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Platform Seven



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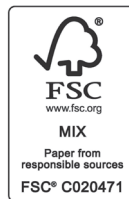
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## I

It is 4 a.m. The station is empty but I'm not alone. I'm never alone.

There are the others, and now there is the man.  
No one has seen him yet, apart from me.

It is black at this hour but the security lights throw a stark white glow across all seven platforms. Every now and then a freight train passes through and the air is filled with a slow screech and rumble: then all falls quiet again, the silence broken only by the squabble of a couple of pigeons on Platform Five.

On the ground between Platforms Two and Three a lone fox, small and silky, trots along the tracks. It pauses and angles its snout to sniff the freezing air before leaping up onto Platform Two in a relaxed and nimble fashion. As it passes beneath a light, its pelt glows chestnut, briefly, before it disappears into the dark.

Two cleaners wander from platform to platform in bright orange trousers and jackets, checking all is in order before the early commuters arrive. In the Duty Team Leader's office, the Customer Services Manager and a security guard sip tea while they watch the CCTV screens. Peterborough Railway Station may be empty at night but it never sleeps,

not really. The last London-bound train doesn't leave until 23.47, although if you want to get to Edinburgh you have to be out of here on the 20.16 latest. Going east, there is the 21.18 to Stansted and westward the 21.59 to Birmingham. Peterborough Station sits in the middle of England like a spider at the centre of its web and like a spider it is always alert to movement, even when it appears hunched and still.

The first London-bound service departs at 03.25 so the station is only closed to the public for a little over three hours. The Customer Services Assistant leaves after the final train but the Customer Services Manager is on duty all night. Often, a freight train will pull up on Platform Seven so that they can change drivers – there's a depot at the back of the station. Freight comes and goes at any time, of course.

The security guard on duty this particular night is called Dalmar. Dalmar takes his job very seriously. Although his main task is to be on hand for the Customer Services Manager, it is also down to him to check the station for suspicious objects every two hours; each of the seven platforms, the waiting rooms, the toilets. Dalmar has never found anything suspicious but he has taken the HOT principle (Hidden? Obvious? Typical?) to heart. Dalmar comes from Somalia, the UK gave him sanctuary twelve years ago and his dreams are haunted by the bombs he will never find. He is proud that his job includes an element of protecting the British public from explosive devices, even though the British public probably thinks he's the one most

likely to be planting them. Sometimes he longs to discover something in order to justify his asylum, but this longing is so terrible he cannot admit it even to himself. The consequences of there being something and his failing to find it are too appalling to imagine. To dread and desire the same thing: does that make him profoundly unlucky, or the most fortunate of people, the most alive?

This particular night, Dalmar is in an upbeat mood. He's just done the check, ticked off every area on the sheet and hung the clipboard back on its hook in the Duty Team Leader's office on Platform One. Now he's chatting to tonight's Customer Services Manager, a short, jovial type called Tom. Dalmar is wondering whether to apply to train in Customer Services. His English was very good even before he left home and he's completely fluent now but he is still shy. Tom has been encouraging him. 'Start on board, Dalmar,' Tom has said; 'on board is where you want to start off, it's much busier on board. Do five years, then transfer to a station. It's a good living, good package.'

While Tom and Dalmar talk, they drink tea from giant mugs. From time to time, unconsciously alternating, they glance at the CCTV, the new system that covers nine different areas of the station at any one time, all shown in full-colour high definition on a large flat screen. Tom takes a particular interest in the bike storage area: the theft rate always goes up in the couple of months before Christmas. Tom is a cyclist himself and feels for the owners. There's nothing he loves more than dashing out and catching someone in the act of applying a set of bolt cutters to a bicycle lock, even though he

could just put the call through to the British Transport Police offices over the road and let them handle it.

It's quiet tonight, though: no bicycle theft, no drunks as yet – it's only Tuesday. The drunks are generally around from Thursday onwards, coming for the early morning trains home. They arrive in ones and twos, men and women, inadequately dressed and shivery, fresh from Peterborough's choicest nightclubs. They stagger onto the platforms either arm in arm or shoving at each other. Then, inevitably, one of them will perform a sudden jack-knife gesture with their upper body, go hairpin-shaped and vomit in splatty puddles all over the platform. That's the cleaners' problem, thank God, although Tom has been known to shovel snow and scatter grit in winter. If a blizzard falls just before the morning rush hour, he doesn't have any choice. Peterborough Station could really do with a roof, in his opinion.

If it isn't the drunks, it's those with mental health issues. There have been a few incidents recently with a middle-aged woman known to the British Transport Police, clearly a raging insomniac, who roams the station as soon as it opens and bothers the early commuters. She wears a brown coat over a floor-length nightie and wellington boots and goes around tapping her lips with two fingers in a *give us a fag* motion, which given that nobody has been allowed to smoke on a railway station since 2007 is a somewhat futile gesture. Once in a while, a homeless person vaults the security fence – it isn't hard to break into the station – but Tom usually catches their dropping forms on the CCTV before their feet hit the platform and he heads out and yells

across the tracks that they can exit through the front or the BTP will come out. There's never any trouble. If it's really freezing, Tom has been known to ignore what he sees on the screens – as long as it's a shape he recognises – and let them huddle in a waiting room for a bit, until they are discovered by whichever security guard is on duty. He knows he shouldn't do it but some nights, he just doesn't have the heart.

None of that is happening tonight, though. Tonight, all is silent. The only thing of interest on the CCTV screens is the fox, patrolling the station in search of any litter that might contain a scrap of food, disappearing from the corner of one screen and magically appearing in another.

Tom and Dalmar are deep in discussion about Dalmar's career development, and only looking at the CCTV now and then – so they don't see the fox and they don't see the man. It is only me, hovering around the office and listening in to their discussion out of sheer boredom, who sees the man enter the station and turn towards the stairs that lead up to the covered walkway over the tracks. I know straight away where he is heading. He's going to Platform Seven.

Platform Seven is new. They built it four years ago, apparently – the staff still talk about the disruption it caused. You would think that Peterborough Station was quite big enough – but no, off they go, extending it, building another two platforms where the old freight line and the fly-ash sidings used to be. It is the part of the station furthest from the entrance, from the Duty Team Leader's office and the Customer Information

Point. The man may not know the names of these different parts of the station's administrative system but he will know that on Platform Seven he's as far away as he can get from any staff. The main entrance opens at 3 a.m. to admit the passengers taking the first train south but only a handful of souls arrive for that, mostly train staff on their way to work, and it goes from Platform One. There's no legitimate reason for anyone to be anywhere near Platform Seven at this hour. The first passenger train is the 06.10 to Birmingham New Street. If he's here for that, he's awfully early.

When I find him he is sitting on the metal bench about three quarters of the way along, the far bench, nearest the access ramp, the quietest part of the whole station. It isn't on the way to anywhere else, you'd only go there if you wanted to be there – or not anywhere at all.

He is around sixty years old, a large man, tall, I can see that even though he is sitting down. I've got good at assessing the physicality of people, good at weighing and measuring their bodies with my leisurely gaze. He is wearing a thick, old-fashioned jacket, the sort that used to be called a donkey jacket, navy with a leather panel. Never quite as warm as they should be, those jackets, and the way he is hunched suggests that it sits heavily on his shoulders, as if everything in his life that is weighing on him is represented in his coat.

But then, why would anybody look cheerful when they are sitting on a metal bench at the end of Platform Seven on Peterborough Railway Station on a pitch-black, freezing cold November morning?

I watch him for a while. He is quite still, on the bench,



facing the tracks. He has a black wool hat pulled down over his ears and a sea-green scarf around the lower half of his face. His shoulders are raised, hands jammed into his pockets so that his elbows make two bulky angles either side of him. It isn't always obvious, you know. You would think, with my superior perspective, that I could spot them a mile off. Not necessarily – railway stations attract all sorts. Along with hospital waiting rooms and dole offices, they are one of the few places a person can sit for hours and not be asked to move on. Everyone is waiting for something in a place like this: the something comes, the something goes – the ebb and flow of it, why would anyone notice a solitary person on a bench? Sometimes they have a bag at their feet; sometimes they are playing on their phone. The fact that this one has neither bag nor phone makes me feel pretty certain what he is about.

Even when I move in front of him, I can hardly see his face, just the portion of it visible between the top of the scarf and the bottom of the hat. He has a bulbous, large-pored nose and a watery gaze. He is looking straight ahead, expressionless – but what looks like distress or distraction might be just a physical response to the cold. I watch him for a few minutes. There is no change in his demeanour. His stare is quite glassy – that's how I know for sure, and it's a feeling like lead, this knowledge.

I glance around. Tom and Dalmar will notice him, or maybe one of the cleaners. Now I have realised what he is, he sticks out like a sore thumb, for me.

But this one is clever, strategic. He has chosen Platform Seven. There's no café on that platform – the snack cart

won't arrive in the waiting room for another two hours and anyway the bench he has chosen is hidden by the solid side of the waiting-room wall. I wonder if he knows this, if he did his research, maybe made a reconnaissance trip. Platform Seven yawns empty. The council houses that face it, across the waste ground and the junkyard, are curtained and dark. Next to them is the giant yard of the Used Car Supermarket but the grilles are down on the warehouse – it's the middle of the night. No one is around; no one has any reason to see him. This cold bench, this platform, they are just for him. He isn't the first person to think that.

There's a CCTV camera attached to the wall of the access ramp – it's at the far end of the platform, next to the red stop light, and it's pointing right at the bench where the man is sitting. I check the light is on: yes, it's working, but maybe Tom and Dalmar are still deep in conversation or maybe Dalmar is doing another round and Tom is playing Words with Friends on his phone. He does that sometimes, when Dalmar is patrolling. He knows how conscientious Dalmar is and that lulls him into a false sense of security.

I stare at the man: still that watery, unblinking gaze. *Look round*, I think, *look up*. *Focus*. If you do, you will see the small bird perched on the edge of the toilet block, silent but flapping its wings in anticipation of dawn, even though dawn seems, and is, so far away. If you look up, you might notice, in the far distance beyond the housing estate, that the sky is getting ready for it: the darkness may not be lightening yet, but look, it's thinning in preparation for the light to filter through. If you notice that,

you will see not light but the possibility of light. You will realise that it doesn't matter how black the night is, dawn will always come.

If only I could speak, even in a whisper. Then I could hiss in this man's ear, *Trust me, this is a terrible thing to do – you will only appreciate just how terrible as you tip forward and reach the point of no return. They will come to you then, the people in your life, their faces, and in that last desperate moment you will know this is a dreadful mistake, the worst thing you could possibly do. Listen, I promise you – the second your feet leave the platform, you'll change your mind.*

I'm directly in front of him – can't he sense my presence? *You'll have to get past me*, I think, willing him to sense the ferocity of my thoughts. Usually I can tell what people are thinking or feeling just by looking at them but I stare at those liquid eyes and the lack of expression in them is frightening: he is not thinking or feeling anything. He is quite resolute. And then, he makes his first movement. He lifts both hands and tugs the top edge of his scarf over his nose, pulling up the collar of his coat a little around the scarf. *You still care about being cold?* I want to shout at him. *For God's sake, in a minute you won't feel anything.*

He rises from the bench and turns his head a little to the left. He has heard something, in the distance. It is his fate, still far off but thundering towards him: a freight train. Freight trains are terrible things: ferocious, heavy, interminable – when they are going slowly it feels as if they take hours to pass through the station. The front of the train is long gone while its rear still seems miles away in

the opposite direction. It's hard to believe there was ever a driver at the front of it.

The man lumbers forward a metre or so until he is standing close to the edge of the platform, past the ridged rubber they lay down for blind people, past the yellow line. I back up but stay between him and the tracks. We are face to face now. He begins to shuffle his toes centimetre by centimetre, as if he has mobility issues, although I know there is no physical handicap behind the reluctance his body feels to approach the edge. His body knows better than his mind how dreadful this is: it is screaming for him to come to his senses. Why doesn't he listen? Every fibre is stretching to move back from the abyss.

The man has begun to sway. Still only his eyes are visible and they are large and pale, glistening with tears. Why has no one noticed him yet? I glance around the station, as if it is possible to make my thoughts loud and panicky enough to summon Dalmar or Tom, and as I do, I hear it coming closer – and he does too. I look back at him and he has turned his head, looking to his left up the track, and we both hear the thunder and rumble of the freight train getting nearer and nearer, the sound of it, and we see the two bright yellow circles of its headlights, distant and disembodied, the edges wavery but the centre of them solid, imminent, rushing towards us through the dark.

I hear a shout from the direction of the old platforms, and turn to see Dalmar across the tracks on Platform Five. At last. The man has his back to him but Dalmar has spotted him and can see across the tracks that he is far closer to

the edge of Platform Seven than anyone should be. Poor Dalmar. He is rooted to the spot. He is nearer the ramp than the stairs and must know there isn't time to race up and across the covered walkway and back down the ramp again before the approaching goods train comes in. He will have used his radio to put the call in to Tom to get a block on the signals, but I can hear the thunder of the freight train getting louder and louder – it's a fast one, with a full load, passing through – who knows if the signal block will come in time or if the driver will be able to brake if it does? Tom's hands will be shaking as he makes the call. Doesn't this man realise what he is doing to them, never mind his own family?

In an act of desperation, Dalmar puts both hands either side of his mouth and bellows. 'Hey! Sir! Sir, you, over there!'

The man does not turn around.

Dalmar waves his arms from side to side, miming the action of pushing the man away from the platform edge. He cups both hands around his mouth again and shouts once more. 'Hey! Sir, over there!' I can hear the pant of desperation in his voice, the crack at the end of the phrase, and I imagine him at the inquest describing later how he yelled across the tracks, thinking it was the only way to get the man's attention, only to feel racked with guilt that it prompted the man's action. It didn't. I've seen three men come close to it now – their legs shaking and their teeth chattering – and seen them pull back at the last minute. This one is different; beyond feeling, beyond thought. This one has decided.

I turn back to the man just as the train thunders towards us, the metal bulk and roar of it filling the cold air, rust-red containers heaped with tons of grey gravel. The man tips forward with his body unnaturally straight, as if he is a tree that has been felled. He doesn't teeter, not for a moment, but stays completely straight, passes through me and onto the tracks just as the train rushes into the station. Gravity takes him. He doesn't so much as flail an arm as he falls.