

As the figure comes within spittin distance, ah can jist aboot make oot thur features. An aulder wife, white hair streamin aw the way tae her belt buckle.

‘Whit?’ ah ask.

‘Ah said,’ she repeats. ‘Whit dae the donkeys at Blackpool beach get fur thur lunch?’

The question ricochets against the walls and chases ma shout doon the dark tunnels.

‘Ah dunno.’

She smiles.

‘A hauf oor, same as everybody else.’

Noo the platform is alive wi the sound ae this wife’s laughter. Her body shakes fae the exertion and light fae naewhaur seems tae reflect aff her vest. Her heid tilts back and her hawns slide intae her pockets. She seems tae exist oot ae this time, oot ae this place. This isnae how ye act at the end ae yer shift on a Friday night on a dark subway platform.

‘Dae ye get it?’ she says. ‘It’s no ma best yin, mind ye, but it’s better than nuhin. Better than sittin here in silence lit you wur daein, nae offence intended. Ye wur sittin here in the dark on yer tod, in case ye didnae notice.’

Ah gie her a chuckle. ‘Aye, it’s no bad.’

Fae inside her fleece, she produces a wee electric

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lamp. She turns it on and places it on the ground, bathin us in a sharp white light. She shoots a hawn oot at me.

‘Ah’m Yotta,’ she says. ‘It’s a pleasure tae meet me, ah’m sure.’

‘Yotta?’

‘That’s correct. Y-o-t-t-a. It’s a unique name and ye’ll remember it, won’t ye? If ah’d telt ye ma name wis Alison, ye’d huv awready furgotten it by noo. Ah mean, Alison’s an awright name but, let’s be honest, parents that name thur child Alison didnae get past the first chapter in the baby name book, d’ye get whit ah’m sayin? Yotta means... it means a giant number.’

‘Cool. Ah’m Daisy.’

‘Nice tae meet ye, Daisy. Gid hing ye’re no called Alison or we’d huv oorsels an awkward wee moment here.’

We shake. Thur’s suhin interestin when ah touch her. Some feelin ah cannae pit ma fing’r on. Suhin ah’ve no felt afore. Lit when ye meet a celebrity and they huv an aura that normal folk don’t.

‘Yer colleague wisnae pleased wi me,’ ah say.

‘Colleague?’

‘The guy who went up the stairs.’

She shrugs.

‘Ah’m new here. Usually ye’d find me at HQ. This is, eh, a different kind ae shift fae whit ah’m used tae.’

‘Right. Well, ah better clear aff afore yeese shut up fur the night.’

Yotta steps tae the edge ae the platform, her black steel-capped boots restin on the raised bumps fur visually impaired folk. She stares doon intae the tunnel, intae the darkness.

‘Ye’d be as well stickin aroond, Daisy,’ she says. ‘There’ll be another yin along in a minute. Thur’s iways another train tae catch doon here. Lit clockwork. That’s whit they call it, eh? *The Clockwork Orange*. Ah dunno who “they” urr but apparently some folk call it that.’

She turns suddenly.

‘Whit happened tae yer face?’

Ah pit ma hawn tae ma mooth. Ma top lip is swollen. Ah check ma fing’rs but the blood’s awready dried. A flake ae blood seems tae be caught under ma nail but ah realise it’s the chipped paint fae earlier.

‘Ah fell on ma face,’ ah say.

Yotta narrows her mooth and sucks in air, makin a whistlin sound.

‘Fur future reference,’ she tells me. ‘Ah find breakin yer fall wi yer hawns works better. But each tae thur own. Gottae be careful these days though. Dangerous world we live in. Ah heard some lassie got knocked doon by a car at that taxi rank at Central Station. It’s lit a zoo at this time ae night. Gottae be careful indeed. But thur’s iways order in this world, even when it disnae seem like it.’

A laugh escapes ma mooth and ah tilt ma neck tae look up at Yotta.

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‘Order?’ ah say. ‘Surely ye don’t believe that. Thur’s nae order tae any ae this. The world’s chaos—jist random hings happenin aw the time.’

‘Mibbe ye’ve no been lookin hard enough.’

‘Ah’ve looked plenty. As long as people urr inconsistent, the world’s gonnae be inconsistent.’

‘Agree tae disagree. But let me ask ye an important question, Daisy.’

She crouches doon next tae me.

‘Huv ye been a gid girl this year?’

‘Who urr you meant tae be lit, Santa?’

‘No quite, but ah ken him.’

She smiles and her wrinkles glow. Aw ae her glows really. She seems brighter than the lamp. Ah cannae take ma eyes aff her.

‘You know Santa, dae ye?’ ah ask her.

‘Oor paths huv crossed. Though fur a man that only works wan day a year, he’s a hard fella tae get a haud ae. And he’s no as jolly as these fulms make him oot tae be. Jist ask Mrs Claus.’

‘Mrs Claus?’

‘Ye’re right, it’s no Mrs Claus anymair, is it? She went back tae her maiden name McCormick efter they split.’

Ah wonder whit this wife’s daein workin fur the subway. They’ve got her on the late shift on a Friday night in Cowcaddens station when she shid be daein children’s parties.

Yotta pulls a bag ae Maltesers fae her pocket. She scoops a hawnful intae her gub, then offers me the packet.

‘Naw, ah’m awright,’ ah say. ‘If ah eat anyhin right noo ah’m likely tae whitey.’

‘Your loss,’ she jist aboot says through the chocolate smeared ower her teeth. ‘Ah fuckin love these hings. Youse don’t appreciate bein able tae buy these any time ye want.’

The darkness is startin tae make me uneasy and ah decide it’s time tae go. Ah reach intae ma bag and search fur ma phone. Ah’ll need tae try and catch up wi Frances, hopefully jump in her taxi. Thur’s nae sign ae ma phone though. Ah must’ve lost it somewhaur between the pub and here.

‘Ah better be aff,’ ah say. ‘Get masel hame.’

The Maltesers urr finished. Yotta delicately folds the packet and places it in her pocket. Her tongue swirls roond her mooth lookin fur remnants.

‘Ye’ll no need a taxi,’ she says. ‘Ah telt ye. Thur’s a carriage due any minute noo.’

Ah gesture tae the screen, whaur it remains the same.
NO FUTHER TRAINS.

‘Look,’ ah say. ‘That’s them done fur the night.’

‘Listen, lassie, who works here? Me or you?’

She points tae the screen. In the few seconds ah took ma eyes aff it, it’s changed. Noo it reads, in flashin letters:

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OUTER APPROACHING.

Then, a faraway rumble. A faraway rumble that's gettin closer fast. It's comin fae the outer line.

'How did ye dae that?' ah ask her.

'Ah'm no quite sure,' she says, inspectin her hawns. 'Ah'm new at this. Worked though, didn't it? Right, quick. How many days dae ye reckon?'

Ah raise an eyebrow.

'Fourteen days?' Yotta goes on. 'That's two weeks, gid round number. But is it enough, ah wonder? Fifteen days might work, wan day fur each stop.'

'Fifteen days?' ah ask. 'Whit dae ye mean?'

'Gid shout,' she says. 'Ah'm furgettin about the secret stop under the river. Pretend ye didnae hear that. So... sixteen, then. Sixteen days. That'll be plenty ae time. Aye, sixteen days shid dae nicely.'

Yotta stares straight ahead. Her jaw clenches lit she's concentratin. Ah huv an urge tae reach oot and touch her. Tae make sure she's still real and ah'm really huvin a conversation wi her. Tae check ah didnae pass oot when ah decked it on ma way tae the subway.

'Yotta, am ah meant tae understand whit ye're on about?'

She turns her heid and looks at me again. The colour ae her eyes seems tae be swirlin and changin lit a kaleidoscope. Ah'm hypnotised by it. Mibbe ah'm mair steamin than ah thought.

‘Sorry if ah’ve been a bit mysterious,’ she says. ‘But it’ll aw become clear soon enough. The question is... urr ye ready, Daisy?’

Thur’s nae time tae respond as the sound ae the subway gets too loud tae hear anyhin ower. Rumbly and crashin roond the corner, it comes. The car seems tae be travellin at a speed faster than any other ah’ve seen afore. It screeches as it scrapes along the tunnel, makin sparks which fizz lit fireworks. Ah jump back and land on ma erse.

Yotta’s voice broadcasts ower the tannoy system. Ah realise she’s disappeared fae the platform.

‘We wid advise aw passengers tae board the outer line. This will be oor last service ae the evening. And roond and roond and roond we go.’

The three subway carriages huv come tae a halt and sit wi thur doors open. Thur’s no a soul on board as far as ah can see. Ah wait fur the driver tae poke thur heid oot tae check who’s gettin on. Naebdy appears.

‘Hullo?’ ah say.

Ah walk toward the front carriage but suhin beeps and the doors shudder lit thur gettin ready tae close. Ah hop through the nearest door. It snaps behind me and the subway begins movin again.

Ah collapse on the orange fuzzy seats. The broon flair is speckled wi orange and yella bits. A discarded hauf-drunk Irn-Bru bottle sloshes its way back and forth on

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the seats across fae me.

The outer line goes in the opposite direction fae ma flat, so ah'm twelve stops away fae Hillhead instead ae the three it wid've been on the inner. The train rumbles on and gains speed.

We don't slow doon as we approach Buchanan Street. We don't stop at aw, shootin right through it. The station passes in a blur. Thur's nae chance fur me tae get oot and check on the driver. Mibbe thur asleep at the wheel. Mibbe thur's nae driver at aw and these carriages urr oot ae control. Ah keep ma fing'rs crossed the doors open at St Enoch. Or at the very latest, West Street.

The lights in the carriage seem tae dim. The rumble ae the train starts tae soothe me. Ah rest ma eyes fur a minute. Ma lip throbs lit ma heartbeat is in ma mooth. Ah'll jist let ma eyes close fur a second. Ah'll open them back up when we get near Kelvinhall. Whit wis that Yotta wife aw aboot? She wis talkin some amount ae pish. Ah'll jist let ma eyes close fur a minute. Ah'll open them when we get tae Ibrox, jist tae be safe.