



Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:24:00

OVER THE TRACKS

By Charles Warren

March 26. 1am

‘Did you hear that?’ Peter said into the darkness.

She was nearly asleep when he spoke. Cold air slid down her back as he shifted in the bed and sat up.

‘There’s something downstairs.’

‘For God’s sake, it’s just the cat.’ Antonia Blythe drew the duvet round her neck. Peter had been such a pain these last few weeks, even worse than usual, irritable and restless, but she had no idea what was bothering him. Nor did she care.

Peter switched the light on. ‘I’m going downstairs.’

She lifted her head, screwing up her eyes against the glare of the bedside lamp. He was sitting uncertainly on the edge of the bed with his back to her. A lip of fat hung over the edge of his boxer shorts and there were whorls of hair on his pale skin. Sleep fled from her and, with sudden clarity, she wondered why she had ever found this man attractive.

She turned away from him. Richard’s back was different. Taut and always a little tanned. She snuggled into the duvet and brought

her knees up to her chest with a little spasm of pleasure at the thought of him.

She heard Peter cross the floor and she glanced up again. He had picked up his old school cricket bat that stood in a corner by the wardrobe.

'Peter..?'

But he said nothing and left the room.

EXTRACT FROM INTERVIEWS WITH BLYTHE CASE SUSPECT DARREN DUGGAN, CONDUCTED BY DETECTIVE INSPECTOR GEORGE MACINTYRE on March 31

'It was the cat, see. I had my hand down the back of the Playstation. I was pulling out the cables when this thing scratches me. I pull my hand out and knock over a pot, a vase or something, I dunno. Next thing I hear this bloke coming down the stairs and the light goes on. Broke Number One rule, never wake up the folk in the house. I didn't want no trouble.'

'You were in his house.'

'Yeah, I know, but... I never hurt anyone in ten years of house breakin'.

'That long?'

'Look at me, I'm only 5ft7. He come at me with a cricket bat. He went mental, like he'd been saving it all up. Didn't say anything, just swung at my head.'

'Go on.'

'I couldn't get out. He got me in a corner. Look, I didn't want to hurt him. I called the ambulance, didn't I?'

'Go on.'

'I picked up this poker, by the fireplace, it was like a toy sword. Look...we've been through this before...'

'Come on, Darren. This is for the record.'

'I stuck him one. There you are, you got it now for your tape, for the fuckin' record. I stuck him with the poker.'

'Don't scream, don't scream,' the man hissed. He was so close that she could see the blackheads clustered on his nose. He was holding their poker an inch from her throat. There was blood on it.

'Help me.' It was Peter. He lay on his side as a dark stain grew around him on the lounge carpet. His voice was a whisper. 'Call an ambulance, please...'

The man with the poker hesitated, backing away from her, shifting from one foot to the other, his eyes jumping back and forth from her to her husband. 'Go on then, ring. Just the address.'

Her trembling fingers missed the numbers on the iPhone that she had brought down from the bedroom. She wondered why she hadn't just hid in the bathroom. She tried again. A woman's voice asked her what service she wanted but she could not speak.

'For fuck's sake.' The little man with the poker grabbed the phone, gave the address and said there was a man with a knife wound. He brushed the phone on his sleeve and dropped it on the sofa. 'You are coming with me, lady.' He picked up Peter's long cashmere coat where it lay on the back of the sofa and threw it at her. 'Put this on over your jimjams... and some shoes, sharpish.'

'Why that house, Darren?'

'Flash motor on the drive. Neat, tidy house. Usually means they like their gadgets... games consoles, streaming stuff, new cameras. Usually means they got more security too, but that makes it more fun.'

'Unless you stab someone. The car on the drive... same one you drove her away in? Same one we found burnt out at the back of Sainsbury's?'

'She drove.'

'How did you manage that, Darren?'

'She did what I told her. I still had the poker.'

'Why did you kidnap her?'

'I had to. She'd seen me.'

'What on earth were you going to do with her, Darren?'

March 26: 8:30pm

Antonia was sitting at the head of a narrow bed. She could hear two men through the plasterboard walls around her. First, the voice of the man who had stabbed Peter, now plaintive and apologetic. The other voice was deeper, confident and burdened with menace. She pulled her knees up under her chin and listened.

'What are you going to do with her, Darren? What was going through your head?'

'I got to think.'

'That's not one of your strong points, is it? Stick to nicking gear. I come here expecting you'd have some nice stuff for me and what do I find? You've killed a bloke and grabbed his wife.'

'He's dead?' Darren's voice had sunk to a whisper. Antonia stifled a cry and slipped off the bed to listen at the door. Peter was dead. She stared round the tiny room, at the sagging bed and synthetic pink cover on it. But no tears came.

'It's all over the news, you dickhead. I forget you young'uns don't look at a paper. Listen: "Accountant Peter Blythe was found stabbed to death at his luxury home at the weekend. Police fear he was the victim of a burglary that went wrong" – they got that right -- "His wife Antonia, 38, is missing and may have been abducted by the killer". There's a picture of her ... very nice.'

'Listen, Dave, I'll sort it.'

'How exactly?' There was a long silence before the man called Dave chuckled. 'Now I know why you pinched her, Darren boy. You fancied her. An expensive bit of blonde tottie installed in your luxury penthouse apartment.'

Antonia retreated to the bed as Dave's laughter seemed to come rolling under the door.

'You fancied her, didn't you Darren? 'Don't suppose a little scrap like you has many girlfriends. You, er, try it on with her?'

'No, I never laid a finger on her.'

'Who's a jury going to believe, Darren, a respectable young married woman...or you? Let me tell you how it's adding up ... aggravated burglary, murder and kidnap. Maybe we could add sexual assault to that.'

'I told you, I didn't touch her. I ... saved her life.'

March 27

On the second day Darren let her out for more than just visits to the loo and food. He told her to sit at the table in flat's kitchen and made two mugs of pale tea.

She was still wearing her cotton pyjamas and Peter's long coat. She pulled it tight around her body as he sank into the seat opposite her.

He avoided her eyes and pushed a newspaper across the table to her. On the front of it was the story she had heard Dave reading aloud – Peter's death in five paragraphs.

'I'm sorry,' Darren started. 'I didn't want...'

'Don't, don't you dare...' She turned away, biting her lip hard to stop the sob that came barging up into her throat. But she could not stop the tears that spilt down her face. 'How much longer are you going to keep me here? What am I doing here?'

She wanted to scream, but stopped herself, remembering with a stab of fear the taut face that had threatened her with a poker.

But even through her tears, she could see no sign of that face. As she stared at him, he seemed to shrink still further, stooped apologetically over his cup of tea and studying the table top. She snatched up the paper and ran to the bedroom.

Another day stole by, most of it spent in that bedroom brooding over what she read in the newspaper, especially the last paragraph: 'Police sources revealed that Mr Blythe's business was heavily in debt and that he had been facing a bankruptcy petition.'

Bankruptcy. So that was what had been making Peter so hard to live with, so angry. Not that they had done much living together in the last two years. She had her City job and the social life that

bubbled around it. He was often asleep by the time she came home, a little tipsy sometimes and leaking the aura of crowded, chattering wine bars.

And then there was Richard. They worked at the same merchant bank, had the same friends. They would slip away from those wine bars for a few hours in his flat above the Barbican before she took the last train out to suburbia.

He would be there when she got out of this and this time there would be no Peter. And, as each hour passed, she became more confident that she would get out, more confident that the boy, for that was how she saw him even though he could only be a few years younger than herself, would not harm her. When they were together, he hovered, watching her like she some prized and rare animal. As her fear eased, some of her poise returned.

He cooked her meals, greasy eggs and oven chips. At first she tried to eat it, but then she discovered his simple disappointment when she pushed the plate away.

‘I’m not eating that.’

‘Please, you got to eat.’ She could tell he was wondering whether to take the plate away.

‘When are you going to let me go?’

‘I dunno. Dave says we got to wait.’

She shivered. Dave was different. She has seen him once, working his way down the battery of locks on the inside of the front door as he was leaving. He had turned to stare at her, knowing eyes sunk in a mask of fat. His thick pale arms and beer belly strained at a washed out red T-shirt.

‘What’s Dave got to do with it?’

'Dave's the boss.' The boy shrugged and looked at her unhappily.

'I need some clothes.' It was true: she had been in the same cotton pyjamas for days and, in spite of her husband's coat, she was cold. Each day she had been allowed to use Darren's sticky little bathroom with its scaled taps and sputtering shower. But she missed her own things, her soaps, lotions, shampoo and the snug feel of her underwear.

'Clothes?'

'I can't stay in these forever. I have £100. Look.'

Darren snatched the money. 'A hundred quid! Where'd you get that from?'

'My husband's coat. It was in one of the pockets.'

'Anything else in there?'

'Will you get the clothes for me?'

Darren grinned. 'I could just keep the money.'

She looked at him, letting a little contempt seep into her gaze and seeing his grin buckle. 'You could. It's nothing to what you have already done to me.'

Darren counted the money and again avoided meeting her eye. 'What do you want then?'

Antonia felt a small thrill of triumph. The pathetic little bastard. 'Is there a Marks and Spencer near here, a Boots? Have you got a pen?'

She tore a page out of the newspaper and begun writing over the pale grey tint of a three-column photograph of her husband. 'You'll find all these in Marks. It's all pretty simple, blue jeans, size 12 long, navy cotton sweater, size 12 and these. Can you read this?'

He craned over her. 'I'm not buying them.'

'Knickers size 12?' She glanced up. The little shit had blushed. His awkwardness made her want to slap him. She took a deep breath and smiled at his embarrassment. 'Plenty of men buy underwear for women, Darren. People will think you have a girlfriend.'

He picked up the list and stared at it, as if he was trying to learn it by heart. 'All right,' he said. 'I'll go.'

'How did you save her life then, Darren?'

'I let her go, I let her get out.'

'You are asking a lot of me here.'

'They said she was trouble, they were thinking about doing her in. Said there was no way round it. So I left the door unlocked when I went out.'

'Who's "they", Darren?'

Antonia made herself wait a full five minutes before she tried the door. She'd heard him turn the key, but maybe, just maybe, he hadn't really locked it.

She wandered round the flat. The bedroom looked out on ranks of terraced houses and a row of exhausted trees. She entered the lounge. Black imitation leather chairs and a huge television sucked up the light from a wide shallow window.

She was barely five miles from her own home! There, three storeys below her, were the silver lines of a railway. Her gaze followed them as they curved into a station...her station. This was one of those dreary low-rise blocks that she passed every day on her

way to Waterloo. She would glance up at the tatty window frames and congratulate herself that she didn't have to live behind them. Then she would return to her laptop and forget about them.

She could not stop her heart racing as she came to the flat's front door. Two bolts were flung back but there were two locks and a yale between them. Her hand came up to turn the latch.

Inches from her face, on the other side of the door, someone sniffed. There was a rattle of keys and she backed away. It was Dave.

He stared at her. 'What have you done with Darren?'

'He's gone out.'

'You wouldn't happen to know where?'

'To buy me some clothes.'

'Clothes? Has he gone soft in the head?'

'I can't go on wearing pyjamas. When are you...'

Dave chuckled. 'Why don't you just wear nothing? That's what I'd like.'

'Piss off,' she snapped... and regretted it.

'You what?' Dave's arm shot from his side and suddenly his fat hand was behind her neck. The pressure on her nape pulled them closer. His warning came in a gust of stale cigarettes and takeaways. 'You listen to me, you stuck up bitch. I don't know what little game you're playing with Darren, but don't try it with me.'

He seemed to think for a moment and smiled. With a shudder Antonia realised that the fingers behind her head had slid up into her hair. He was caressing her. 'You are pretty, aren't you?' He pulled her still closer and his belly nudged her hip.

‘What’s going on?’ It was Darren. He had slipped through the open door and stood behind Dave’s shoulder. Antonia glimpsed a little anger in his face.

‘Darren!’ Dave released her. ‘Been on a shopping spree?’ He snatched a Marks and Spencer carrier bag from Darren and peered into it. ‘Where’d you get the money for this lot then?’

‘She had it. It was in her coat.’

‘And you spent it on her. Jesus. You’re up for a good thumping.’ Dave passed the bag to Antonia. He kept his eyes on Darren. ‘You, you put your nice new clothes on. Darren and me, we got some talking to do.’

Antonia ran to the bathroom. Tears pricked her eyes as she pushed the tiny door bolt home. For a moment she thought she would retch as she sat on the edge of the bath. She tried not to think of what might have happened. She forced herself to her feet, to unpack the clothes and run a basin of water. Outside she heard the rumble of Dave’s voice and Darren’s raised now and then in protest. She began to douse her face in the steaming water.

Dave was gone when she emerged. She felt better – cleaner and warmer.

Darren sat at the kitchen table. When he finally looked up, there were tears in his eyes. He opened his mouth to say something but could not, turning his face away again and walking quickly to his own room.

A little later Antonia heard the door slam and, emerging from her bedroom, found that the front door of the flat had been left unlocked.

'Did "they" give you that black eye? That broken rib? Speak to me, Darren... all right, you just listen, tell me if I'm right. I think "they" is a certain Dave Stanton. Not a very nice man at all. You nick stuff, he finds buyers. He's got half a dozen blokes like you. Now we both have a problem. Mr Stanton is a difficult bloke to pin down. We've never been able to make a case. Your problems are rather larger, but I'm inclined to believe you. In fact, I think you fell for her, you poor bastard. It doesn't have to be a murder charge and your ... your act of mercy, could be taken into consideration.'

March 29

Antonia slid low in her huge bath, letting the water lap at her chin. At last they had all gone, even her mother. She was alone, no more friends and neighbours with their whispers of concern and gasping curiosity. And that policeman, MacIntyre, with his endless questions, though he seemed less interested in her kidnapper than in Dave. She had taken her phone off the hook and not bothered to recharge her mobile. Soon Richard would be here.

Mother had been hardest to get rid of. 'You really shouldn't be left alone so soon,' she had said. Dear mother, she had thrown away the broken vase, kept the cat fed and put a huge rug over the lounge carpet. The police wouldn't let her get rid of it just yet. She'd even asked them for the poker back.

Antonia stood up and looked at herself in the full-length mirror opposite the bath. Not bad, she thought, watching clumps of foam slide lovingly over her hips and stomach. The skin on her face had even survived all that fried food and cheap soap.

The little shit had left the door unlocked. She never did work out what she was trying to tell her, what he was blubbering about. As she dried herself, she remembered her cautious descent on the stairs outside the flat and the bang of the service door as she ran into the street. She had thought about walking to the railway station but had only got about a quarter of a mile before a police car turned a corner in front of her.

Her body tingled with warmth and expectation as she pulled on her underwear.

'She's quite something, isn't she Darren? Put on quite a show at our press conference. The journos loved her. No wonder you were so...so enamoured.'

'I ain't grassing.'

Richard stood in the doorway, clutching a bunch of roses.

'Hi...' said Antonia and pulled the door wide open for him. She knew she looked good.

He stepped into the house carefully, running a hand through his abundant hair and glancing left and right, but not at her. She flung her arms round him and pulled him tight, snuggling her cheek against the Egyptian cotton of his striped shirt.

He kissed the top of her head. 'These are for you.'

She released him and lay the roses on a table in the hall. 'More flowers. My mum buys me flowers, everybody buys me flowers. You know what I want, come on, I've opened some wine.'

She took his hand and led him into the lounge. He perched on the arm of the sofa. The cat, curled up on a cushion next to him, raised its head to look ... and sank into sleep again.

‘What’s the matter?’ said Antonia.

‘I’ve not been here before. It just seems a little odd.’

‘Well, you couldn’t before, could you?’

‘No, and...’

‘And what?’

‘Well, you seem like nothing has happened. I know you can look after yourself, but this... I mean, your husband died in here.’

‘Yes, he did, and you thought he was a bastard and I no longer loved him. He was pretty horrible to me, you know.’

‘Yes, but...’

Antonia realised she was getting angry. This was not how she wanted it to be. She handed him a wine glass. ‘I’ve been kidnapped, stuck in some shitty flat for days, threatened and questioned. What I want now is a little warmth. I want you. Don’t be distant with me, Richard. We are fun, we have a good time. At least, that’s what I thought.’

‘We did but I think, I think maybe we should cool it a bit now. You’ve been through a lot.’

‘Cool it? What does that mean, for God’s sake.’

Richard shifted to the edge of the chair arm. ‘Perhaps we should see a bit less of each other. You need to get straightened out.’

Antonia heard her voice tremble. ‘Is this what you came round to tell me?’ Richard’s wine was untasted. She could tell that all he

wanted to do was go. 'Why? Afraid I might get clingy? You needn't worry, I'm tough. You said so yourself.'

'You need to get Peter's estate sorted. Sort yourself out.'

'His estate? His debts you mean.' Richard avoided her gaze. 'That's it! You are worried that I might ask you to help me out. Well, you are right. I thought we'd do this together. Together, you and I, like lovers.'

'I'm sorry, Toni.' He stood up.

'Please Richard...' She heard the plea in her voice and felt a stab of disgust. She would not let him see her cry.

Richard tried to puncture the silence with platitudes. He would call next week. It was best for both of them. It would give her a bit of space.

When he had gone, she sank on to her sofa and wept, watched only by the cat. Later, she finished the bottle of wine and went to bed. Tomorrow she had a press conference to go to.

'I dunno why you had that press conference if you knew where to find me.'

'Yes, she gave a pretty good description of where you lived. We didn't expect you'd be on the floor, half conscious. Your pal, Dave?'

'I ain't grassin.'

'I'll tell you why we had the conference. Theatre. We present a damsel in distress to the public, and lo and behold, the next day we have an arrest. It didn't work out quite the way we planned, what with what she said about her boyfriend.'

March 30

Antonia was waiting for the right question. So far they had been pretty ordinary. Were the police hopeful of catching her kidnappers? How did she feel? Did she ever think of taking her own life? She laughed at that one. She knew she looked pretty good and wondered if Richard was watching, and that wanker who kidnapped her.

‘Were you sexually assaulted, Mrs Blythe?’ It was a woman who put the question, blonde and attractive like herself, extending a small recorder over the head of another journalist.

Antonia hesitated. Her lawyer and that detective, Inspector MacIntyre, had fielded some of the trickier stuff. He jumped in: ‘Mrs Blythe has given us no indication that she was attacked in this way.’

After that the questions seemed to ebb. The photographers reviewed their pictures and the reporters started talking to one another.

‘Are you receiving counselling, Mrs Blythe?’ It was the same reporter, watching her closely.

‘It’s been offered to me, but no. I have many supportive friends and my family has been wonderful. However, I would like to say that the one person I was counting on the most to help me through this has turned his back on me. My boyfriend of three years dumped me the day after I escaped.’

‘Christ,’ whispered her lawyer. The reporters were silent for a second and then they all spoke at once. MacIntyre appeared to be about to intervene, but turned away and shrugged.

‘You were having an affair?’

‘Yes, I was.’ She had to be careful not to lose their sympathy. ‘Peter and I had not been happy for some years. I sought affection elsewhere and, when I needed it the most, I was abandoned.’

The next day it was all over the papers. McIntyre called to tell her they had arrested a small-time burglar, Darren Duggan. They had also questioned a Dave Stanton but a number of witnesses have already come forward to vouch that was in Northumberland last week, looking after his mother.

‘Well, Darren. I’ve got to charge you in about an hour. Your thoughts on Mr Stanton? He says he was up in Morpeth looking after his dear old mum. Antonia Blythe says he was around a lot, threatened her and tried to grope her, and you prevented it. That would stand in your favour.’

‘He was up north all week.’

March 31

‘Look at this.’ Richard slapped a copy of the Daily Mail in front of her.

Antonia was seated at her kitchen table, nursing a cup of fresh coffee and looking at the messages on her phone. ‘I’ve seen it.’

She had too. A big picture of herself (a nice one) and a headline in block capitals ‘Ordeal of kidnap wife’ with a smaller headline beneath adding ‘City girl tells how callous lover dumped her after astonishing escape’.

How could she? Richard demanded. He was the laughing stock of the office. The chairman had been cool with him that morning. It was in all the other papers too... even the FT. The bank did not like this sort of publicity.

Antonia looked up from her phone. She was glad she had not slammed the door in his face. There was publicity and publicity. The chairman had rung that morning to offer her a fortnight's compassionate leave -- she didn't want it -- and told her she had shown real guts.

Richard clamped his hands on the edge of the table and thrust his face into Antonia's. 'Why?'

'Because you dumped me when I most needed you, when...' A movement behind Richard silenced her. There, framed by the kitchen door, was Dave.

Richard saw the fear in her face and spun round. 'Who the...'

'Shut it,' said Dave. His hair was pulled up under a ski hat and he was wearing gloves and a synthetic boiler suit. 'Shut it, both of you and you, madam, just listen.'

'How dare you,' Richard started. Dave's hand rose and fell. There was a smacking sound and Richard dropped to his knees in front of a saucepan cupboard.

Dave blocked the only exit from the kitchen. 'This the bloke the papers said dumped you?'

'Yes.'

'You could do better.'

Antonia did not answer. Her heart was racing.

'First things first, madam. I am not going to touch you. However, you should know that the policeman posted at your gate is currently in pursuit of some joyriders who happened by. What's more, I've got more alibis than the police can shake a stick at.'

'I'm here to ask you a favour. My good friend Darren's lawyer tells me they're trying to make out that I was part of this, that I assaulted you. Now we both know that's not true...more or less.'

'I told them you were there, you must know that.'

'So drop the bit about the assault. We both know it never happened. Say you made it up to get back at us. That way they'll go easier on Darren – he's been a good boy and kept his gob shut – and they'll have nothing on me. It's just your word against half a dozen, including my dear mother, who say I was up north.'

'What if I don't?'

'You saw how easy it was for me to get in here. Do as I ask, you'll never hear from me again. Ever. You are trouble.'

'That's it?'

'That's it.' Dave grinned malevolently. 'You know Darren let you out, don't you? I had other plans...but it seems simpler if we leave it at this, eh?' He didn't wait for her answer and vanished from the doorway.

Antonia heard him let himself out of the front door. She sighed hard, trying to slow her heart and wondering if he really had gone.

Richard scrambled to his feet. 'I'll call the police.'

'No, don't,' she said. 'Why don't you just go. Please.'

When he had gone, her cat materialised and mewed. Her hand was trembling as she reached down to stroke its head.

The train was quiet and Antonia easily found a seat. It was good to get back into her work routine. A man of about 50 in a navy blue suit looked up from his FT, drank her in, and resumed reading.

She wondered if the estate agents had put the house details on their website yet. She opened her laptop as the doors beeped and the train lurched and began to creep out of the station. She could not stop herself glancing up to look for that tatty low-rise block where she had spent three nights. With a jolt she wondered if Dave was up there, a pale square face watching through grimy glass. But the train was accelerating now and the flats fell behind, one building among scores of others that flickered past the train's windows.

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