

RAIL DISASTER

Rush hour trains collide in thick fog – many dead.

Tragedy struck office workers and Christmas shoppers on the evening of 4 December when two trains collided in thick fog under the Nunhead flyover. The 5.18 from Charing Cross to Hayes and the 4.56 steam train from Cannon Street to Ramsgate had been delayed by the poor weather. Coaches on both trains were packed, with passengers standing as well as sitting.

The Hayes train had stopped at a signal outside St John's at 6.20 p.m. when the steam train ploughed into the rear coach. This was just the beginning of an unfolding disaster, which left more than 80 dead and 200 wounded.

The steam train swung to the side and struck a steel column of the Nunhead flyover, causing the bridge to collapse, crushing two coaches below. A third train, from Holborn Viaduct, was just approaching the fallen flyover, when quick action by the driver brought it to a halt, preventing further catastrophe. The coaches were derailed but no one on board was injured.

The rescue efforts of firemen,

police, railway staff, doctors and nurses were hampered by fog and darkness. Worse still, the ruined bridge was in danger of falling further, crushing rescuers and trapped victims alike.

But through the long night of toil the army of volunteers continued to grow, with many local residents throwing open their doors to assist the injured. Eleven ambulances attended the scene, driving casualties further and further afield as nearby hospitals struggled to cope.

Local telephone lines became jammed by worried relatives as news of the accident spread. Hundreds of passengers were marooned in London for the night with the mid-Kent line completely blocked.

Many of the dead and injured were from Clock House and Beckenham. Passengers alighting at those stations were more likely to choose rear coaches because of their proximity to the station exits. It was these that took the brunt of the collision.

Southern Region authorities have launched an immediate inquiry.

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June 1957

The article that started it all was not even on the front page, but was just a filler on page 5, between an advertisement for the Patricia Brixie Dancing School and a report on the AGM of the Crofton North Liberals. It concerned the finding of a recent study into parthenogenesis in sea urchins, frogs and rabbits, which concluded that there was no reason it should not be possible in humans. This dusty paragraph might have been overlooked by most readers of the *North Kent Echo* were it not for the melodramatic headline 'Men No Longer Needed for Reproduction!'

The result was an unusually large postbag of mostly indignant letters, not just from men. One wounded correspondent, Mrs Beryl Diplock of St Paul's Cray, deplored the article's sentiments as dangerous and unchristian. More than one female reader pointed out that such a proposition was liable to give slippery men an excuse to wriggle out of their responsibilities.

There was one letter, however, that stood out from all the rest. It was from a Mrs Gretchen Tilbury of 7 Burdett Road, Sidcup, and read simply:

Dear Editor,

I was interested to read your article 'Men No Longer Needed for Reproduction' in last week's paper. I have always

believed my own daughter (now ten) to have been born without the involvement of any man. If you would like to know more information you may write to me at the above address.

The next editorial meeting – usually a dull affair involving the planning and distribution of duties for the week and a post-mortem of the errors and oversights in the previous issue – was livelier than it had been for some time.

Jean Swinney, features editor, columnist, dogsbody and the only woman at the table, glanced at the letter as it was passed around. The slanted handwriting, with its strange continental loops, reminded her of a French teacher from school. She, too, had written the number seven with a line through it, which the thirteen-year-old Jean had thought the height of sophistication and decided to imitate. Her mother had put a stop to that; she could hardly have been more affronted if Jean had taken to writing in blood. To Mrs Swinney, all foreigners were Germans and beyond the pale.

Thoughts of her mother prompted Jean to remember that she needed to pick up her shoes from the menders on the way home. It mystified her why someone who seldom left the house should need so many pairs of outdoor shoes. Also required were cigarettes, peppermint oil from Rumsey's, and kidneys and lard if she could be bothered to make a pie for dinner. Otherwise it would just be 'eggs anyhow', that old standby.

'Does anyone want to go and interview Our Lady of Sidcup?' asked Larry, the news editor.

There was a general creaking backwards in chairs, indicative of dissent.

'Not really my thing,' said Bill, sports and entertainment editor.

Jean slowly extended her hand to take the letter. She knew it was coming her way sooner or later.

‘Good idea,’ said Larry, huffing smoke across the table. ‘It’s women’s interest, after all.’

‘Do we really want to encourage these cranks?’ said Bill.

‘She may not be a crank,’ said Roy Drake, the editor, mildly.

It made Jean smile to remember how intimidating she used to find him when she had joined the paper as a young woman, and how she would quake if summoned to his office. She had soon discovered he was not the sort of man who took pleasure in terrorising his juniors. He had four daughters and treated all women kindly. Besides, it was hard to be in awe of someone whose suits were so very crumpled.

‘How can she not be?’ Bill wanted to know. ‘You’re not saying you believe in virgin births?’

‘No, but I’d be interested to know why this Mrs Tilbury does.’

‘She writes a good letter,’ said Larry. ‘Concise.’

‘It’s concise because she’s foreign,’ said Jean.

They all looked at her.

‘No Englishwoman is taught handwriting like that. And “Gretchen”?’

‘Well, clearly this is the sort of interview that is going to require some tact,’ said Roy. ‘So obviously it’s going to have to be you, Jean.’

Around the table heads nodded. No one was going to fight her for this story.

‘Anyway, the first thing is to go and check her out. I’m sure you’ll be able to tell pretty quickly if she’s a charlatan.’

‘Give me five minutes alone with her – I’ll tell you if she’s a virgin,’ said Larry, to general laughter. He leaned back in his chair, elbows out, hands behind his head, so that the gridlines of his vest were clearly visible against his shirt.

‘She doesn’t say she’s *still* a virgin,’ Bill pointed out. ‘This happened ten years ago. She may have seen some action since then.’

‘I’m sure Jean can manage without your expertise,’ said Roy, who didn’t like that sort of talk.

Jean had the feeling that if he wasn’t there, the conversation would rapidly turn coarse. It was curious the way the others moderated their language to suit Roy’s prudishness, while Jean herself was treated as ‘one of the chaps’. She took this as a compliment, mostly. In darker moments, when she noticed the way they behaved around younger, prettier women – the secretaries, for example – with a heavy-handed mixture of flirtation and gallantry, she wasn’t so sure.

Jean divided the rest of the afternoon between her Household Hints column and Marriage Lines – a write-up of the previous week’s weddings.

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After a reception at St Paul’s Cray Community Centre,
Mr and Mrs Plornish left for their honeymoon at St
Leonard’s, the bride wearing a turquoise coat and black
accessories . . .
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Household Hints was a cinch because these were all supplied by loyal readers. In the early days Jean used to put some of these to the test *before* publication. Now, she took a certain pleasure in selecting the most outlandish.

That done, she wrote a brief note to Gretchen Tilbury, asking if she could come and meet her and her daughter. Since she had provided no telephone number, the arrangements would have to be conducted by letter. At five o’clock she covered her typewriter with its hood and left the building, dropping the letter into the post room on her way out.

Jean’s bicycle, a solid, heavy-framed contraption that had come down, like most of her possessions, through generations of the Swinney family, was leaning against the railings. Standing

in front of it, too much in the way to be ignored, was one of the typists locked in a deep embrace with a lad from the print room. Jean recognised the girl but didn't know her name; there wasn't much interplay between the reporters and the other departments on the paper.

She had to step around them, feeling rather foolish, to retrieve her bicycle, until they finally acknowledged her and pulled away, giggling their apologies. There was something almost cruel in their self-absorption and Jean had to remind herself that it was nothing personal, just a universal symptom of the disease of love. Those afflicted could not be blamed, only pitied.

Jean took a silk headscarf from her pocket and knotted it tightly under her chin to stop her hair from blowing in her face as she cycled. Then, squashing her bag into the basket on the handlebars, she wheeled the bicycle to the kerb and swung herself onto the saddle, smoothing her skirt beneath her in one practised movement.

It was only a ten-minute ride from the offices of the *Echo* in Petts Wood to Jean's home in Hayes and even at this time of day there was little traffic. The sun was still high in the sky; there were hours of daylight left. Once she had seen to her mother there might be time for some gardening: ground elder was coming in under the next-door fence and menacing the bean rows; it required constant vigilance.

The thought of pottering in the vegetable patch on a summer evening was infinitely soothing. The lawns, front and back, would have to wait until the weekend, because that was a heavy job, made heavier by an obligation to do her elderly neighbour's grass at the same time. It was one of those generous impulses that had begun as a favour and had now become a duty, performed with dwindling enthusiasm on one side and fading gratitude on the other.

Jean stopped off at the parade of shops that curved down the

hill from the station to complete her errands. Steak and kidney would take too long but the thought of eggs for tea again had a dampening effect on her spirits, so she bought some lamb's liver from the butcher. They could have it with new potatoes and broad beans from the garden. She didn't dawdle over the rest of her list – the shops shut promptly at five-thirty and there would be disappointment indoors if she returned home without the shoes or the medicine, and utter frustration for herself if she ran out of cigarettes.

By the time she reached home, a modest 1930s semi backing on to the park, her cheerful mood had evaporated. Somehow, in transferring the waxed paper package of liver to her tartan shopping bag she managed to drip two spots of blood on the front of her dust-coloured wool skirt. She was furious with herself. The skirt had not long ago been cleaned and she knew from experience that blood was one of the most tenacious stains to treat.

'Is that you, Jean?' Her mother's voice – anxious, reproachful – floated down the stairs in response to the scrape of her door key, as it always did.

'Yes, Mother, only me,' Jean replied, as she always did, with a degree more or less of impatience in her tone, depending on how her day had gone.

Her mother appeared on the landing, fluttering a blue aero-gramme over the banisters. 'There's a letter from Dorrie,' she said. 'Do you want to read it?'

'Maybe later,' said Jean, who was still taking off her headscarf and divesting herself of her various packages.

Her younger sister, Dorrie, was married to a coffee farmer and lived in Kenya, which might as well have been Venus as far as Jean was concerned, so remote and unimaginable was her new life. She had a houseboy and a cook and a gardener, and a nightwatchman to protect them from intruders, and a gun under

the bed to protect them from the nightwatchman. The sisters had been close as children and Jean had missed her terribly at first, but after so many years she had grown accustomed to not seeing her or her children in a way that their mother never would.

‘Is there something nice for tea?’ Having noticed the paper bag containing her mended shoes, her mother began a slow and wincing descent of the stairs.

‘Liver,’ said Jean.

‘Oh good. I’m ravenous. I haven’t eaten anything all day.’

‘Well why ever not? There’s plenty of food in the larder.’

Sensing resistance, Jean’s mother backtracked a little. ‘I slept rather late. So I had my porridge instead of lunch.’

‘So you *have* eaten something, then?’

‘Oh, I don’t call that *eating*.’

Jean didn’t reply to this but took her purchases into the kitchen and deposited them on the table. The room faced west and was warm and bright in the early evening sun. A fly fizzed and bumped against the windowpane until Jean let it out, noticing as she did so the specks and smears on the glass. Another job for the weekend. They had a woman who came in to clean on a Thursday morning, but she seemed to Jean to achieve very little in her allotted hour, apart from gossiping to her mother. But this was a chore of sorts, Jean supposed, and she didn’t begrudge her the five shillings. Not really.

While her mother tried on the newly mended shoes, Jean took off her skirt and stood at the sink in her blouse and slip, inspecting the spots of dried blood. In the curtained dresser she located a box of rags – the earthly remains of other ruined garments – and, using the severed sleeve of a once-favourite cotton nightdress, began to dab at the stain with cleaning spirit.

‘What are you doing?’ said her mother, peering over her shoulder.

‘I got blood on it,’ said Jean, frowning as the rust-coloured

patch began to dissolve and spread. 'Not mine. The liver, I mean.'

'You messy girl,' said her mother, extending a twiggy ankle to admire her shoe, a beige kidskin pump with a Cuban heel. 'I don't suppose I'll ever wear these again,' she sighed. 'But still.'

The mark was slightly fainter now, but larger, and still quite visible against the grey fabric.

'What a pity,' said Jean. 'It was such a good skirt for cycling.'

She took it upstairs with her to change. She couldn't wear it, but neither could she quite bring herself to consign it to the rag box yet. Instead, she folded it up and stowed it in the bottom of her wardrobe, as if an alternative use for unwearable skirts might one day present itself.

After tea – liver and onions cooked by Jean and a pudding of tinned pears with evaporated milk – Jean weeded and watered the vegetable patch while her mother sat in a deckchair, holding but not quite reading her library book. She would never sit outside alone, Jean noticed, however pleasant the weather, but only if there was company. From the park came the high, bright shouts of children playing, an occasional sequence of barks from the dogs in the street as a pedestrian passed along and the even less frequent rumble of a passing car. By the time dusk fell, all would be silent.

Jean and her mother moved into the sitting room at the front of the house, drew the curtains and switched on the lamps, which gave out a grudging yellowish light behind their brown shades. They played two hands of gin rummy at the small card table and then Jean picked listlessly through a basket of mending, which she had been adding to but otherwise ignoring for some weeks. Her mother, meanwhile, took out her leather writing case to reply to Dorrie's letter. By way of preparation for this task, she reread it aloud, which Jean could only presume was for her benefit, since her mother was already well acquainted with the contents. She did the same thing with newspaper and

magazine articles when she was finding the silence of a Sunday afternoon irksome.

Dear Mother,

Thank you for your letter. It sounds lovely and peaceful in Hayes. I wish I could say the same – it's been non-stop here. Kenneth has been staying on the farm – he's got a new manager at last who needs to be 'broken in'. Let's hope he lasts a bit longer than the previous one – now referred to in private as 'Villainous Vernon'. (Mrs Swinney tittered at this.)

I have joined the Kitale Club and it's become my second home while Kenneth's away. There are some real 'types' there as you can imagine. I went to see the Kitale Dramatic Society's production of Present Laughter on Friday night. Pru Calderwell – the absolute queen of the social scene here – was ever so good as Liz Essendine. The rest of the cast were pretty wooden. I thought I might as well audition for the next one myself if that's the standard!

We've got ourselves a new black Alsatian pup called Ndoфу. We're completely besotted with him. I'm supposed to be training him up as a guard dog for when I'm here by myself but he's such a soppy creature, he'll just roll over for anyone who tickles him.

The children will be home for the holiday in a few weeks' time so I must take advantage of my last few weeks of freedom and get some more tennis in. I've been having some lessons and I'm playing in a mixed doubles tournament tomorrow with a chap called Stanley Harris who is about 60 but madly competitive and throws himself all over my half of the court shouting, 'Mine! Mine!' so I shan't have much to do.

Must dash for the post now. Keep well. Much love to you and Jean.

Dorrie

‘She writes a super letter,’ Jean’s mother said.

‘Well that’s because she has a super life to write about,’ Jean retorted.

These breezy bulletins always left her feeling a trifle sour. Fond memories of their shared childhood closeness were now clouded by resentment at their contrasting fates.

At eight-thirty Jean’s mother rose effortfully from her chair and said, as though the idea had just that moment occurred to her, ‘I think I’ll have my bath.’

Although Jean had occasional misgivings about their domestic routines, and intimations sometimes reached her that other people had a different, freer way of doing things, her mother’s bath-night ritual was one she was keen to uphold. Twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays between eight-thirty and nine, Jean was mistress of the house, free to do as she liked. She could listen to the wireless without her mother’s commentary, eat standing up in the kitchen, read in perfect silence or run naked through the rooms if she chose.

Of all the various liberties available, her favourite was to unfasten her girdle and lie at full stretch on the couch with an ashtray on her stomach and smoke two cigarettes back to back. There was no reason why she couldn’t do this in her mother’s presence – lying down in the day might prompt an enquiry about her health, no more – but it wasn’t nearly so enjoyable in company. The summer variant of this practice was to walk barefoot down the garden and smoke her cigarettes lying on the cool grass.

On this particular evening, she had just peeled off her musty stockings and stuffed them into the toes of her shoes when there was a tremendous clattering from the back parlour, as if all the tiles had fallen off the fireplace at once. Upon investigation she found that a blackbird had come down the chimney, bringing with it an avalanche of soot and debris. It lay stunned in the

empty grate for a few seconds and then, at Jean's approach, began to thrash and struggle, battering itself against the bars.

Jean recoiled, her heart heaving in horror. She was quite unequal to the task of either rescuing or finishing off a wounded bird. She could see now that it was a young pigeon, blackened with soot, and that it was perhaps more terrified than injured. It had flopped out of the grate and was beginning to flap unsteadily around the room, imperilling the ornaments and leaving dark streaks on the wallpaper.

Throwing open the door to the garden, Jean tried to wave it towards the doorway, with stiff-armed gestures more suited to directing traffic, until it finally sensed freedom and took off, low across the lawn, coming to rest on the branch of the cherry tree. As Jean stood watching, next door's ginger cat came stalking out of the shrubbery with murder in its eyes.

By the time she had swept up the gritty mess from the hearth, wiped the worst of the marks from the walls and closed the door on the damp, subterranean smell of soot, she could hear the bathwater thundering in the drain outside. She smoked her cigarette standing up at the cooker waiting for the milk to boil for her mother's Allenbury's.

Now that her heart rate had returned to normal she felt quite a sense of accomplishment at having seen off another domestic crisis without having to call on anyone else for help – even supposing there had been anyone to call.