

Tate had approached the heavy man from behind, delivering a severe blow to the back of his skull, intended to disable him. Tate recalled the crack, like a boiled eggshell hit with a spoon, and the fragments of brain and gore that had liquefied with the blood on his aluminium bat. No further action required.

There had been so many others. And while Tate took pride in having spilt little blood, he had sprayed and shattered a myriad of souls.

He stared down at his left hand, the absent thumb making a freakish silhouette in the gloom. The staring eye he had so carefully cut from his victim's hand now imprinted in his mind and seeing the darkness within.

The careening train continued to speed along the tracks like a gargantuan black bullet, rolling perilously with abandon on its endless journey; lifeless and lightless. The steady automated hum relentless.

Tate desperately wanted to disembark from the mechanical monster. To feel again the terra firma beneath his leather clad soles.

“Where the hell are we going?” screamed Tate, hammering and clawing at the windows. But it occurred to him that he had answered his own question. The train continued to pulsate around him, the crushing darkness sucking on his breath and contaminating his pores; and as Tate squeezed closer to the window edge, gasping for relief, he could swear the shroud outside was hued with deep fiery red.