

Through an open door, occupying the complete wall where the usual frosted window should have been, Tate saw a long table set in a luxurious dining room. The table was laid for dinner, and at it, seated in elegant, high backed, golden chairs, were a number of people - or a number of beings who had been people... Were changing even as they ate.

Tate staggered back.

This was impossible! How could he be looking at a dining room through a toilet door ... aboard a train travelling at speed through a dark, unending tunnel?

Had he suddenly gone mad?

Wiping cold sweat from his forehead with the back of a shaking hand, he managed to draw a breath. He *must* be mad!

More than a dozen people sat around the table. He recognised four of them: the attractive woman who had smiled, the bald man who had been listening to music, the young man who had been reading a magazine, and the attendant who had served coffee. Before her, on the table, rested the two metal jugs she had been carrying. She drank coffee as she waited, and as she drank her skin appeared to melt, to fall away from her lips.

A door opened on the far side of the room, and a woman with a basket walked in, followed by a man carrying a small dog, then a man in a railway guard's uniform, and finally a man wearing a peaked cap. Tate knew with certainty that this was the train driver.

The train driver sat down at the head of the table and removed his gold- braided cap. He produced a tin box with a floppy metal handle and took out a thermos flask and a packet of sandwiches. He unscrewed the

lid of the flask and set it and an inner plastic cup on the fine linen tablecloth. He poured steaming tea into both containers and pushed one across the table in the direction of the guard, who silently occupied an empty chair. He nudged the sandwiches towards the guard with a friendly movement of his hand. As he did so the skin of his hand dissolved, revealing tendons and bone.

The old lady took an apple out of her basket and began to peel it. As she ate Tate could see through her throat, track the passage of the pulp as it slid past her epiglottis, into her oesophagus.

All the other people were eating, and as they ate their appearance changed, skin melting away from gristle and then flesh from bone.

The train driver motioned Tate towards the remaining unoccupied seat, his hand now skeletal; the flaring balls of his eyes staring out of the bone and cartilage structure of a face that slowly peeled away to reveal a bloody, raw skull, now bent over the bright piping of his uniform as he munched his first sandwich with teeth that grew longer as his gums dissolved.

Tate obeyed the gestured instruction and sat down on the plush velvet chair. He felt in his pocket and produced his ticket to wealth – well, not *extreme* wealth, he thought, just payment for a job.

No one seemed to notice that it was a dismembered thumb that he laid upon the delicate china plate placed in front of him. The staring eye of the tattoo seemed to stare at him as he began to cut and eat. The thumb was difficult to hold. It bounced and slid on the plate, so that he was forced to lift it in his fingers, like a chicken leg, before beginning to gnaw.

Jesus! He almost jumped out of his seat as he awoke, his heart pounding, spitting to remove the taste of raw, dead flesh from his mouth! Dream images warred with the bright lights and luxurious fabric of the first-class carriage, darkly reflected in black windows.

Images of melting flesh and people at table shimmied in slow, grisly syncopation with the slight swaying of the train, the beat timed by the remote clack of iron wheels on metal rails.

A dream! A nightmare! That's all it was! But, Jesus, it was powerful! Even now it seemed real. Once again he wiped sweat from his brow.

He looked around. The young woman still rattled away at her business laptop. Nothing was going to disturb her! The bald man lay back in his seat, mouth agape, sleeping. The young man stirred with angry impatience as he leafed through the pages of one of his magazines. The young were always bored, impatient for the next day to arrive.

There was no sign of the woman attendant.

Jesus! What a dream! He still felt a sickly fear. His flesh crawled at the vivid memory of melting flesh and of gnawing on the dead thumb.

He felt the packet in his pocket, shuddering with a horror that he had never felt before.

But it was only a dream.

Better to forget about such things. Reality, hard reality, was the only thing that counted. Business! Day-to-day operations that made money. Cold, hard cash. It was all just business.

At that moment the train appeared to emerge from the long tunnel with a roar of rushing wind, speeding on through the night. He could see lights and the vague outline of buildings, for the first time since leaving the station.

A complex of switching rails glistened.

Everything was as it should be. They flashed past a dimly lit station, the first they had encountered. The driver was really letting her rip, as if he was dreaming of driving a French train on the other side of the Channel, striving to reach vaunted SNCF speeds of 170 mph.

Madness! Thought Tate! This was supposed to be a late night local train, making its sluggish way towards the south coast.

Still! A potentially speedy conclusion to his latest job was welcome.

Then the windows of his carriage exploded, shattered glass spraying into the night and ripping through the warm carriage as the metal fabric of the walls concertinaed and the coach reared into the air, like a horse in terror, scrabbling, horrific - with a screeching of torn metal - to remain suspended for a moment above rails and track lights, and then fall slowly back and sideways, overturning in a grotesque, final convulsion.

With the screeching metal the lights flickered and went out, followed by an explosion and a blinding flash of light.

The light was the last thing Tate was aware of in this life.

He screamed in fear and anger, twisting and contorting in a light that seared into the essence of his being, invading his power of knowing, exposed his hatred and despair, revealed with agonising clarity that in all of his forty years - by his own deliberate choice - he had never loved - not for

a moment, not for an instant - and a voice that was the same as the light,
was the light, was eternity - was unending love - scorched and whispered
through his pain-racked, raging soul: *Terribilis est locus iste*.

This time he had no trouble with the Latin.

He had entered a terrible place, forever.