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The Obituary Writer

Written by Lauren St John

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The
Obituary Writer

Lauren St John



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I

The thing he remembered afterwards was that the clock was changing to thirteen as he rushed onto the platform. The rear lights of the train he should have been on – so easily could have been on – were slipping round the bend with a wiggle and the station was briefly empty, so that he was momentarily alone with a businessman in a creaseless pink shirt, pinstriped suit and shoes that offered a mirror to the sullen sky.

That was another thing that stuck in his mind: the man's improbably perfect attire, perhaps because of the later contrast.

Nick felt disproportionately annoyed at having missed the train. It didn't bother him that he was late, because when it came right down to it the dead were already dead and not about to go anywhere. Nor was he concerned about his deadline, because he'd been scrambling to come up with first-edition copy for nearly half of his thirty-eight years and he'd never failed yet.

Mainly he was irritated because he considered time spent waiting for trains, planes and buses to be time subtracted from life. Minus time. Sure it was possible to make use of it by reading up on the machinations of politicians, or communicating electronically or digitally in an unhealthy number of ways. You could write out your grocery list, ponder quantum physics, or rue the state of your relationship. But you couldn't do anything real. You were just trapped in an urban vacuum, forced to inhale London's rich array of airborne pollutants and watch soot-streaked rats eat garbage off the railway tracks, when you could be in the civilised comfort of your own home making love to a beautiful woman, writing the first chapter of a bestseller, or reading a few pages of Dickens.

The fact that he seldom did the third thing, had never done the second, and did not do the first nearly often enough, and would, had he stayed in his apartment for an extra twenty-one minutes that

morning, have frittered it away searching for a lost sock or beating himself up about the novel he'd spent the last eight years intending to write, wasn't the point. The point, Nick told himself, was that it was twenty-one minutes shaved off your lifespan. That was why he resented waiting now.

A lazy flow of passengers refilled the platform at Greenwich station, like the sea spilling in at low tide. There was the usual horde of students, tourists and City-bound commuters, scattered according to the customs of their home nations, their value on personal space. The newer tourists and immigrants were the only ones speaking. Nick watched them sometimes to see how long it was before they nudged each other and lapsed into the voluntary hush observed by everyone else. He was always shocked at how quickly people, who in their own countries filled any public area with their colourful, voluble, sociable chatter, felt compelled, courtesy of a few frozen stares, to join the library quiet of London's transport network.

Naturally, the people who did rebel were the very last ones you wanted to hear from. Most recently, they seemed to be pickpockets taking time off to play the accordion.

At 9.34 the long-delayed next train arrived in an amplified screech of metal. The silent herd surged forward and arranged themselves in a packed arc around each door, blocking the exit of the new arrivals. The selfishness inherent in this action added to Nick's irritation. He and the businessman hung back together, even though Nick had a deadline and the other man appeared to be on his way to a meeting of vital import. His scrubbed, flushed face was focused and set. There was a mutual *tsk tsk* in their body language, a tacit understanding that they alone grasped the futility of standing in front of outgoing passengers in the interests of gaining a split second's advantage in the race for the best seats.

A high-pitched beeping indicated that the train was about to depart. The businessman seized his chance to spring on-board. Conscious of his judgements on others, Nick hesitated in an exaggerated show of politeness. In that instant the doors slammed shut.

'Hey!' he yelled at the distant driver, but the businessman had shoved his briefcase into the vanishing gap and was hanging onto the door's rubber edge. Nick wrenched it open a little wider and jumped in.

'Thanks. That was good of you.'

As he spoke, the train jerked forward and the man was forced to snatch at a handrail to keep his balance. He turned away without saying anything.

The last seat on the carriage was situated between a student reeking of dope and an obese, blank-faced woman with an oversized handbag. A static pounding issued from the student's headphones. His left knee jiggled up and down.

Nick did his best to tune the boy out. He'd awoken that morning with a plague of rats chewing at his nerve endings. Repeated checks of his diary had failed to explain why he was gripped by a feeling of foreboding, and it was not until he'd fed himself a breakfast of cornflakes and black coffee and Oliver a can of tuna that he'd given up worrying about it. By then he was already late.

Past Deptford, the world beyond the railway seemed hemmed in by the October sky, leached of colour. It went by in a monochrome strip. The train's passage was an overloud drum solo, drowning out nearly all attempts at conversation or thought. The carriage rolled violently along the steel snarl of tracks. Within minutes they'd be at London Bridge and there'd be another unseemly rush for the door.

Nick pushed past the jiggling student and made his way down the aisle. The businessman was in the final row. He was poring over a sheaf of papers. Among the ordered contents of his open briefcase was an apple. It was, Nick noted as he paused to steady himself, one of those vivid green ones, the kind that were always sour as hell, with chewy skins that got stuck between your teeth. In an ideal universe they'd have been reserved for horses. He was willing to bet that the businessman's wife handed him the fruit as he left for work each morning and that he never ate it and never told her he didn't either, because every apple would have been given and taken with love.

As he passed, the man glanced up and saw him staring. A sheepish smile smoothed his anxious face. Equally sheepish at being caught out, Nick grinned back.

Close to the door the floor bucked beneath his feet and he grabbed at a handrail to steady himself.

That's when the carriage corkscrewed off the tracks.

Time scrambled. The runaway train became a firework display of exploding electrics. The floor swapped places with the ceiling.

Nick felt as if his head had taken up residence in an active thundercloud. The roaring seconds stretched out interminably. His life didn't flash before his eyes, as he'd always imagined it would, but he panicked it might be over before he'd really lived. He wished he'd given more thought to God.

Then pain smashed like an axe into his brain.

Blackness.

A flickering light.

Blackness.

Light.

Nick's senses returned in a rush, letting in a terrible screaming. He had the feeling that a lot of time had passed, but could as easily have accepted it was a fraction of a second. His eyes opened to a war zone.

In the centre of the aisle lay a severed arm, its gold watch still intact. A sack of groceries had spilled and washing powder, pink with blood, was sprinkled throughout the carnage. A teenage girl's mouth was stuck open in a silent cry of anguish. Showers of glass were piled around the broken bodies, like crushed ice surrounding a butcher's display.

Nick hauled himself to his feet and stood reeling, trying to get it together to start helping people. Apart from a ballooning headache and a grazed knee showing through torn trousers, he appeared to be unharmed. It was impossible to take in.

He started towards the petrified girl, but a shivering feverishness overtook him.

Something was wrong. Something was so out of kilter that even amid the chaos the non-rightness of it communicated itself to him. He gripped the back of a seat for support.

What was it that didn't add up?

Then it came to him. The carriage was a bloody battlefield. Every inch of it was filled with people writhing, weeping, crawling, choking or dying.

And he was the only one standing.

Two days later, he was back at work.

‘Christ, Donaghue, are you planning to write your own obituary?’ cried Henry Stillman, his editor. ‘Get the hell out of here and go home to bed, or admit yourself to hospital or something. If you hang around here it’ll only rebound on me. I’ll have the insurance company on my back or acquire a reputation as a heartless slave driver.’

‘Not undeservedly, surely,’ Nick retorted.

He tossed his messenger bag onto his desk, hung his jacket over the back of the chair and began to sift through his post, throwing anything that came in a brown envelope into the wastepaper basket without looking at it.

The other envelopes came in a variety of friendly or attention-seeking shades. He recognised the handwriting on a couple. One was from the agents of an ageing pop star, a renowned lothario, who kept him updated on all career developments in anticipation of the singer’s expiry. Any day now Nick expected to receive a notice regretfully informing him that the singer had passed away in the act of love but that his forthcoming album was being hailed as an artistic triumph.

When Nick had joined *The Times*’s Letters and Obituary section five years earlier, after a decade as a freelance featurewriter, he’d found it macabre in the extreme that certain celebrities, politicians and business high-fliers were so preoccupied with their own legacy, with remaining famous beyond the grave, that they either sent in their own obituaries, to be added to the 5000 the paper kept on file, or routinely supplied new biographical details that might enliven an existing one.

‘Such is human vanity that a lot of people would be miffed if they died and their obituary didn’t appear in *The Times*,’ Phil Baker, the senior obit writer, had told him on his first day. ‘Even those who you’d

imagine could have reposed secure in the knowledge that a testament to their life's work would be required reading fret about it constantly.'

Phil was Nick's favourite person in journalism. He was old school, cut from the cloth of reporters made heroic by Hollywood movies like *All the President's Men*. He even dressed like them, immaculate to the last detail of his spruce white hair, starched shirts and tailored jackets and waistcoats. He had a droll, pragmatic, humane view of death and the dead, and twenty-seven years in the department had not dulled his passion for his subject. Or his sense of irony.

'An obit isn't meant to be a eulogy,' he'd once remarked. 'The idea is warts and all. At the same time you need to remember that it's about achievement rather than failure. I mean, every naval officer is ego-centric and bossy. That's how they get to where they are. War heroes are ghastly people when you get right down to it.'

Nick dropped the last of the brown envelopes into the bin, switched on his computer and swivelled in his chair to look around the office. In keeping with contemporary newspaper architecture it was open-plan, with lots of steel and glass. It had all the atmosphere of an airport departure lounge, right down to the malnourished potted plants.

It was only then he noticed that Henry was still poised in the door of his cubicle. Amy, the department secretary, had a chocolate bar suspended in mid-bite, and his friend was staring at him as if he'd just tested positive for rabies.

'Someone dial 999,' said Phil, only half joking.

Nick laughed, although it hurt to do so because his body felt as if it had been backed over by an articulated lorry. 'Phil, I'm fine. Really.'

'I'll be the judge of that,' countered Henry, advancing on him through the warren of paper-piled desks.

'Nick, you're obviously concussed, patently delusional, and need to be admitted to the nuthouse without delay,' Phil said matter-of-factly. 'Are you aware that it's not normal to stroll into the office and start going through your post and readying yourself for the day's assignment mere hours after being dragged from the blazing wreckage of a train crash?'

Nick laughed and winced again. 'Seriously, everyone, I'm fine. I'll be coming to work by bicycle from now on, but apart from that I'm a hundred per cent. Well, maybe ninety-nine. No truly, I'm okay. A bit shaken, but okay.'

And he was. He was so fine he was almost worried about how fine he was. With the exception of a couple of category-ten headaches and a palette of bruises representing the full spectrum of the Northern Lights, he was no worse off than he frequently felt after a big night out.

At Becca's insistence, he'd spent the day following the crash in bed. He'd been so weak and nervy that it had been a relief to let someone take over, even if that someone was his pretty blonde ex, now married to his neighbour, Greg.

Becca adored Nick and he was fond of her, but in subtle ways she rarely let him forget that their break-up had nearly destroyed her. It wasn't that he'd cheated on her or in any way treated her cruelly during their year-long university relationship. On the contrary, she freely admitted he'd been the best by a mile of the very bad bunch of men she'd dated prior to meeting Greg. No, it was because at the end of that time, when she was so in love with him she'd have taken a bullet for him, he'd told her that he thought of her as a kid sister, not a lover.

She'd never really got over him until one night, during their annual catch-up, Nick had introduced her to Greg, a muscle-bound black fireman who lived three doors down. They were married six months later. Nick was best man at their wedding.

Any concerns he might have had about having Becca for a neighbour had proved groundless. She was besotted with Greg and the three of them had so much fun together he couldn't remember what he'd done for a social life without them. A couple of times he'd caught himself wondering how things would have turned out if he'd been the one to fall in love with Becca and marry her, but the reality was she'd had a lucky escape. Nick had long since decided that he and relationships were incompatible.

Greg and Becca had raced to his hospital bedside within an hour of him arriving there in an ambulance. They'd sat with him while he was poked, probed and evaluated, and supported him in a brief battle with the admitting doctor when Nick had insisted on going home the same day. Greg had slept on his sofa that night, waking him at intervals to shine a light into his pupils. Becca took over the next morning, skipping work to spend the day puffing up his pillows, bringing him cups of tea and Marmite soldiers. She'd also fielded messages, answered the door to couriers bearing flowers, and kept callers at bay with the brisk efficiency of a drill sergeant.

‘I don’t understand why everyone’s making such a fuss,’ said Nick, his gratitude tempered by the lingering guilt he always felt around Becca. ‘When I broke my leg skiing and was laid up for months in chronic pain, I couldn’t pay anyone to take an interest in me.’

‘That’s because it was self-inflicted. Weren’t there large quantities of Jack Daniels involved? This is different.’

She handed him a tumbler of water and two white pills. ‘Here, get these down your gullet and stop complaining or I’ll go to the office and leave you to fend for yourself.’

‘Is that a threat or a promise?’ queried Nick, but he swallowed the tablets.

He was handing the glass back when it slipped from his fingers and smashed. Diamond shards exploded upwards.

His yell came from a long way away. Becca’s blonde hair and flushed face faded to black and then he was back in the railway carriage, only this time there was no sound. None related to the crash, at any rate. All he could hear was a squeaking, like that of a straining rope. Conscious of a presence, he looked everywhere to discover its source.

‘Who are you?’ he yelled. ‘Let me see you!’

‘Nick! Nick, it’s me, Becca.’

Freezing water blasted the train from his brain. Nick came round to find ice cubes sliding down his bare chest. He bolted upright and they clattered to the wooden floor. ‘For fuck’s sake, Becca, are you trying to kill me? I think you’ll find that those kind of nursing practices were outlawed a few centuries ago.’

Behind her rimless glasses, Becca’s eyes were wide and staring. ‘Nick, this is not a joke. You frightened the life out of me. What just happened?’

‘No idea.’ Nick felt dizzy and on the verge of a migraine, but he had no intention of sharing that with her. ‘Some kind of flashback, I guess. I’m sure it’s pretty common with crash victims. Don’t make a fuss about nothing. You’re not my mother.’

A crimson wave spread down Becca’s neck and under her grey cashmere jumper. ‘Or your sister,’ she said coldly. ‘Get dressed. I’m taking you to the hospital.’

Nick grinned. ‘You’re still beautiful when you’re angry. Look, I appreciate your concern. You’re a great nurse and I’m the luckiest man

alive to have you taking care of me, but I'm back to normal now. Promise.'

'You think it's normal to pass out when a glass breaks? Is that what *normal* people do? And what's worse – what's *really* disturbing – is that for the whole two minutes you were out, your fingers were moving madly, as if you were typing. It was creepy.'

Becca perched on the edge of the bed and smoothed his tousled dark hair. 'Nick, please. Be serious for once. Are you sure you're all right?'

'Positive, but thanks. When I need someone to read me the last rites, you'll be the first person I call.'

'Bastard.'

'Sorry,' Nick responded automatically. As he sank into the pillows and the beginnings of a tablet-induced coma, a wave of depression swept over him. At the first sign of intimacy, he almost always made a joke. He knew he was doing it, knew it hurt people, especially Becca, but he couldn't help himself.

He was reminded of that now, standing in front of his colleagues who, given permission to ask questions about the train crash because he himself had referenced it, were coming up to him in awkward batches while he deflected them with platitudes. This time it wasn't intentional. He simply couldn't describe what he'd been through. Words, his stock in trade, seemed inadequate. He was only able to offer banalities: 'It was over so quickly . . . Life flashed before my eyes . . . A terrible tragedy. The emergency crews were amazing . . . I feel blessed . . . fortunate . . . lucky . . .'

A lapsed Catholic and avowed agnostic, he also repeatedly thanked God, to whom he genuinely did plan to give more thought, just not at this moment when he was only trying to get from one hour to the next and feeling astonishingly cheerful in view of how recently he'd cheated the grave.

At last, when he couldn't cope with any more curiosity or well-wishing, he said politely: 'Do you mind? I really can't talk about this anymore. I have a deadline.'

He returned to his computer after that and began work on an archive piece, the only story Henry would entrust him with, because that way he could pretend not to see the thing he was pretending not to see, now descending on him with the relentless, rapidly accumulating ferocity of an avalanche.

On Thursday, three days after the crash, he left the office early for a hospital appointment. His mobile rang as the taxi sped across Westminster Bridge. Nick clicked it through to voicemail without looking at it. It beeped twice as he watched a swan rise from the Thames, wings angel-white in the sunlight.

Guilt, that he had lived to see this day when so many of his fellow passengers hadn't, swelled in his throat. He loosened his tie and checked his phone. He had nineteen missed calls – eight from friends, three from ex-girlfriends and eight from withheld numbers, all doubtless from reporters or editors, many from his own paper.

There was mounting anger at News International over his refusal to provide so much as a line of comment on the train crash, let alone the eyewitness account *The Times* had been banking on. What made it worse was that controversy surrounded the derailment. Even at this early stage, it was clear that somebody or something was to blame. Sabotage and rail company negligence were the accusations being bandied about. Nick was well aware that if he hadn't had Henry shielding him he'd have been hauled before the editor to explain himself and, in the fullness of time, 'let go'. First-person stories by reporters snatched from the jaws of death were among the most prized in journalism. They were held up to a cynical public as proof that reporters were not the sleazy, morally bankrupt liars of myth, but brave and revolutionary truth-tellers, risking their lives in the trenches.

Or, in the case of Nick, ordinary human beings catapulted into extraordinary situations.

A reporter refusing to report was unprecedented. And unpopular.

Nick scanned the list of other calls. He half-expected his parents' number to come up, although of course it never would. For once he was glad. To have their son involved in a national disaster would have

been their worst nightmare. It would have devastated his mother. She and his insurance-salesman father had been the kind of people who went 20 mph in a 30 mph zone. Their every waking hour had been spent in the avoidance of risk or anything else foreign or unfamiliar that might threaten their safe, steady march towards retirement – the moment, as they saw it, when life began.

Overprotected as a boy, Nick had in his teens and early twenties rebelled by flirting with death at every opportunity, pushing everything he did – skiing, driving, running, sailing, surfing – to lethal limits. It was a matter of painful regret to him that he'd flaunted his fearlessness in front of his parents. He'd worn his scars like badges of pride. For years his mum and dad had ferried him back and forth to various A&E departments without complaint. They'd rarely criticised him. Mostly they'd studied him with a concerned and kindly bemusement, as if they were certain he'd been substituted at birth but were determined to love him just the same.

He was twenty-four and in his last year at university when the police knocked on the door of his student digs. Earlier that morning, while on their way to church, his parents had been involved in a head-on collision with a truck driver who'd fallen asleep at the wheel. His dad had been due to start his retirement the following day. He'd booked a course of golf lessons. Nick had been asked to identify their bodies.

His parents' neatness in life had come undone in death. Faced with his mother's naked, mutilated body, which he'd been forced to confront in order to verify her identity from a birthmark, Nick had been overwhelmed by the urge to cover her with his jacket. He'd wanted to throw his arms around her and protect her from the gazes of people whom she could never have borne to see her with a missing button, let alone in her birthday suit on a mortuary stretcher, without the dignity that would have been afforded a side of beef; all her years of careful grooming, planning, saving and insuring come to nothing. The injustice of it had been as agonising as the loss.

An ambulance screamed past the cab. Nick almost leapt out of his skin. A forest of red crosses and signs to incomprehensibly named specialists indicated they'd arrived. He paid the fare with shaking hands.

*

Dr Marius Retson was a balding South African with the ruddy good health and thickly ridged forearms of a lifelong sportsman. He exuded a warmth Nick had hitherto found lacking in the medical profession, and an aura of unassailable confidence that came from being prodigiously gifted and rewarded in an area of human anatomy still shrouded in mystery. In among the framed degree certificates on his office walls were photographs of Ferraris and Aston Martins. Nick had not the smallest doubt they were his own.

‘You’re a most unusual case, Mr Donaghue,’ was the neurologist’s opening remark. He perched on a corner of his cherrywood desk, arms resting on one thigh.

Nick’s heart began to pound. In a single sentence he’d gone from being a slightly banged up outpatient to being – what? Nick had been so preoccupied with trying to convince everyone of his wellbeing that it hadn’t occurred to him there could be anything wrong with him. That the CT scan they’d told him was routine on the day of the crash could later have thrown up something sinister.

He wondered how many people had sat in the chair before him and been handed a death sentence.

‘I’m sorry to have to inform you . . .’

‘. . . an area of concern on your scan . . .’

‘An inoperable tumour, probably fatal . . .’

‘Call me Nick.’ His hands, gripping the chair’s leather arms, became clammy.

‘Nick,’ Dr Retson repeated obediently, his Afrikaans accent enunciating the word precisely. ‘How have you been since the crash? Obviously you’ve been traumatised and it’s going to take a while for you to recover emotionally, but how have you been physically? Any headaches? Vomiting? Blurred vision?’

‘I’m fine,’ Nick burst out, his voice coming out much higher and louder than he’d planned. He tried again. ‘I’ve been very well. I’ve had a couple of headaches but I feel quite good, considering.’ He decided not to mention the incident with the glass. It seemed a trivial thing now.

Dr Retson picked up a silver pencil torch and eased down Nick’s lower lids with hot, gentle fingers.

‘Why?’ Nick blinked in the glare. ‘Why am I such an unusual case?’

The neurologist clicked off his torch and returned to his seat on the

far side of the desk. ‘I didn’t mean to alarm you with my turn of phrase,’ he said with a smile. ‘I have nothing but good news for you. Your MRI was clear.’

‘This is what I’ve been saying to everyone all along – I’m perfectly fine. And now I’ve had to take half a day off for nothing. I know you’re trying to be helpful and I appreciate it, but it’s a bit frustrating. I mean, I have a job to do. I’m busy.’

‘I asked you to come here,’ Dr Retson said patiently, ‘so that we could conduct further tests which I consider to be vital. I also wanted to satisfy myself in person that you don’t have a brain injury. Three days ago, you lost consciousness. It seems likely that you suffered a blow to the head. Ideally, we’d have kept you in for observation but you insisted on going home. You appear to be well, but if the headaches get worse or if you experience any problems with co-ordination, dizziness, mood or behavioural changes, or light sensitivity, come back and see me immediately. Sometimes in medicine when something seems too good to be true, it is.’

Nick felt a flash of anger. ‘Why is it too good to be true? Am I not allowed to be okay? Would you and everyone else find it easier to cope if I had something with a label? A tumour? An aneurism? I was lucky, that’s all. It happens. Who knows why some people are spared and others aren’t in these disasters. Maybe I helped some old lady cross the road when I was fifteen and I’ve finally been rewarded for it.’

Dr Retson regarded him intently. ‘There’s a bit more to it than that. Statistically you’ve beaten unbelievable odds. I’m not a gambler myself, but they’d have to be millions to one. Do you know what they’re calling you around the hospital? The Miracle Man. There were one hundred and twenty-seven passengers on that train. Of those passengers, eleven have died and a hundred and fifteen suffered injuries that we tend to associate with war or terrorist bombings. That leaves you. The only person to have emerged from the crash without a serious, life-threatening or fatal injury. The only person without a scratch. And yet I gather you were in the first carriage, the one that took the brunt of the impact?’

An unwelcome flashback of the moment when he’d gazed around the turmoil of mangled metal and broken people and realised that he was the only one standing seared Nick’s memory.

'I have a knee that looks as if it's been attacked by a cheese grater and lots of bruises,' he pointed out in a weak attempt at humour.

The neurologist ignored him. 'You alone, among a hundred and twenty-seven passengers, walk away with barely a mark from a crash they say is the worst in British rail history? That constitutes a miracle in my book.'

'Do me a favour. Don't call me the Miracle Man within earshot of any reporters. They do love a catchphrase.'

'Aren't you a reporter?'

Nick grinned. 'Shhh.'

Out on the rush-hour streets Nick's guilt returned to swamp him. He'd stopped at the hospital reception to enquire about the businessman, whose name he hadn't yet managed to discover. An over-tanned woman encased, like a python, in a glass booth had suggested that the reason Nick was having difficulty locating him could be that he'd passed away.

Nick was aghast. *Passed away?* Of course he hasn't passed away . . . At least, I hope he hasn't.'

For some reason, he found the mere possibility shattering. If it were really true that the businessman was dead, what right did Nick have to be alive?

Destiny had come like a scythe through a field of wheat and cut down one hundred and twenty-six people and somehow, whether through a fluke of fate or divine intervention, Nick had been let alone. And for what? *Why him?*

'Guilt is a wasted emotion,' Phil had told him over the canteen lunch Nick bought him earlier that day. Phil occupied most-favoured-employee status in the department and Nick wanted him to persuade their editor to reverse his decree that Nick was not to touch an obituary until Henry decided he was fit to do so. Somehow it had turned into a counselling session.

'I was raised a Catholic,' Nick said. 'Guilt is in my DNA. Anyway, I'm not convinced it is a wasted emotion. Surely conscience and accountability are the only things that separate us from the animals.'

'But who benefits?'

'What do you mean, who benefits? Nobody benefits. The whole point is that you're paying a sort of psychological penance for your

crime, whether that crime is cheating on your girlfriend, or stealing a loaf of bread, or surviving. The benefits are residual. They're karmic. If you feel guilty about cheating on your girlfriend it might make you be more loving to her, or at the very least she might feel less hurt because she knows you feel awful about it. If you feel guilty about being alive, it's a way of showing the universe that you don't take your survival for granted.'

Phil stirred sugar into his coffee. 'So really it's just about feeling bad for the sake of feeling bad?'

'You've missed the point entirely.'

Now he conceded that maybe it was Phil who had a point. What use was his middle-class angst to anyone? It was not going to make a single person walk again or live again. He'd be better off making the most of the reprieve he'd been given.

He left the crowds behind and took a shortcut down a back alley. He planned to catch a bus home to Greenwich. Ahead of him the underpass loomed. A train screeched and whined across the top of it. Nick shuddered. God knows how long it would be before he was able to bring himself to use the railways again.

He approached the underpass with caution, pausing before he entered it to squint up through the concrete and steel at the last, heartening slot of sky. A rosy sunset was moving in.

The sooty darkness of the tunnel caught him unawares. He blinked. Overhead, the metallic whiplash of rails gave notice of a coming train. A whirlwind of grit peppered his skin. Nick barely noticed it. He blundered on blindly, his nostrils full of railway smells. He wanted to be through the tunnel and gone before the train was overhead.

A shoulder slammed into him. He had a fleeting glimpse of expensively barbered grey hair and a fat, florid face. There was a whiff of whisky as the man spat: 'Watch where you're going, you fucking moron. Fucking lowlife.'

Pent-up emotion exploded in Nick. Before he could stop himself he'd brought his fists up, ready to smash the man's face in. Only the fear in his abuser's eyes, the way he cowered away like a beaten cur, brought him back from the brink.

'Sorry,' he said, relaxing his hands. The man stumbled away from

him just as the train thundered onto the bridge overhead, shaking the ground and setting Nick's teeth rattling.

A wave of dizziness came over him. His vision went black and he heard again that rope-like squeak and, intermittently, a tinkling sound, like ice in a glass.

'Need a hand, mate?'

The clouds rolled back and Nick found himself on the pavement on the far side of the tunnel, with no idea how he'd got there. He focused with difficulty on the freckled hand reaching down to him. The sunset had intensified.

'Thanks,' he said when he was at eye-level with its owner, a twenty-something with a gap-toothed grin and spiky ginger hair.

'No worries. Hardly surprising if you have the odd wobble. You must be pretty fried after what happened. Everyone at the office is talking about how you came back to work two days after the crash when the rest of us lazy bastards would have demanded a three-month sabbatical.'

Nick dusted the grime from his jacket and trousers with unnecessary vigour. His fingers tingled strangely. An electric current pulsed in them. 'I take it you're a reporter. Do I know you?'

'No, but I know you. You're the guy who has every editor at News International spitting nails because you're an eyewitness to one of the worst train crashes in history and you won't return their calls. You won't play their game by being a good news story that sells papers.'

'Do you have a name?'

Again the cheeky grin. 'Damian Dexter from the *Sun*.'

Nick felt his headache return with a vengeance. 'Well, Damian Dexter from the *Sun*, let me make myself crystal clear. It's nice of you to lend me a hand, but I'm not going to discuss the crash. Not now. Not ever.'

'What's the deal with you, Donaghue?' asked Damian, pulling a pad and pen from his pocket as though Nick hadn't spoken. 'You're a hero. I've talked to the ambulance guys and a couple of coppers and they say you were the last passenger to leave the train. That even after the rescuers came, you insisted on waiting until the last survivor had been cut free from the wreckage and stretchered away before you'd even consider getting in an ambulance. They say you single-handedly saved three people. And yet you don't wanna talk about it.'

He bit the top off his pen. 'Anyone would think you had something to hide.'

But Nick had switched off at the first sentence. He was thinking about the man in the tunnel, about the violence of his reaction, his sour breath. His face had struck Nick as familiar.

'Did you get a close look at the man who ran into me? I thought I recognised him from somewhere.'

Damian's nib hovered over the paper. 'What man?'

'The man in the tunnel – who else?' Nick flexed his fingers to ease the pins and needles. He wondered if he was having an allergic reaction to something he'd touched when he blacked out. Poison ivy perhaps. 'You must have seen him. Big guy in his late fifties, early sixties, with a face like a bad banker, overfed and wet-lipped.'

'You're dreaming, mate. I was right behind you. There was no one in that underpass but you, me and a few rats. Hey, if you're feeling shaky and having visions, you might want to visit one of the head doctors at Guy's Hospital. Get things checked out.'

He added slyly: 'Or is that what you've been doing?'

It occurred to Nick that it would be a bad idea to have a newshound like Damian knowing anything about his business, no matter how innocuous. He slung his messenger bag over his shoulder and turned to go. 'Thanks again. See you around.'

'Not so fast,' said Damian, unwilling to give up on a potential scoop. 'What's this about them calling you the Miracle Man?'