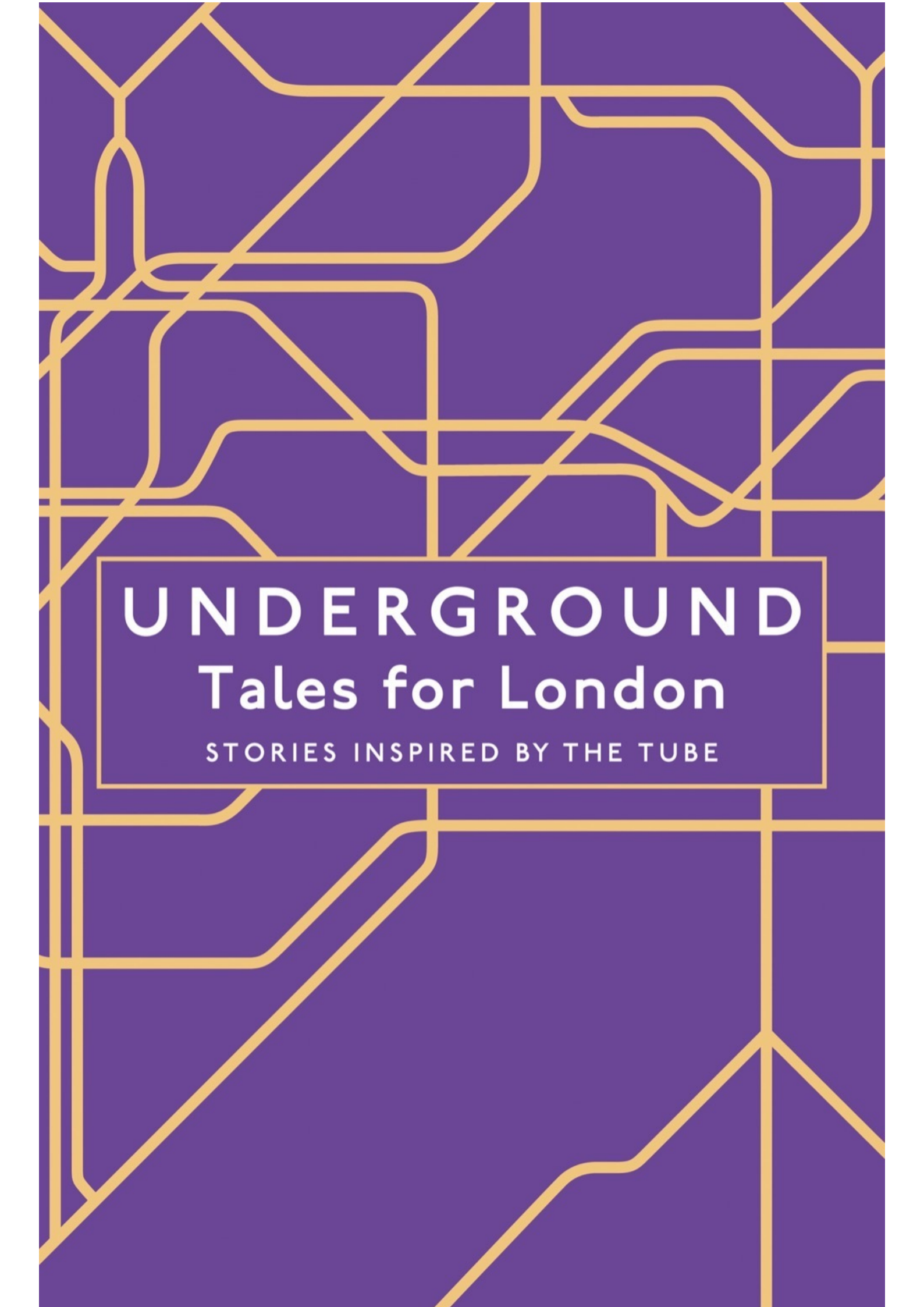




UNDERGROUND

Tales for London

STORIES INSPIRED BY THE TUBE

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Every line tells a different story ... A troubled young woman travels across London to end an abusive relationship. An agitated father gets lost in the city with an injured toddler. Two men – who unknowingly cross paths every day – finally meet one life-changing afternoon. A sudden death on the platform at Blackfriars sparks rumours of murder. Underground, we are at once isolated and connected. We avoid eye contact and conversation while our lives literally intersect with those of strangers. As we stand on the tube, it becomes possible to travel far further than expected – and this sense of possibility lies at the heart of this stunning collection. Twelve writers explore life on the London Underground through eleven short stories and one memoir, commissioned to mark the opening of the Elizabeth line.

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UNDERGROUND TALES FOR LONDON



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Dedication

For London

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Note from the Editor

Born in 1863, the London Underground is a place where everyone comes together, from the city's most wealthy to its homeless, old people, young people, students, residents, visitors... five million of us cram into underground carriages every day, to make our way across the city.

It is a place of endless fascination. Lives literally cross over one another. We travel in close proximity across 250 miles of underground track: we mostly stare at our feet, our phones, our newspapers, but occasionally magic can happen – a flirtatious eye caught, a small kindness exchanged. There is occasional tragedy, too, with lives lost, taken, ended.

This short story collection is a celebration of the London Underground, commissioned to mark the opening of the Elizabeth line. The twelve stories – including one memoir – explore the scope of human experience, from family misadventures to spiritual journeys, from the ends of love affairs to those just beginning. Life and death are made manifest, all on the daily commute.

The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, said: 'London is open.' I believe this message to be essential. This is a city where everyone is welcome, and as these stories demonstrate, the London Underground is the network connecting us all.

Ann Bissell, 2018

ELIZABETH
The Parade
James Smythe

My father, who had been dead for fifteen years, was the last person to board the train. I had that singular sensation of, when looking at a crowd, being able to pick out the one face that meant something to me, to home in on it, to see every detail of it. It was my father, as if he had just been down to the shop and then returned, rather than having succumbed – that’s the word that the doctor used, when they called me to visit him: *succumbed* – to his death the way that he did.

But, of course, it wasn’t him. It was another man, with a suit like his and a coat like his, brushing around his knees even in the middle of the summer; only this man wasn’t dead. His face wasn’t as sallow and pallid as my father’s, at the end. He took his hat off, and I saw his face. The insides of the hat, so different to my father’s; which, I was convinced, held some secrets of the universe, because he would gaze into them when searching for moments of pause, and I would try to distract him. I stared at this man, and he met my eyes, and we smiled, because that’s what you do when something is mutually embarrassing. I looked away, then, to the platform; and the most striking memory, of my father, his actual suit and coat, leading me through the station one day when I was small. Holding my hand, guiding me, taking me someplace; I forget where. His hand, folded over mine, so large it swaddled it; and the warmth of it, on my child-thin knuckles.

‘Come with me,’ he said, as if that was all.

And then, snap, to reality, to the actual then: the light lurch of the train as we left Liverpool Street, leaving Alex’s flat for the last time; my rucksack, a bag with my entire life crammed into it, between my knees. The woman opposite me typing on her phone; the man next to me with a script, learning lines, his lips mouthing the words with almost silent sibilance; another woman with a novel, the cover folded backwards, just a tease of a glimpse of what she’s reading. For one year of my life, as a challenge, everything that I read was a suggestion from other readers on the underground: the covers acting as part of the lure, solidified by the intensity of the reader’s face as they tried to turn as many pages as they could before their stop. I tried to see the woman’s book, then, a cover of delicately painted art, but she kept it clenched. I wished that I could have known, because she was so intent that I wanted nothing more than to read it. People on all sides, all living their lives.

The comfort of feeling hemmed in; even if just a little.

I shut my eyes and leaned back. The new trains rattle less than the old. Less of a rocking sensation; somehow both more and less comforting, at the exact same time.

I heard a flapping that I was sure was a pigeon, somehow make its way into the carriage. They do that: they peck their way into stations, down escalators, onto platforms, into lunches. I pictured it, moving down the carriage; head bobbing, inquisitive, nudging crumbs and leaves along the line of the door. And then my phone trilled in my pocket, cutting through the flapping; leaving that noise gone, and no sign of the bird.

A message, from Alex:

I’m sorry. Fly safely. X

I deleted it. Didn’t just turn off the screen, act as if it weren’t there, but I deleted it. The faff of endless menus, of attempting to discover a way to remove that message, to purge it, while leaving the previous messages – *I can’t wait to see you; I thought of you today* – even though, perhaps, those were lies, since no choice such as his gets made so rashly. And I saw my hands – my knuckles, more wrinkled and drawn than I remembered them being, as if I hadn’t actually looked at them in the longest time, and time itself had cheated me of whatever near-muscular form I thought that my

knuckles once had – and I realized how old I suddenly was. A tidal wave of time, washing over everything, swallowing it whole.

My father had died fifteen years earlier. He had been eighty-five, and old with it; a curmudgeon in a chair at Christmas, paper crown still folded on his placemat, Whisky Mac in hand regardless of what the rest of us were drinking. The man in the crowd reminded me far more of my father when I had been young, still hat and coat and briefcase and a complicit understanding that he was my hero; and I, in some way, maybe was his.

Then, of course, time and life interrupt; and we were at odds. When his father – my grandfather – died, I remember him telling me that he was sad that he never got a chance to say the things that he wanted to say. The gulf between them; the pain.

I told myself that history wouldn't repeat; except, of course, that's the nature of history. Inescapably cyclic.

Farringdon, and the electric slide of the doors that, when I was a child, on another line before this one even existed, used to *hiss* their pleasure at being opened. A girl got on. Ten, or eleven, and dressed for some sort of event: you can see them around at weekends, as superheroes or movie stars. This girl was wearing a bonnet, a Victorian child-heroine writ large. She apologized with her eyes, and she sat next to me. Bunched her skirts up. I folded my body as small as I could, in the space, and she smiled at me. And we left Farringdon, this part of the city that's so old, so well worn; and in the tunnel, in the dark, I saw myself reflected in the window. My face, but somehow barely recognizable. The thump of the dark tunnel outside, seemingly endless, as if leaving the carriage and wading through the black might lead to some parallel world.

'Pardon my intrusion,' a still, small voice said. From the young lady. 'You're Gregory Abbey, aren't you?'

I had a moment where I wondered if there was any chance she'd read one of my novels, but I doubted it – she was not the target audience, if such a thing even existed – and *yet*. Perhaps she was one of Alexander's nieces. He had enough of them, faces that blended in amongst a parade of introductions: *this is my friend, Gregory*.

A lie, a lie, a barely formed truth.

'I'm sorry, but I don't remember you,' I said.

'I'm Alice,' she said. She held her hand out, to shake mine; and mine enveloped hers, a gnarled root swamping soft willow. 'Do you remember me? It has been a while.'

I felt myself spiralling. Shut my eyes, a blink that lasted a count of one, nothing more; and I remembered her. I remembered a photograph that my grandmother herself had shown me, of the day that she had her picture taken. And this was her, my grandmother, Alice Abbey; and she was sitting in front of me.

'Are you real?' I asked her, and she laughed. She didn't answer; which, in itself, is an answer, of sorts. 'Why are you so young? When I last saw you, you were an old woman.'

'Wouldn't you rather look like this, if you could?'

'What are you doing here?' I wondered how loud my voice was; how loud you should be, when speaking to somebody who was meant to be long dead.

'I'm here because you are. I used to ride this stretch,' she said. 'The tunnels don't change, you know.' She smiled. Kicked her feet, which scuffed along the floor.

'But why?' I asked her.

'Because today is when you're going to die,' she told me. 'And this is what happens when you do.'

My dying father's bedside was a strange affair. He was in a hospice, because there was no other way to make sure that he was actually cared for, not the half-arsed care that comes from having one eye on a dying man and another on the food you're burning, the love you're losing, the television you're missing. He wasn't happy, because he wanted me to take him in. But I had Alexander. I told

him, then, when he asked why he couldn't move in with me. He said, 'You don't have a wife, you don't have children.'

I told him. He told me not to visit him any more.

The only time I made it through the doors was at the very end. The care workers apologized to me on his behalf. They had seen me sit, and wait, and ask – *beg* – to be let inside; and he had spat at them in proxy for me, this bitter old man.

I watched him die, and he looked at me before he did, too weak to say anything.

He succumbed, and neither of us said what we probably needed to say.

In his box, given to me after he passed, I found his hat. I stared inside it for hours, waiting to see if it would give itself up to me. Give him up to me; but nothing.

'Do you feel it?' Alice asked me. 'How close you are?'

My hand instinctively went to my head, to the scar that Alex once remarked was shaped like a suspicious eye. 'They said that I have six months,' I replied, 'but I'm going to Amsterdam, where they have treatments to try ...' My voice, trailing off, rang in my own ears.

'It's today,' Alice said. Her smile was sympathetic. I looked at the window, the reflection, because I wanted to see what my own face was doing. 'I'm sorry,' she said.

'It's fine,' I replied.

She positively beamed. 'Good. There's some people here who would love to see you.'

The doors opened at Tottenham Court Road. I remembered being here when I was a young man: being brought to Old Compton Street by a friend, to a world where everything felt permitted, and nothing was as I told myself it was. He said, 'You're not true to yourself,' and I suppose that wasn't wrong.

Through the doors, then, the people came. A bustle of them, of tourists and half-termers and commuters, and a busker, singing some old song; and Ronnie, in the middle of them all. That self-same friend, his eyes their almost-iridescent purple shimmer, his smile a spread of honest warmth.

'I can't believe it,' I said.

'Jesus,' he said, 'Greggy! What a delight!' He embraced me, elbows into the other passengers – he was never one to care for what others thought of him, and his celebration was stronger than the personal space of anybody else in the carriage – and pulled me tight. 'Look at you! You look good, considering.'

'And you,' I stammered. Our *considerings* were aligned: I might have been dying, but he had already been dead for going on forty years.

He sat opposite me, his long limbs extended then snapped back, arms folded and legs crossed. 'This is a bit fancy, isn't it?' He looked down the carriage. 'I remember when this was all fields.' A joke; and a grin so delightful that I almost forgot the strangeness of his being there.

'Yes,' I replied, because I didn't have any other words.

'You got old,' he said. Matter-of-fact. 'Still, only as old as you feel.' I remembered him then, in that moment, as he was when he died: gaunt. Not the same as my father, because one was sunken, the other collapsing. A vital difference. I wondered: would I sink? Or would I collapse? Was that what I was doing at that exact moment? 'I knew I'd get here first.' A glint in his eye. 'You lazy shit, taking your time over something so important. I always said that you were a little behind.' Bond Street, and the squash of people, suitcases and children tightly gripping hands.

'Don't think I'm rude,' I said, 'but I have to ask: why are you here?'

They looked at each other, as if the answer should be obvious; and they smiled, because they were in on a private joke that I most definitely was not.

'Think of this as a parade,' Alice said. 'A farewell and mind your way.'

'Death doesn't need to be as dour as the world would have it. We're here to celebrate with you.'

'And what if I don't want to die?' I asked. 'What happens then?'

'You don't have a choice,' Ronnie said.

The train pulled in to Paddington. I waited, for a moment, and then—

I was gone, from my seat, to the platform, rucksack strap gripped in my hand; my worn old knuckles white with the force of my hold. And the doors hushed shut behind me, and I turned to see Alice and Ronnie staring through the glass; and I said, out loud, ‘I am not dying today,’ and I walked along the platform, watched until the train moved out of sight. ‘Not today,’ as I sat on a bench. Put my hand to my head, and swore I could feel something under the skin, under the bone, beating alongside my pulse.

Alex drove me to my first appointment, at University College Hospital, back when my illness was nothing more than a persistent headache and an elevated blood-cell count. He sat in the car and said, ‘I’ll wait here for you.’ And I should have known then, really. Because so much with him was, *Let’s not make a big deal out of this.*

As I was led through to the test chamber, they asked if I was alone. I told them, ‘My partner’s in the car,’ and they said, each nurse with a slightly different inflection, ‘They can come inside, you know,’ and I replied, ‘Oh, he prefers it.’ As if that was justification. Each nurse their own version of a consolatory nod.

‘It’s hard on the loved ones,’ that’s what one of the nurses said to me, later; when the prognosis was dealt, and I was reeling, and Alex wasn’t with me.

‘Yes,’ I said, placid as you like; because I didn’t want to say, well how do you think it feels to be here alone?

That day, when I got home, my head shaven, hat perched defiantly on my smooth, round skull, he told me that he had spoken to his ex-wife; that they had more to sort out, regarding their children, their house, their possessions.

He asked me if I minded him going to see her.

‘Of course not,’ I told him. Why would I mind?

I rode the city, the length and breadth of it. I went to whichever line would take me. Every line, every length. Every destination, every station with their shared darknesses in the tunnels, running off for as long as you can imagine; this intricate webbing, underneath the city – *my* city – that links everything, *everyplace* together. To Pinner, to my old flat, bought when I was in my fifties, the fifth floor of a block that felt craningly high even at only six floors, all vulgar Eighties carpets and wooden kitchen, but so very, very mine; to Kensington, to Alice’s house, remembered briefly from when I was a child and she, most definitely, was not, but after the war and she had money and my mother telling me to not touch *anything*; to Hackney, where I lived in the years before it was trendy to say that you lived there, when it really was council terraces and warehouses that couldn’t even dream of being turned into communes; to Richmond, to the bars that felt like a part of me when nowhere else was open, where I sat and drank quietly, waiting to be noticed; and to the bookshops at the lower end of Soho, no longer hiding their content in blank covers, smuggled out in my teenaged pockets, no longer hiding anything at all.

I went to all of these places, and yet to none of them; I remembered them all perfectly, a lifetime in just the blink of my eyes; just as people said happened. A flash, so bright in that extended moment as to be almost entirely blinding.

I met Alex when he was already lying to his wife. A friend of mine that I knew online told me about an app, and he explained how to install it onto my phone, and from there I met Alex. He was ten years younger than I was, but he spoke about time as if he was some sort of master of it: the things that he had done, the people he had known, the life he had lived. He had two children, but he never spoke about them and didn’t want me to either, as if my saying their names might somehow alert them to my existence. He had a wife, whose name I was allowed to say, but only in a way that suggested I was appreciative of the pain he was enduring by staying with her. ‘Oh, Deborah wouldn’t understand,’ he would moan, hyphenating every syllable with his breath for some sort of extreme

emphasis. 'She's known about my dalliances before, but this?' He stroked my arm. 'This love? She wouldn't understand *that*.'

We met in bars on the ground floors of hotels, and then occasionally in restaurants adjacent to those bars. A few times, his wife was away, and we went to his house, where we slept in the guest bedroom, on an undressed mattress and under a naked duvet, in case his wife wondered why the master bedsheets had been changed.

He never came to visit me; I always went to visit him. He left his wife when she caught us one day. Or she left him, I was never sure. I bought my flat, and he bought his, near Liverpool Street. He told me that it was too soon for us to cohabit. 'Besides,' he said, 'are you sure that you want everybody to talk?'

When, eventually, I told him my prognosis, his face was perfectly still for a while, until his eyebrow raised, and he said, 'What a shame.'

As if there was ever a future for us, at all.

On the platform, at Paddington. Waiting for the purple trains, at the doors, perfectly aligned to the opening of the carriages. The people, crowding, with their bags, their lovers, their pasts and futures; every part of human life somehow finding its way to that platform. I watched as train after train passed through the station.

'Are you OK, sir?' A woman in a uniform, a tabard, smiling at me. I smiled back.

'I'm overwhelmed, that's all.'

'London can do that,' she replied. She looked at my over-filled rucksack, the mark of a visitor. 'You here for a holiday?'

'No. I'm leaving,' I said.

She smiled again. She had a lovely smile. Warm, kind. Reminded me of my mother. 'Let me know if you need anything, OK?'

I stood as she walked off, and I made my way to the marked area of the platform, by the glass doors. Being on a platform would once tousele every part of you as the train rushed towards you; but that time, it was just there.

The doors opened, and there she was: my mother.

Her name was Elizabeth. Betty, she called herself, because – in her words – 'I'm not exactly the Queen, now, am I?'

Ronnie laughed, from his seat. 'I told you he'd be back. Didn't I tell you?'

My mother opened her arms, and I sank into them.

Alice told me about the route she used to take. 'My whole life,' she said, 'this run. This line, these tunnels, they've existed for so long. Not these *exact* tunnels, but adjacent is sometimes the same as the original, don't you think?' The train stopped, and people disembarked, and more boarded. Each time I stared, to see the faces and hear the voices.

'Nothing beats the original,' my old tutor, Sean, said, 'though God knows this city tries: constantly self-imitating.' Sean died of old age, a peaceful passing that made those of us at his funeral somehow envious: his was, we agreed, as if we were all cricketers, a good innings.

'You don't like London,' I said to him, almost under my breath, a phrase I had recited a hundred times or more in the years that I knew him.

'And you blame him?' My cousin, Vanessa. Long hours spent playing in Alice's garden, when she was in her middle age, and Vanessa and I were, for a time, all each other had. Vanessa took scissors to her own wrists, but those scars weren't visible: in that carriage, she was in her twenties, footloose and free of those fancies that people seem so eager to be free of.

'Not everybody feels like you do, you know.' Arnold, the first boy I ever loved, cancer of the insides, a spread that lost all track of its origin point.

‘And not everybody is quite so contentious.’ Samir, from the school I once taught in, while trying to make ends meet between novels. Colleague, first reader, friend, infection that rendered him first slightly stilled, then completely static.

‘Don’t remember Gregory much, then, I take it?’ Adelle, agent, dedicated smoker who overcame the odds of the smoker’s lot and died, elderly, in a crash.

‘As much as I need to,’ Ronnie said. Cutting through them all. Ronnie, who died because – as he said in the letter that he left his friends, which we all gathered around to read in the week following his death – he loved too much. His smile was pervasive, able to somehow commit to whatever situation we found ourselves in: that same smile, somehow consistently appropriate. Even then, with my impending.

I pulled him to one side. ‘How did you deal with this?’ I asked.

‘The parade? I decided that everything’s a parade now. One big to-do.’

We left the city, or the innards of the city. The part that feels as though it’s inescapable when you’re inside it, and then so alluring as to be almost unreachable when you’re not. The built-up gave way to the suburbs, the built-down: two-storeys, bungalows, flats above shops. Comfort and ease; the love handles of my city.

A memory, of Alex poking my sides, before I got ill. Telling me, ‘Well, this is a new addition.’ My stomach, his finger sinking into pink flesh. ‘Nobody told me we were expecting.’

‘I don’t know why you stayed with him,’ Ronnie said, reading my mind.

‘I didn’t ask you,’ I said. Maybe I spat my words, defensive, because Ronnie looked affronted; but still, his lovely smile essentially formed his face for itself.

‘You lived out here, didn’t you?’ he asked me.

‘Once. You didn’t.’

‘Thank God. I died before I could pretend that I wanted to.’ Snark, smirk.

‘I did actually want to, you know.’

‘You didn’t know what you wanted.’ His smile changed. Have you ever seen somebody who looks so happy, suddenly so sad? Or maybe not sad, but withdrawn; understanding, empathic. ‘It’s funny, this. Leaving somewhere. Moving on. The past, going into a place you haven’t been yet.’

The train stopped. Hayes and Harlington. Last stop before Heathrow.

Ronnie looked to the doors. My father, definitely him this time, standing there. In the hat that he used to wear, the perfectly pressed suit. His lip a line, a crease, in an otherwise creaseless face.

‘I’ll leave you two alone,’ Ronnie said. He squeezed my arm, near my wrist; and Alice waved at me, and my mother kissed my cheek. Everybody else faded away, until there was just me and him, him and me, in this carriage, thundering past the houses, on its way.

‘I lived in a house near here,’ I said to him. He sat opposite me, and he did that affectation with his trousers: hitching them slightly, so that they didn’t catch on his socks; so that a glimpse of his ankles could be seen, below the braces on his socks. ‘The first time that I moved in with somebody, it was here.’

‘Nice enough area,’ he said. ‘I remember coming here when you were a kid. There was a shop. For your models.’ I used to build Airfix models. A Sopwith Camel with my grandfather, who saw them during the war. Glue on my fingers, and I would peel it off in what felt like sheets. My father watching us, somehow envious of the relationship I had with him. I didn’t know who he was more jealous of. ‘How long’s this line been open, then?’

‘A year or so,’ I replied. He nodded. Information, not good or bad; just useful. ‘I loved him,’ I said. My father didn’t blink.

A pause, as pregnant as any I have ever experienced.

‘It’s different,’ he finally said. ‘Than what you expect.’

‘What is?’

‘Where you’re going.’ He moved to stare out of the window, pushing his face to the glass so that he could see along the track as we followed a bend.

‘Did you have this?’

‘Everybody has this.’

‘So who was at yours?’ I felt petulant. As if, if I kept him talking, maybe I could stay alive for longer. Maybe I could prolong the inevitable; the succumbing.

‘Oh, you know. Your Uncle Jackie, he was there. My friends. Some of the boys from the Rose.’ He took his hat off. His hair a fine dusting. ‘Your grandfather.’

‘What did he say to you?’

He examined the insides of his hat. All the secrets of life, in there. ‘He said that he didn’t care what we’d never spoken about. He said that it didn’t matter, in the end.’ He stood up. I distinctly remember it: his standing as punctuation, perfectly timed with the train’s arrival; the slowing, the coasting, towards the airport’s station. ‘That’s what I would say, Gregory. I’ve read your books. I like to think that I know the measure of you.’ The train stopped in a tunnel, briefly. In the dark, waiting for a platform; for an ending. Good to know that some things never change. ‘We should go,’ he said.

‘I don’t know how I feel,’ I told him.

‘I don’t think you *should* know.’

I followed him, off the train, and to the platform. Through the windows, I could see something ill-defined: a person, a man, left on the train. Sitting very still in his seat, waiting to be found. And when that body was found, it would cause a delay. I felt guilty then, in that British way that we feel guilt for our actions altering the lives of those we don’t know; but then the trains would run to schedule again, and all would be well.

Alex would be called to identify, because there was only really one number in the body’s telephone that mattered; and he would stand back, hand over mouth. Surprised, but not surprised. He would say that I was a friend of his, I’m sure.

It didn’t matter.

One day, he would die: and he would have his own parade. His own things left unsaid; his own regrets.

I wondered if I would be called upon to visit him; and if I would, then, refuse.

My father’s stride, through the station, towards the exit. I watched him, slightly behind. I felt myself younger, then; in my twenties. Scared, afraid. My hands in my pockets.

He turned to look at me. ‘There he is,’ he said, nodding. His thin mouth a satisfied smile. ‘There he is.’ He reached his hand out for me, and, ‘Come with me.’

I slipped mine – so young again, the knuckles smooth, taut – into his; and I succumbed, to a mutual whatever.

DISTRICT Blackfriars Matthew Plampin

4 January 1892

The president arrived in the lobby at a brisk pace, his boot heels clacking down the marble staircase. He was exactly as he'd been described: tall and uncommonly thin, about sixty years old, with a broad forehead and a silvery, scrupulously neat beard. His suit was black, cut close and worn with a frilled dress shirt, an eccentric touch that somehow increased the severity of the overall effect. The clerk at the desk – who'd been eyeing Merrill from time to time, as if suspecting that he might try to pocket an inkwell – was off his stool immediately, retrieving coats and hats from a small chamber beside the doors. Merrill rose to his feet, doing his best to appear alert and useful. Uncle Bob, descending a few feet behind the president, gave him a weary look.

'This is James Merrill, Mr Leyland,' he said. 'My nephew.'

The clerk helped the president into a black overcoat, which was buttoned up to the neck, and then handed over a spotless black topper. After fitting this carefully on his head, the president turned towards Merrill for a momentary appraisal. There was an odd blankness about his eyes, and when he spoke his voice was devoid of interest.

'He dresses well.'

Uncle Bob accepted his own coat and shrugged it on. 'Dressing,' he replied, 'Merrill can do.'

Before joining the National Telephone Company Uncle Bob had been an officer of infantry, ranking somewhere in the middle, and you could see it in him now – that deep-dyed regard for hierarchy that soldiers were prone to have. Attending on this Mr Leyland, he was every inch the loyal lieutenant, moving aside smartly as the president made for the doors. Only then did Merrill realize that someone else had come down with them, another junior like himself; this man was older, though, thirty-five at least, blond-whiskered and bordering upon portliness.

'I am Mr Carlens,' he said, skirting the desk to fetch a grey coat and bowler. 'Mr Leyland's private secretary.'

Was that condescension in Mr Carlens' expression – a shade of scorn, even? Merrill could hardly blame him if it was. His situation was plain enough, there for anyone to divine: that stale story of hapless youth, surrendered to an upstanding family elder for correction and supplied with an unearned career in business for which he was proving markedly ill-suited. Merrill wasn't at all proud of this. There were days, in truth, when he could scarcely bear the sight of his own reflection.

The two juniors went out into the dull January evening. Uncle Bob had been summoned to Leyland's office in the City only an hour or so before, to escort him back to the telephone company's premises on Temple Lane. No cab was being called, however, nor was there any sign of the grand private carriage that the president was said to keep on hand both day and night. Merrill saw that Leyland and Uncle Bob had turned to the left, and were following the crowds that tramped down towards Cannon Street.

'Are we not—' he began. 'Forgive me, Mr Carlens, but isn't there a—'

'Mr Leyland wishes to take the underground.'

Merrill managed to contain his disbelief – merely to nod, as an unquestioning subordinate should do. Frederick Richards Leyland was, without doubt or exception, the richest man in England. Some at the telephone company claimed that by the end of that year he would be the richest man alive. He had millions in the bank. Carriages and country houses. A Kensington mansion in which the finest modern paintings were displayed like stamps in an album.

'This surprises you,' Carlens observed.

They started out in pursuit of their employers. Merrill watched the president's pristine topper shimmer as it passed beneath a street lamp. 'I haven't been with the company very long, Mr Carlens. There is much I do not—'

'It is true that Mr Leyland is averse to crowds, generally speaking.' The private secretary lowered his voice; Merrill sensed that he relished his position at the president's side and the insights it permitted. 'There are a good number who conduct their business hereabouts whom he would not care to meet. Who might well seize upon the chance to speak with him.' Carlens surveyed the hundreds streaming around them: this world of men, emptying out at the day's end, marching off to stations and omnibus stands. 'The chances are slight, of course – but still, eyes peeled, eh?'

Cannon Street was broad and busy, bending away to the right; beyond the buildings was a clipped view of St Paul's, the half-dome almost lost in the dark, starless sky. Directly ahead, among the bright shop fronts, a steady procession of people was disappearing between a stationer's and an optician's, down a tiled stairway into the underground. Merrill knew the District line with regrettable intimacy. It was an unchanging fact of his existence, ridden from Earl's Court to Temple and back again: an hour eaten out of each and every day. Routine had numbed him to the point where he didn't usually notice how it was. That evening, though, as he left the street and hurried onto the steps, he saw it as the president must surely be seeing it. The cracked and grubby tiles. The cement floor, littered with flattened cigarette ends and scraps of paper. And the blasted *smoke*, that gritty, metallic smell, tobacco and coal intermingled, hazing the air and making the subterranean ticket hall yet dingier.

The president and Uncle Bob had stopped in the middle of this low-ceilinged atrium, a pair of ill-matched rocks lodged in the ceaseless flow of commuters. Uncle Bob, clearly uncomfortable, was tugging at his grizzled moustache. Leyland was taking in his surroundings with evident distaste, coughing genteelly in the muddy atmosphere.

'Tickets, Merrill,' said Uncle Bob, as if this was obvious and really should have been guessed. 'First class, back to Temple.'

Chastened, Merrill went to join the queue. Five windows were open at the office, and perhaps two hundred people presently trying to pay. He could only choose a line and stand in it. Around him was a dense, lulling murmur, several dozen shifting conversations, their words blurring together. His thoughts wandered to a common in high summer, near a friend's house at Richmond; to Emily in her blouse and boater, and that song they'd all sung together: *Within the musk-rose bower, I watch, pale flower of love, for thee ...*

'Louse!' someone shouted.

Merrill turned sharply to see a man, a perfectly ordinary-looking man in a blue sack coat, standing up close before the president and yelling in his face.

'Louse,' he repeated. 'Villain – wrecker!'

A companion was trying to restrain him. Carlens strode forward to assist, planting a hand on the shouting fellow's chest and gesticulating angrily, ordering him away. Uncle Bob was colouring, huffing something under his breath, outraged on their master's behalf – for Leyland himself seemed entirely unmoved. He was looking across the concourse as if this man in the blue sack coat simply didn't exist. Seeing he would get no response, the assailant barked 'wrecker' for a second time, and asked the president loudly if he understood at all what he had done, what he had destroyed; and then he stalked off furiously towards the street.

Merrill returned his gaze to the ticket office. Not *that* slight a chance then, Mr Carlens! he thought. He wondered what lay behind this little confrontation. There was much talk about Frederick Leyland over at Temple Lane. President of the National Telephone Company, Merrill had learned, was but one of his positions. Leyland was also a major figure in electricity, having a sizeable stake in Edison, and a ship-broker with a huge transatlantic fleet. This was the origin of his wealth, in fact, numbering upward of thirty steamers. The very idea of it boggled the mind. It was said that his ambition knew no boundary or scruple – that the shipping company up in Liverpool had been

won through the betrayal of his mentor, and he had conducted himself ever since with absolute ruthlessness, leaving a trail of crushed competitors in his wake. And every company director bested in negotiations and lawyerly manoeuvrings had an operation behind him – sales merchants and accountants and clerks, each with his wife, his infants, his poorly parents. A lot of livelihoods. A lot of lives.

The tickets were purchased distractedly, Merrill almost forgetting to buy first class. It was hardly his habit. Uncle Bob was talking with determination about some subject or other, in order to dispel any lingering unpleasantness. The four men started down the central staircase to the platforms. Merrill was regarding Leyland more closely than ever, studying the precise arrangement of the hair above his collar, which had the look of having been trimmed that same morning. A warm, dirty wind gusted up to meet them. The president coughed once more, against his hand.

‘Already, Colonel,’ he remarked to Uncle Bob in his detached manner, ‘I believe you can see quite clearly where the problem lies.’

They were attracting notice. You couldn’t fail to spot it; Leyland was being recognized. Merrill recalled the more salacious rumours that bubbled through the Temple Lane offices – rumours that claimed it was not merely companies their president had wrecked. This was a man with a great appetite for women, as brimming with lust as he was empty of passion, and with the means to make any obstacle to his desires vanish; and unburdened, furthermore, by any guilt or self-reflection upon the matter.

‘He doesn’t care who knows about his activities,’ one especially talkative junior surveyor had confided, equal parts scandalized and impressed, over an after-hours mug of porter. ‘It doesn’t trouble him a jot.’

Such behaviour, the surveyor had continued, had naturally added to the number of Leyland’s foes. There had been a wife at one point, a beautiful woman, well-liked and decent, who was driven out in the coldest, cruellest fashion. Leyland’s essential nature was one that could not help but repel. Over the years he had suffered vicious ruptures with everyone from his doctor to his decorator.

‘His *decorator*?’

‘That was a while ago now. A dreadful to-do. The plan for his dining room went awry, you see, and they disagreed over the bill. Yankee fellow it was, a Mr Whistler. Friend of the wife’s as well. It’s said that Leyland threatened to take him out and whip him in the street.’

Merrill followed art. It was one of the reasons for his family’s concern. ‘You mean *James* Whistler, the artist?’ he’d asked. ‘The painter of nocturnes, who has a show coming at the Goupil Gallery?’

This had met only with a shrug.

The party headed onto the westbound platform. It was filled with City men, standing alone mostly, buried in their newspapers or simply staring at their shoes. The air was yet more turbid than in the concourse. Spherical lamps hung at intervals along the tiled ceiling, but the smoke soaked up their light, obscuring them to the point where the furthest were reduced to fogged, yellowish smears. Weaving between the other passengers, Leyland led them beneath the large, plain clock that hung at the platform’s midpoint. Then he went to the edge and beckoned for Uncle Bob to join him. They began pointing down at the tracks, conversing in low, purposeful tones.

Carlens stayed in the middle of the platform, monitoring those nearby – a couple of whom were directing sidelong looks at the president.

Merrill stood next to him. ‘Train shouldn’t be more than a minute or two.’

The private secretary wasn’t listening. ‘You see now,’ he said, nodding towards Leyland, ‘what this is about.’

Merrill kept quiet.

‘Electricity,’ Carlens enlarged. ‘Or rather *electrification*. Mr Leyland is always thinking of the future. You know of his share in the Edison company? He sees this line being powered that way,

and lit that way too. He sees telephones connecting the stations – connecting the platforms and the offices. Vast improvements, Mr Merrill. Vast indeed.’

Merrill crossed his arms, frowning slightly as if in contemplation. He was impressed, rather to his annoyance, and stung by a sudden and profound sense of inadequacy. He simply could not think in these terms. His grand idea, the sum of his life’s ambition, was that he might write for the stage – and that was receding into the distance at a rate of knots. Now he sought chiefly to keep his damned family at bay, and escape the censure of Uncle Bob. This long-limbed black-clad rake, so sinister and ridiculous, had plainly wrought more than his share of harm – but he had *vision*. It was the only word. Leyland saw the shape of things to come, and the practical changes that would affect the progress of cities. Of entire nations.

‘There’s gold down here,’ Carlens went on, satisfied by Merrill’s reaction, ‘in these wretched tunnels. Mr Leyland perceives it clearly. A rich seam of it. He changed shipping, you know, changed it for good, and now he’ll change the underground. Make his fortune all over again, I shouldn’t wonder.’

‘And the boon for London will be incalculable,’ Merrill added. ‘I mean to say, Mr Leyland will – well, he will be doing the people of this city an enormous service.’

Carlens was eyeing him with a certain pity, as if noting a lack. He inclined his grey bowler in acknowledgement. ‘Quite so.’

A high-pitched whistle sounded off to the right, and light broke around a corner of the tunnel. A few seconds later the squat, sooty locomotive heaved itself into the station, sending banks of smoke and steam rolling through the still mistiness of the platform. Its wheezing chugs and the prolonged whine of its brakes made any further conversation impossible. Leyland and Uncle Bob stepped back, for a moment reduced to silhouettes; then Uncle Bob went after one of the leading carriages, following it a few yards along the platform before opening a door for the president. As the juniors hurried up behind them, Merrill noticed the ‘1’s stencilled on the carriage’s other doors: first class. There was less competition for seats here, most of those out on the platform making for the other, inferior sections of the train. They had a compartment to themselves – unheard of in second or third class at this time on a Monday. Merrill embarked last and took a place on the left, directly inside, facing Carlens. The furnishings, he noticed, were a little fresher and better made; the upholstered bench seats a few inches further apart. The smell was the same, though: tobacco ash and gas, and the ever-present smoke. He reached over to close the door.

There was a shout from the platform guard and the blast of a pea whistle, and the underground train pulled from the station. Once they were out in the tunnel, Uncle Bob asked Leyland about the City and South London Railway, one of the new, deep-running lines, which had been using electric traction locomotives for over a year. Leyland was disdainful. It was a ramshackle operation, he replied, unreliable and poorly implemented. The generators barely provided sufficient power for the engines – there was nothing left for lighting or—

This bout of coughing seemed to catch him unawares. It sounded different, constricted, as if his throat was tightening. The carriage swayed upon the track; the single gas fitting hissed softly above them. Merrill looked away into the inky sheen of the window, just as the train arrived at Mansion House. The platform here was as busy as the one at Cannon Street. Two well-fed managerial types advanced on their compartment. Carlens held the handle, keeping them out, waving them on with his other hand. The gentlemen persisted, but the private secretary held firm. Eventually the whistle blew, and with shakes of the head they went to board elsewhere.

‘Are you well, sir?’ asked Uncle Bob.

‘Quite well,’ Leyland answered hoarsely, between coughs. ‘It will pass.’

The train continued westwards. Recovering himself, the president addressed Uncle Bob, sketching the outlines of a new concern that would be able to take full advantage of this opportunity he had detected. Merrill gathered that it would be founded on the Edison company, which would be bought out, gulped down whole, much as Leyland had done with his shipping firm in Liverpool.

‘Edison can be improved,’ he said. ‘Expanded. I’m convinced of that. This underground railway will only grow, Colonel, and every last foot of it will require electrification.’

Uncle Bob was enthusiastic. With Leyland presiding, he said, it would surely work; as with so much in business, the vital elements would be leadership and sheer force of will, and the president possessed both of these in abundance. On and on he went. Merrill began to loathe him a little for his sycophancy.

Leyland made a sound, as if in interjection, raising one of his bony hands suddenly from his lap. Uncle Bob came to an obedient halt. They all waited patiently to see what comment or insight he might offer.

Nothing came. The raised hand began to tremble, Leyland’s strange, blank eyes popping wide. Merrill glanced over at Uncle Bob. He was sitting forward, hands on his knees like Ingres’ *Monsieur Bertin*, his ruddy face hidden in the shadow of his hat brim – plainly concerned, yet reluctant to act in case this prompted his master’s ire. Leyland spoke very faintly; a squeal of steel from somewhere below drowned out his voice.

‘Pardon me, Mr Leyland?’ said Uncle Bob. ‘What was that, sir?’

‘I can’t breathe,’ Leyland whispered.

Uncle Bob was off his seat at once, propriety and reserve forgotten, reaching for the president’s neck – then exclaiming in frustration, tearing the gloves from his hands, unbuttoning Leyland’s overcoat down to the middle of his chest. Carlens leapt to his feet, and Merrill as well, their hats bumping against the compartment roof, although there was nothing at all that either could do. Beyond Uncle Bob’s shoulder, Merrill could see the president pulling feebly at the frills that lined his shirt front, attempting to undo his collar.

Leyland managed to inhale, gasping like a man surfacing after a deep dive. He took four more heaving breaths, and nodded to Uncle Bob to indicate respite. The rest of them relaxed a fraction, and were starting to return to their seats when as one they realized that the president was tipping slowly to the side, towards the window. Carlens lunged in to support him. Leyland’s head lolled horribly, the topper falling to the floor. Even in the compartment’s weak gaslight Merrill could see that he was mortally pale.

‘What is this?’ asked Carlens. The private secretary’s cool urbanity was gone; he sounded fearful. ‘Could it – could it be poison?’

Uncle Bob was looking hard across the carriage, to where the lights of the next station were just coming into view. ‘His heart,’ he said, as the train left the tunnel. ‘I’ve seen it before.’

Elbowing Merrill aside, he went to the door, wrenched down the window and shouted for assistance, his head passing mere inches from the startled crowd that lined the platform. The train shook to a halt. A noise came from the president, a tiny croak, along with the slightest twitching motion. Uncle Bob went back to him. Carlens stepped away and sat opposite. Merrill stood fixed in place, able only to stare.

‘Merrill,’ Uncle Bob snapped. He hesitated, then softened his tone. ‘James. Come here, lad. Help me lift him out.’

Leyland was heavy despite his leanness. Merrill stood behind, his arms around the millionaire’s frilled chest, the fellow’s shoulder-blades jutting into his thighs. It took a good deal of concentration to edge him through the doorway without knocking his head, which without its topper seemed dreadfully vulnerable and exposed. At the same time, however, Merrill knew that his efforts were merely for show, for there could be little doubt that this was no fainting fit or fleeting ailment. Frederick Leyland was at the point of death, if he had not passed it already. He had no more breath or movement in him.

A station guard was there to meet them, drawn over by Uncle Bob’s bellows. Behind him, a number of other passengers stood in a loose semicircle, all craning necks and questioning eyes. Sight of the president stopped the guard mid-query; he turned and attempted to contain the gathering crowd. This great giant of British business was laid there on the underground platform, parallel to the

train, as respectfully as they could manage. Uncle Bob set down the legs, then came to help Merrill with the chest and head. Carlens was standing half out of the carriage, his posture slack, robbed of purpose; the black topper, rather dusty now, hung limply in his hands.

The crowd was growing steadily – *a fellow lying dead*, people were saying, *right there by the train!* Merrill moved back. Before long he heard Leyland's name, a shiver of recognition passing through the station, further increasing the interest. They were at Blackfriars. The station was in an open trench, only one level below the street. Its platforms were under cover, but above the trains was the evening sky; the tops of buildings, touched with gaslight; and St Paul's again, from the other side, glimpsed through the rising steam.

Someone was praying. Uncle Bob knelt by the body to put his ear to the president's breastbone, but heard nothing. Merrill put his hands in his pockets, not knowing what else to do with them. He looked off to the platform's end and found himself imagining a multitude – every enemy, living and dead, that Leyland had acquired during the course of his extraordinary, cold-hearted existence, filing down the double staircase. This ethereal company walked in procession between the wrought-iron pillars and drifting clouds of coal smoke, joining the circle pressing in around the dead man. Few showed any sign of grief. Indeed, most were well satisfied, and a few visibly glad; others positively frothed with fury, mouthing curses, ready to spit on the hated figure where it lay. There were the shipping partners from Liverpool, whom Leyland had knifed in the back; the ruined competitors, the discarded mistresses, the man in the blue sack coat from Cannon Street station; the unwanted wife standing quietly dignified, her face behind a veil; even the artist Whistler, who Merrill had once seen caricatured in *Vanity Fair* – a dapper little Yankee with a monocle and a bamboo cane, peering over with grim curiosity.

'James,' said Uncle Bob. 'James, we need to fetch a doctor.'

Merrill blinked; the vision was dispelled. He stared down at the black legs, sticking out so rigidly. The disquieting whiteness of the face. 'A doctor,' he repeated.

'An examination must be made,' Uncle Bob explained, his voice hushed and urgent. 'A declaration of death. Before we can have him removed from this place.' He pointed towards the exit. 'Quickly, boy. *Go*.'

The road outside the station ran between Ludgate Circus and the mouth of Blackfriars Bridge, and was as clogged with people and traffic as any in London. It was bitterly cold as well, a wintry breeze whipping in from the river. Merrill emerged from the concourse and began to work his way onto the packed pavement. He hadn't the faintest idea where a doctor might be found in Blackfriars at that hour. Out there in the rawness of the open air, however, the last of the underground's grimy heat leaving his clothes, he felt only relief. He looked around him a little dizzily, trying to get his bearings; then he straightened his hat and started off into the city.

CIRCLE

Joanna Cannon

Some people read on the underground. Others push buttons on telephones. I've always been more of a thinker. I'm not one for novels, and I only have a mobile telephone because someone in a shop once talked me into it. Cyril was with me and he went right along with the idea.

'It'll be good for emergencies, Margaret,' he said. 'Stop you from feeling alone.'

Except none of the emergencies I've encountered since has ever benefited from the presence of a telephone, and in all honesty I'm not sure I will ever feel alone again.

There are lots of us on tube trains – the thinkers. If you look hard enough, you can spot us amongst the paperbacks and the newspapers, and the quiet conversation of strangers. We stare at the floor, losing our thoughts in the clutter of other people's feet. We hide our worries in the tired pattern of the seats. We wrap our feelings along the brightly coloured handrails. Nothing is demanded of you on the underground except to wait and stare, suspended in time and place, as life transfers you from one situation to the next. I have always thought a journey was the perfect opportunity to reflect. To think about what comes next. To wait for God to make a decision about why you're there, I suppose.

I enjoy all the different underground services, but the Circle line has always been my favourite. More so now. There's a strange comfort in circles. A reassurance. Although the Circle line isn't a circle any more, of course. A tadpole, Cyril used to call it. 'Look at its little tail,' he'd say and laugh. Gone are the days when you could rotate around the bowels of London uninterrupted. Now, we are all tipped out at Edgware Road and forced to make a decision about ourselves.

Obviously, my decision is very easy.

I just catch the next train and travel all the way back again.

Everything began just after Cyril died. At least, I think it did. It might have been going on for the longest time before then and I didn't notice. We knew Cyril was going to pass away. The consultant told us several times, and in no uncertain terms. *Do you understand what I'm telling you?* he'd say, after every third sentence. *Yes, yes,* we'd say, *we understand.* Perhaps we didn't seem distressed enough. Not quite the right amount of sorrow. I hadn't realized there were guidelines on how to behave when someone is told they are dying, but clearly, we had fallen outside their parameters. Getting upset shrinks a person though, doesn't it? Because once you allow the misery to escape, it takes with it your resolution and your determination and your resilience, and it feeds them all to your problem. Until the problem grows big and fat, and you are left behind, emptied and almost disappeared. Much better to remain logical. To hold onto your strength.

'Everyone dies,' Cyril said, on the journey back from the hospital. 'It's not as though it comes as a surprise, is it? We've known it would happen since the day we were born.'

We were walking home from the tube station, along avenues the estate agent had once described as 'leafy', but which were now unburdened of their charm by an early December evening. Cyril was wearing his old brown lace-ups. Shoes I had begged him to replace for the past two years. I studied them as he walked in front of me along the pavement, and I said to myself, 'He'll never agree to replace them now, will he?' The thought pierced my mind so suddenly, and so deeply, that for a few moments I couldn't remember how to breathe. It's not the big thing that tears you apart, is it? It's all the smaller things that gather at its edges.

'We'll need to go through the box files,' he said. 'Sort out any paperwork.'

'Yes,' I said, 'we will.'

'Tie up any loose ends.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Loose ends.'

I studied his silhouette in a smudge of orange street light. The angle of his trilby. The faint stoop of his shoulders. The way he crooked his left arm ever so slightly, as though he was always waiting for me to join him. I stared at all these things and as I stared, I wondered how long they would remain firm in my memory, and how long it would be before I had to start imagining them instead.

‘And of course, we need to make a decision about Jessica.’

He carried on walking as he said the words, sending them back over his shoulder in the casual way one might talk about the weather.

I didn’t reply.

Whenever I travel on the underground, the thing that fascinates me most, is below my feet and above my head, countless other people are all doing exactly the same thing, yet each of us is completely unaware of the others’ existence. All those ordinary lives held together in the darkness. A puzzle of people. People whose lives are inexorably linked to our own, yet who will always remain invisible to us. I think about them, as I travel the Circle line all day. I search, past the smeared windows coated in the breath of strangers, past the white reflection of my own staring, and I wonder who is out there in the darkness, staring back. Just out of reach.

There’s a need for vigilance at the stations, though, so I can’t daydream too much. Wood Lane, Latimer Road, Ladbroke Road, Westbourne Park. I could recite them before I go to sleep, like a small prayer. I never used to notice the names when I was a commuter. I would drift from one station to the next without a second thought, relying on the sway of the carriage and some strange, deep-rooted sense of place to know when I should stand and begin making my way through the wall of people towards the doors. Now I follow the map. Now I silently mouth the place names along with the electronic voice. Since Cyril died, I have the quickened eyes of a tourist.

The consultant was wary of a time frame, but in the end, his caution was pinpoint. Six months. Almost to the week. Those were a strange six months, because when Cyril first became ill, we spent all our time searching for encouragement. Each evening, we sifted through the events of the day to feed our optimism. Archaeologists of hope. Once we knew he was dying, the treasure hunt was over. We were on a road of inevitability, and no matter how attractive we tried to make the landscape, the certainty of our path made each day seem less fruitful. More of an obligation to get to the other side. It’s at times like those you realize it’s only really hope that glues everything else together.

As luck would have it, Cyril was reasonably well until the final two weeks. There were days so mundane, we celebrated in the reassurance of their ordinariness. The comfort of small routines, the absence of hospital appointments and doctors who had run out of ideas, the small seed of absurdity that perhaps they had got it all wrong. They hadn’t, of course. The drawer spilling with medication told us that. The cheery ‘hello’ of the Macmillan nurse. Ridiculous things like the best before dates on tins of soup and the day the daffodils finally died away. We tiptoed around the illness for fear it would waken at the sound of our voices and grow larger. On occasion, though, it needed to be mentioned, even if it was indirectly.

‘You’ll remember where we keep the spare fuses,’ he said.

‘I will,’ I replied.

‘And that back door always starts sticking when the weather changes. You just need to push it with your foot. Right at the bottom.’

‘I know, Cyril,’ I said. ‘I know.’

We sorted out the box files. Cyril spent entire mornings at the dining room table, peering over the top of his glasses at pieces of paper, making a decision about each one and putting them all into piles. Keep. Throw Away. Undecided. It felt as though he was going on annual leave, temporarily handing over custody and giving me an opportunity to be solely in charge of our lives for a short while. Except it wouldn’t be our lives any more. It would just be mine.

After a few weeks, he finally reached the bottom of the last file. The only things remaining were errant paperclips and receipts so faded, no one would ever know what had been received. It was only at that point he turned to me, took off his glasses and placed them very carefully on the tablecloth.

‘We need to tell Jessica,’ he said.

I straightened the piles of Keep, Throw Away, Undecided. I gathered up the paperclips. I stared out of the patio doors into the watercolour of a spring lunchtime.

‘I don’t think there’s any need to tell her,’ I said. ‘Why does she even have to know?’

Cyril pinched at the bridge of his nose, where his spectacles had left the dent of a morning’s work. ‘She’ll wonder where I am, Margaret.’

‘I’ll tell her you’ve gone away,’ I said.

Cyril shook his head very slightly.

‘I’ll tell her you’ve left me, then. That’s it.’ I put the paperclips back into a box file. ‘That should do the trick.’

Cyril gave a very large sigh. ‘She needs to know the truth, Margaret. She’s not stupid.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘No, she’s not stupid.’

Feeble-minded. That was the term they used about Jessica. I was a small child, but I still remember it. Not stupid or thick or backward, but *feeble-minded*. Perhaps in an attempt to make the whole thing sound more elegant. No one’s fault. One of those things.

My mother said she always knew Jessica was different as soon as she was born.

‘Jessica wasn’t like you, Margaret,’ she would tell me. ‘You were the only baby I had to go by, but I knew there was something wrong, right from the start.’

Jessica was fractious, restless, loud. She refused to be comforted. She wouldn’t feed. She wouldn’t sleep. She screamed all day and all night. I would lie in bed, fingers pressed into my ears, trying to remember a time when she didn’t exist. There didn’t seem to be a week when Jessica hadn’t succumbed to one infection or another, when she wasn’t struggling to swallow, when she wasn’t filled with rage.

My parents tried everything. A carousel of specialists in distant rooms. My mother, thick with misery. My father, fingertips barely touching the edges of reason. I don’t remember much of the conversations, but I do remember one doctor smiling at my parents across the width of a desk, and saying, ‘Why not have another baby? This one really isn’t going to bring you very much joy.’

Keep. Throw away. Undecided.

Jessica couldn’t speak, but she understood. As she grew, she learned other ways to communicate. Kicks. Bites. Scratches. It would take my mother hours to dress her each morning as I watched from a doorway. There were days my mother painted her face in coats of bright optimism, and other days when she would curl up in the corner of the room and have to be coaxed back into the world again by my father.

When Jessica was five, it was decided she was uneducable. Disabled of the mind. She couldn’t be sent to school, and so the education authority thought she should be put into an institution instead. The health authority agreed. My parents, who looked after Jessica every waking minute of her life, and who were the greatest authority of all, were never listened to.

‘We fought to keep her at home,’ my mother said for years afterwards. ‘We fought as hard as we could.’

I never really knew if she was telling me, or telling some past, long-forgotten version of herself.

Jessica was sent away. It was for the best. Everything was for the best. My parents said it to each other. People said it to my parents. Doctors. Friends. Strangers in the street. *For the best* became attached to every sentence, like a quietening balm. A balm that soothes but never heals.

The first place was a sprawl of Victorian melancholy in a far corner of Essex. We travelled there, each Sunday. Whilst everyone else went to church, my parents went to worship at an altar of their own self-loathing. Getting there and back took the best part of a day, and I would stare through

the smeared windows of train carriages and watch London ebb and flow, until it was replaced by farms and fields, and the scatter of nameless villages. St Catherine's, it said at the gate. Children's Home for the Mentally Defective. As though all the children inside were small pieces of damaged machinery.

The corridors were lengthy and yellowed. The doors were all shut. Staff skimmed the edges of distant hallways, but we never saw any other children. You could hear them, though. Echoing around the fancy cornices and the giant cast-iron fireplaces, the smothered sound of unquiet minds. Jessica waited for us in a panelled room. My sister, buttoned into someone else's clothes, because no one wore their own things at St Catherine's. There was a giant cupboard at the far end of each dormitory, and what the staff decided to dress you in was pot luck. All the beautiful outfits my mother had made were walking around on someone else. The four of us sat in a semicircle of matching high-back chairs and stared at each other. My mother would try to hug Jessica. Jessica would squirm away. Then the three of us would leave. It felt like a trip to the Natural History Museum. As though we had been to look at an exhibition no one else knew anything about.

They make documentaries about these places now. Cyril and I watched one. There was a presenter standing in a derelict room, waving his hands around and shouting about asylums. Black and white photographs. The stutter of an old film reel. All those broken lives, all those unheard stories. Except this wasn't just a story. This was my sister.

Cyril was right.

Jessica isn't stupid.

There's little point in starting my day now until the rush hour is over, as London is held static in a charge of elbows and frustration. Cyril and I used to be in the middle of that. We spent years pressed into endless carriages, breathing into the material of strangers' overcoats, standing on the right, living our lives behind yellow lines.

I usually set off from home around ten thirty. That way I can go about my business in peace. I take a packed lunch, because it can get quite expensive going to those little kiosks at the stations. I used to take my knitting, just to pass the time, but I quickly realized you need to have your wits about you to have any chance of success. It's easy to miss someone in a crowded carriage, and you can spend the rest of the day trying to locate them again. I tend to look at people's feet if I've a moment to spare, because it's amazing what you can learn about someone just from their shoes. I try to guess the kind of person they belong to, and when I look up, nine times out of ten I'm right.

The only time I allow myself to daydream, is when we're beneath Hammersmith. I know Jessica is up there somewhere. She has moved many times since the days of St Catherine's. Sheltered. Assisted. Lodge. House. Home. Care. The same situation wrapped up in different words. Victorian panels were swapped for primary coloured walls. High-back chairs for activity rooms and sensory play. She was given a physiotherapist, a nutritionist, an occupational therapist. She even has a speech therapist who managed to find a voice no one had ever heard before. Jessica uses this voice sparingly, words chosen with care and usually released from her mouth one by one. In that way, I think she is probably wiser than the lot of us. Wherever she's lived, though, it's always been the same. She is forever out of sight. In the far corner of hospital grounds, or behind towering hedges, shuttered windows, closed blinds. Hidden away where no one else can see. It was the thing Cyril remarked upon the first time he met her. My parents were long gone, and I had been left to make the pilgrimage alone each Sunday, until Cyril volunteered to go with me.

'Where is it then?' he said.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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