

THE TUNNEL: SHAUN HUTSON **(ending by Shaun Thornley)**

Stuck to the mirror was a Polaroid, torn partially across the throat, of him. Apparently dead.

Above the Polaroid, written on the mirror;

Terribilis est locus iste.

Tate stepped backwards in panic and banged his head hard against the hand drier. He grabbed the door handle to stop himself from falling and held onto it while his breathing returned to as close to normal as he thought it ever would. Suddenly he knew what it felt like to be on the other end.

Tate grabbed the Polaroid and edged out of the cubicle. After looking down both corridors, still no one in sight, he shoved the Polaroid in his pocket and moved over to the toilet cubicle in the next carriage, the buffet car. The door was slightly ajar but Tate wasn't taking any chances and stood back quickly after pushing it open. Nothing.

Into the buffet car, slowly, warily now, still nobody. More abandoned tables; mainly food. Tate moved up the carriage increasingly quickly as his irritation overcame his initial fear from the toilet. Some idiots playing a game? He'd reached the wall of the buffet itself, at the far end of the shortened passenger section, when something registered on his subconscious, fear seeping back to replace the irritation. There was something in the carriage that he'd missed. Something worryingly familiar.

Tate walked slowly back down the carriage, looking from side to side. Abandoned food, drinks, coats, a few books and one laptop. Luggage on the racks. Nothing that explained his feeling.

Back at the end of the carriage Tate turned and immediately saw them. Obvious now, because he was looking, but he still couldn't believe he'd missed them before. On the luggage rack, half way down the carriage, were two leather gloves. He reached into his pockets, trying to find his own pair, but after the Polaroid he already knew he was wasting his time.

He walked back up the empty carriage, reached up for the gloves, and took them down. Definitely his. Tate stuffed them in his pocket with the Polaroid, wishing that his preferred method of execution were shooting. At least then he'd be armed. He walked on to the end of the passenger section, pausing at the wall of the buffet and listening. Not a sound.

He lent round the corner, looking down the corridor that lead to the buffet counter, and then quickly back again to his original position with his back flat against the wall. Nobody. He walked round the corner and along the corridor. Level with the open door to the kitchen, a quick glance revealed another empty space, at least empty of people. Tate though had spotted a useful looking set of knives, from which he decided to help himself to a particularly vicious looking one, one that reminded him of earlier.

If this were more than just some elaborate joke at his expense then he'd be ready.

From the kitchen he could see that the serving area of the buffet counter was also empty, so he went back out of the kitchen and along to the counter. Nothing in the corridor or on the counter, but on the wall next to it was a notice below a bell push. 'Please ring for service'. Tate laughed mirthlessly. Pressing it would not bring service today, but it might bring whatever was going on to a head.

He switched the knife to his left hand and reached over with his right. As he did so he realised that the bell push was indented into the wall; anyone with fat fingers would struggle to reach the button. Although Tate's hands were large his fingers were not and he just managed to get to the button. He pressed it hard and long. The bell rang in the kitchen as he'd expected, the first real sound since the mobile phone in his carriage, but he couldn't tell if there was another bell elsewhere. After what Tate thought was long enough to annoy anybody else on the train, he released the bell. As he did so he heard a dull thud and felt a numb pain in the finger he'd used on the bell.

Looking down as he withdrew his finger he saw that the counter was beginning to fill with blood, and realised that he was missing the end of his finger. Tate swore loudly, more from the shock than the pain, which was surprisingly slow in coming, and moved quickly back into the kitchen to find something to stop the blood. After wrapping his hand in a tea towel he leant against the wall, breathing hard, to take stock. Any idea that this might be a joke had disappeared completely from his mind.

There was still no sound that he could hear. No one had appeared at the buffet to resolve the situation, one way or the other. Tate knew there was no point staying in the kitchen, as he'd successfully advertised his location to whoever was responsible for all this, so on through the doors into 2nd Class he went, checking the toilets on the way. As he'd half expected, 2nd Class was just a repetition of 1st class. Abandoned food, drinks, books, coats. He took a certain perverse pleasure, despite the circumstances, in noting that 2nd class lived up to its name; trashy novels, chain store clothes and not a laptop in sight.

No toilet engaged light, nothing of significance to him, nothing visible through the windows. Out of the end doors, toilets checked and empty, and Tate was looking into the next carriage.

Then it suddenly occurred to him. He'd been a fool of course. He wasn't trapped in here. There was no need to play this game out to whatever conclusion its designers had in mind for him.

Tate turned and glanced from side to side. No point risking being hit by another train, so he moved to the door on his right and pulled down the window. Pitch black outside, no sign of any lights or anything at all. This no longer surprised him after the previous half-hour of peering intermittently through the windows. He should have been surprised, but not by that. Although the 'door unlocked' sign wasn't illuminated Tate saw no good reason for climbing through the window unnecessarily, so he reached his left hand tentatively out of the window to try the handle, only to pull it back quickly almost immediately. If his hand were next what better way to do it than when he reached for the handle? Better to check.

Tate put his head out of the window and looked down into the gloom. Now he was surprised. Suddenly he could see the handle clearly, now brightly lit, and simultaneously he knew why he should have been surprised when he first opened the window. There was no wind. But it was too late. The scythe struck him on the left of his neck and, as his head parted from his body, left on the stationary train, he just glimpsed the cheering crowd of his victims' relatives.

This place, for him at least, was indeed terrible.