

Stations and Crossings

Ian Scott

"Susan? Scout? I can't hear you. Hello, Scout?" The connection was dead.

Morning: the phone warbled.

"Thomas Kendrick."

"Daddy?"

"Scout! How are you my darling?"

"Oh, tired and grotty."

"Still have that cold?"

"Sort of."

"You should be home in bed, not gallivanting around London."

"I'm well medicated, Dad. Stop fussing."

There was a lot of background noise, people, traffic, some sort of pulsing siren.

Thomas pressed the loudspeaker hard to his ear.

"Listen, Daddy, I'm at Kings Cross. It looks like they've closed the Underground here.

There are no trains going through on the Hammersmith line so I'm going to walk or get a bus or something. I just thought I would - woah!" There was a blare of car horns.

"Scout! Susan?"

"I'm OK daddy, just avoiding death on the roads."

"You take care now. You should be in bed."

"I'm a big girl now daddy and I have to work. I thought you ought to know about the tube, anyway. It might be cleared by the time you come through."

There was a flower stall on the station concourse where Thomas bought lilies and a blank card. Sitting on a nearby bench, he inscribed the card with his fountain pen.

"Sorry to bother you."

The voice was thin, dry. Thomas looked up at the woman standing in front of him. He thought her age anywhere between thirty and fifty. She wore battered trainers, filthy jeans and a grimy fleece jacket. Her skin was pock marked, the colour of February rain clouds. Her hair was lank, streaked with grey and pulled into a tight ponytail. There was a rodent quality to her hard, thin face.

"Can you spare any change please love?" Her expression was pleading, little girl helplessness in a derelict body.

Thomas stared at her, his pressed lips growing white. "Is this all you can do with your life? With the one chance that has been given you?" His voice trembled.

The woman didn't blink, just swivelled and scuttled on to her next mark, a bemused Chinese studying a tube map.

Thomas took his small, leather-bound Bible from his overcoat pocket and slipped the completed card between its leaves. He kept it in his hand as he walked out into clear January sunlight. Ahead of him, a host of people milled around an entrance to the Underground station, a narrow staircase into the earth. An electronic sign mounted above the entrance flashed "Do Not Enter", accompanied by a loud, insistent tone. He remembered the sound from the background of Scout's call. He imagined her here, moving swiftly and surely through the aimless crowds, her lean, graceful, boyish appearance drawing second glances from men and women. He bit his lower lip.

An Underground employee was shouting above the noise of the alarm. "There's too many people underground, we have to close the station temporarily for safety reasons." He looked at Thomas, a white-haired, slightly stooped man in a black suit and overcoat, clutching a book and a bouquet, looking lost.

"Sorry about this sir. Where did you want to get to?"

"Great Portland Street."

"You could try a bus but they'll be packed, this time of day. It's about thirty minutes walk, if you weren't in too much of a hurry. Just keep straight down Euston Road, due west, past all the stations." He pointed.

"Thank you," said Thomas, "I believe that I will."
"Mind the junctions, they'll be manic around now."

Thomas walked off, conscious of his slow pace, an alien amongst the rush hour commuters. He tried to admire the elaborate neo-Gothic architecture of St Pancras Station, the cathedral of the nineteenth century railway builders, but he knew that it was just a façade: it was as under-used as most other cathedrals. Heavy traffic snarled past him, a taint of petrol staining the morning air. The industrialists had put their faith in the wrong God.

At a cross street, a sign read "Churchway". He looked around and saw a utilitarian grey edifice with a spire: St Pancras Parish Church. So, the martyr's name lived on in two buildings, but who had heard of this one? Who would congregate in this grim sepulchre?

In front of Euston Station a square was laid out around a grey obelisk. As he neared, Thomas saw it was a war memorial, guarded by statues of four soldiers leaning on their rifles, heads bowed. An inscription on the obelisk read "In Memory of our Glorious Dead". Across the road brooded Friends House, home of the Quakers. Thomas pondered whether the soldiers were averting their eyes out of shame that they could not live up to a Quaker's ethics. He wondered how a Quaker dealt with modern life, with its doubts, fears, hatreds and hot thirsts for vengeance. Especially vengeance. How could they turn their cheek so placidly?

Warren Street station stood at the enormous junction of Euston Road and Tottenham Court Road. Waiting to cross, Thomas watched the northbound traffic erupt from central London, motorbikes out-sprinting the cars. A young man wearing headphones jogged past him into the road, eyes on the closing landslide of metal. The bikes veered past, but the driver of the leading car, a silver BMW, continued to accelerate toward him, a horn blast confirming he was aware of the man. Thomas caught his breath. One slip, one stumble and the BMW couldn't possibly stop. The jogger reached safety. Thomas exhaled. The stupidity of them both appalled him, but the driver... had he had faith that his road would be clear? No. Faith requires one to expect the unexpected. Arrogance assumes the road will be clear.

"Scout?"

"Daddy? Hello again." The traffic noise in the background was deafening. "It's starting to rain here, really heavily. Remember to bring your overcoat and an umbrella."

"What's that? Rain you say?"

"Yes rain! Rain! Don't forget your coat, in case the tube is still broken."

"How about you? Aren't you on a bus?"

"No, they've all been full. I'm nearly at Portland Street now, I'll see if the trains are running again. Don't forget your coat!"

"I won't. What would I do without you?"

Great Portland Street station was ahead, an Art Deco rotunda squatting on a triangular traffic island. Thomas slowed and took in the scene. It seemed strange that life went on, traffic powering past on all sides, people queuing at the bus stop, bundled against the chill. Thomas pulled the folded newspaper clipping from his Bible. The graphic was clear and accurate, the analysis comprehensive.

"Hi Daddy, it's me, just to let you know that the tubes are still out and it's raining pretty hard now. I'm just at the station now. Oh, there's a bus! Damn! Missed it."

The bus had been at the back of the stop, in the bus and taxi lane. It had started to pull out but stopped in the traffic waiting at the lights.

"Just to say that when you come down, can you bring - oh! It's opened its doors again, I'm in luck!"

The driver, wrongly, had opened the side door to let off an elderly woman who had missed her stop.

"Hey! Come on! Let us on, it's raining!"

The driver, correctly, would not open the front door to take on Scout and two other people who had followed her.

"Oh this is so - "

The car had been coming from the north, making a right turn across the junction, on a filter light that was changing to red. The driver was aiming for the taxi lane, saw the bus mostly pulled out, its right indicator flashing. He saw the traffic lights ahead going green and accelerated off of his turn. He did not expect anybody to be in the road, shielded by the bus' angle.

Thomas had not heard any noise of brakes or tyres, no screams, no thuds, just the sudden absence of Scout's voice and the line snapping into silence. The connection was dead.

He tied his lilies to the pole of the bus stop and propped the card against them, drawing looks from the queuing passengers. Head bowed, he opened his Bible to the Psalms and started to read, but his voice faltered and eyes filled. It wasn't enough. He dropped to one knee and cradled his forehead in his hand.

"Dear Lord, accept the souls of the those who died here into thy ever loving grace... and..." he paused, breathing heavily. "And forgive..." A taste of bile rose in his throat. "Forgive those responsible..." His shoulders slumped, his head dropped. He rose, slowly.

Thomas looked around himself, at the indifferent bus passengers, the thundering traffic, the pedestrians with phones clamped to their ears. He felt utterly detached. He shook his head slowly, tears streaming, faced the skies.

"Who is listening?" he shouted. "Who? These?" He swept his hands wide, flinging the Bible away. A jetliner howled overhead. He dropped to his knees, arms spread. "I have given you my life, Lord. You don't need hers. Please, not her. Not yet."

He became aware of a soft ringing from his mobile telephone, the one that Scout had bought him for his little expeditions. It was his wife, exhausted.

"Is there any change?" he asked.

"A little, more brain activity. They think that she might be dreaming. Where are you?"

"Not far away. I'll be with you soon."

He dried his eyes. What sort of spectacle was he creating? A young woman helped him to his feet. "Are you OK?" she asked.

"I believe so. I'm sorry. My daughter... seriously injured, two days ago..." He gestured vaguely.

"I'm sorry. Is there any hope?"

Thomas nodded, slowly. "I have faith, and, with faith, there is hope."

He picked up his Bible, smoothed the pages. Faith, hope and charity. He thought of the woman at Kings Cross.

"Forgive me," he said quietly, to nobody visible.