

A TOUCH OF MADNESS

By Mark Cornell

The horn blowing and brake slamming seemed to go forever, but lasted maybe thirty seconds. People raised their heads and pulled off their ear pieces to stare out the window. Our train screeched to a sudden halt in the winter darkness out in the middle of nowhere. Judging by the chatter and gasps the passengers knew what had just happened. The driver climbed down the cabin steps and searched the tracks below our carriage with his torch. Some people whimpered in the silence.

‘He’s looking on the wrong side.’ A neatly bearded, suited, passenger standing next to the door opposite me held his hands over his eyes as he stared into blackness below him. ‘You probably don’t want to look down there,’ he faced us then nodded over his shoulder. His calm face struggled to control the horror. His eyes were full of fear yet there was relief in them as well, perhaps he was thanking God it wasn’t him.

A work colleague of mine heard the body go under the train two years ago and he had to take some time off. It altered him, he was a bit of a cold fish but now he seems more vulnerable. Yet this time, there was no impact sound as the train shuddered to a halt. But there was obviously a body lying below our carriage in the freezing cold outside. The driver jumped back into the cabin to announce over the microphone that there had been an accident. The silence was broken by cries and people ringing their mobile phones. I’ll go back to my book, I told myself, but found it impossible to focus on the words. Others put their heads down and pretended to do the same. The mobile phone callers shouted as they repeated there’d been an accident and whined how they’d probably be stuck on the train for hours. People speculated about where we were. The consensus was we were stranded somewhere between Mitcham and Heatherdale; the outer eastern suburbs of the city. We sat for what seemed an eternity until there suddenly appeared luminous vests, helmets and torches searching everywhere on the tracks below. You couldn’t see their faces but judging by their bodies, the emergency workers all appeared to be big middled aged men. The bearded passenger pressed the emergency button but after no response he knocked on

the door window and pointed directly below where he was standing. He quietly told the rest of us that he'd seen a body without legs, but also that it was jet black outside and hoped that perhaps the lower part of the body was hidden behind a bush. He slowly shook his head as he uttered, 'What a place to do it. The last thing you'd see was a blackberry bush before you died.'

What a place indeed, hidden far away from your fellow human beings. Beyond all hope, with just one last grisly task left in your fevered brain, grasping for the release of death. You couldn't get anywhere bleaker than an empty, prickly paddock in the outer suburbs in between stations. Away from the breath and bustle of your fellow human beings, miles from the nearest road. He'd jolted a trainload of passengers out of their everyday existence. How did he do it? Did he lie on the track or walk into the comet light of the speeding train?

Some women panicked, some men became anxious as the emergency workers made a half circle around us. A young, fair haired, man sitting directly across me kept shuffling in his chair while he scrolled down his mobile phone. He mumbled he was in the train company's website and it mentioned the accident but didn't go into any detail.

An ambulance suddenly appeared at the top of the paddock, slowly reversing until it was level with our carriage. The young fair haired man looked at the cover of my book which was a history of how they put man on the moon.

'You know that's supposed to have not happened?' By the scared look in his face I could tell he was desperate for conversation.

'My father in law used to work for NASA. He helped to design the guidance system on the Lunar Module that got man there. NASA employed thousands of people. How could they all be liars? He reckons everyone in charge was mad.'

'Oh really!' He gave me a surprised smile.

'He said one Manager used to walk around with a can of sardines in his top pocket which he'd crack open every time there was a crisis another Manager never sat down but used to lie horizontally across the top of his desk.'

‘I suppose you would have to have a touch of madness to do that job,’ replied the young fair haired fellow with a twinkle in his eye. By now all the torch bearing emergency workers had reached the spot pointed to by our bearded passenger.

A tall policeman marched in and instructed us to evacuate our carriage. I unfortunately lost contact with the passenger I’d started up a conversation with and slowly found a seat in the carriage behind the driver’s cabin. I could still make out the ambulance. The emergency workers carried a stretcher to the accident site. Should I keep looking or turn away? The answer to this question came as the stretcher was lifted back towards the ambulance. On it I saw the back of a bald, shaved head of a man who looked like he might only been in his thirties. Then I saw him waving his arm. ‘It’s still alive,’ someone shouted. I imagined the impact, then the horror of the realization that he’d survived; the pain, the damage done to his body by the iron wheels of the train. Another emergency worker came down to the railway track with a large yellow plastic bag; it seems our bearded passenger had seen things correctly.

At last, we were told by the policeman we could evacuate the train and that buses had been arranged for every ten minutes at Mitcham Station. We stood and queued and slowly made our way to the driver’s cabin. For a man who had just been involved in a major accident he seemed almost chirpy as he instructed us to turn our backs and grip the bars and step down one by one down off the train. The dark cabin was almost tranquil. I thought of Neil Armstrong and how he steered the Lunar Module over a boulder strewn landscape with only seconds of fuel left. The police took our bags off of us then gripped our ankles to guide us down the train driver’s ladder. We were greeted by darkness and drizzle. There were plenty of police to guide us when we stepped off the tracks to the nearest road. An old woman behind me grumbled on about how there should be floodlights so we can see where we’re going. I ignored her just as I’d ignored several other people who had complained that night. A soul had probably perished and they couldn’t see beyond their own noses. I turned my head to the sight of hundreds of people queuing to get off the metallic train; it reminded me of a queen insect disgorging its young.

Naturally there was no shuttle of buses by the time we arrived at Mitcham Station. There was a public phone. I tossed up whether to ring home or not. Knowing that my wife would be at Yoga or even if she'd stayed home, she wouldn't be able to pick me up because the traffic was horrendous, and I couldn't give my thirteen year old son a time when I'd come home, I decided to wait for a bus. A fellow middle aged old codger came up to me and asked whether he's get into trouble because he hadn't validated his ticket yet. Our laughter drew another middle aged old codger and we decided that we three would gang up against any burly ticket inspectors that came our way.

We finally caught a sardine packed bus to Ringwood. One of my fellow middle aged mates stood next to the front window to crack jokes and help guide the bus driver who was unfamiliar with this part of town. When we arrived at Ringwood, railway workers escorted us to the correct platform to catch the train home. An extremely overweight young woman loudly crapped onto one of the staff members how she had to wait 40 minutes for a bus; I almost went over to her to tell her to shut-up.

I looked at the sign as I boarded the Belgrave train to realize I had to wait another half hour before it took off. I tried to read my book again but was drawn across the carriage to listening to this happy silver bearded old fella chatting to a friend. He seemed blissfully unaware of the attempted suicide. He talked of his love for fishing and how he never drank while casting a line, but enjoyed a beer when he wasn't. (I was determined to have a beer or three when I got home.) He made wooden toys out in his garage for charity groups and never charged for them. He showed his friend a photo he kept in his wallet of a hospitalized disabled four year old girl, and mentioned she had a look of half smiling, half in fear as she held one of his toys.

Half smiling, half in fear, the look of the bearded passenger, the train driver, the young man who spoke with me, the police who escorted me off the train, the disabled little girl, it was a lesson I was to relearn; probably the best way to deal with adversity is with a smile. There was no-one home when I came through the door with my half dozen beers. There was a written note on the kitchen bench that my wife and son were across the road with our neighbours. My wife had gone to Yoga, my son

across the road, when it was obvious I wasn't coming home soon. (So much for the need felt for a mobile phone in an emergency.) Life rolls on, or screams to a halt, regardless of our needs.

There was nothing in the news the next day. Someone had tried to kill himself, a whole train network was disrupted, there were traffic chaos everywhere, but it wasn't reported. A discreet article came out in the paper a month after the accident. It talked about black spots, clusters on the railway that are known for where young people lie on the tracks waiting to die. I sometimes recall that night when I hear the sound of a train horn in the distance or study the steel wheels of a train on my way to work.

I often think of that poor man on the tracks and the gesture of his arm. Was he waving or was it a reflex? Did he die after being cut in half or did he somehow get through it? Is he being wheeled around a hospital? God you have my pity. Lecturing is a waste of time. I should know I've been through the same dark region. I have the scars to prove it. My wife knew I'd returned when she saw the gleam come back to my eyes.

Neil Armstrong died while I wrote this story. The intelligent recluse, I'll never forget the look on his face after his moonwalk, the smiling man on the moon. Children know all about the wonder of life, some of us lose that awe, yet we're sometimes given the opportunity to relearn. A touch of madness can be a good thing.

Bio:

Mark is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favorite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has traveled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He took family leave for three years to look after his son Thomas. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.