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A GEORGE CROSS MYSTERY

TIM SULLIVAN



An Aries Book

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For Ottilie and Marlowe.
Welcome to the world.

1

The man in seat C24 on the 10 a.m. Bristol Temple Meads to London Paddington train service was studying the young girl sitting across the aisle from him with her mother. The five-year-old was engrossed, eyes unfeasibly wide open, like a tiny Pixar character, her breath steaming up the glass, as she watched two raindrops racing each other in diagonal rivulets across the carriage window. He wondered whether she'd placed a silent bet with herself as to which would get to the other side first. She should've done. What would be the point otherwise?

It was a gloomy, grey September day. A blanket of cloud above, so thick it looked like a ruffled duvet. But instead of offering warmth and comfort, it just promised persistent rain. But at least everyone on the train was on their way to wherever they were heading, dry and warm. For a time, that was. Seven minutes, to be precise. This was when the train pulled up sharply to a shuddering halt. The man in C24 looked down at the River Avon which ran alongside this section of track some yards below. A four was rowing, followed by a coach in a small motorboat barking instructions through a megaphone. It was a further five minutes, when the early morning rowers were well out of sight, that a collective unease ran through the carriages of the GWR train. This was no normal delay.

'We are just being held at a red light. It shouldn't be too long till we are on our way again,' said the guard over the train tannoy.

For most of the passengers this announcement sounded perfectly routine. All except for the man in carriage C, seat twenty-four. He knew it had nothing to do with a red light. That wasn't the reason for the delay. He could hear the alarm, the sense of shock, a desperate attempt to keep it together, in the guard's voice. After a further fifteen minutes it was clear to everyone that something was very wrong indeed. Passengers started to fret about being late for appointments, the possibility of missing flights from Heathrow. Phone calls were made. Texts sent. People wanted to feel they were actually doing something in this hopeless situation. To make them feel less impotent. The train then began to move again. But slowly.

'Ladies and gentlemen, due to an incident on the train, this service will terminate at the next stop. We request that all passengers remain seated when we reach Bath Spa.'

C24 was annoyed. He should've timed it better. But he'd had no choice. He'd had to act when the opportunity presented itself. Too late now. As the train pulled into the station with the city's Georgian buildings in light Bath stone rising from it, the first thing that was immediately noticeable was the number of British Transport Police on the platform.

'Will all passengers please remain in their seats. To repeat, there has been an incident on the train. Police will be asking for contact details of all passengers and possibly statements from those situated in carriage J. This train will terminate here. All tickets will be valid for the next scheduled train for Paddington departing in twenty-five minutes.'

There was a collective sigh in the carriage. Predictably, some people got up to gather their things, ready to leave the train, as if the announcement to stay seated had no bearing on them. Like passengers on a plane crowding the aisle immediately after the

seat belt sign has been extinguished after landing, in the absurd belief that it would enable them to disembark significantly quicker.

After he'd given the police false contact details, C24 left the carriage carrying two items of luggage, only one of which was his.

The other belonged to the man he'd killed in the toilet of carriage J.

2

Detective Sergeant George Cross wasn't one for taking a lot of personal time off work, if any at all. But recently he'd done just that. This was to help his mother clear out her house in Gloucester, which had now been sold, and move her down to Bristol, where she would live with George's father, Raymond. He'd found it quite an exhausting process as he determined to do it with immense efficiency for the benefit of his mother. He'd arrived back at work quite fatigued, but at least he could console himself that things had gone well. Her relocation was for purely practical reasons. Christine had left George and his father when he was a small child and had only recently reappeared in their lives. This new arrangement was one of companionship for her and Raymond, as well as Christine being a part-time carer for her ex-husband. Her second husband, Duncan, had died a couple of years before so it was a perfect arrangement which George allowed himself to take complete credit for. He had initially been suspicious and resistant to his mother's re-emergence into their lives. This was somewhat ironic as she'd only made contact with him after she'd discovered George himself had been enquiring after her in Gloucester. An irony which would have soared directly over George's head with several feet to spare.

Clearing out a parent's house is often an emotionally taxing time for offspring. Whether it be in the wake of a death, or simply downsizing because of age and practicality, going through someone

else's life, particularly if they and the memories you are boxing up are well known to you, is a stark reminder of how short one's own life is. To be reminded of one's own mortality. For George this wasn't so. The life he was helping to pack up, sell off or donate to charity had nothing to do with him. Its existence simply illustrated the vacuum of time his mother had been out of his life. It served solely as a reminder of how long it had been. A lifetime, pretty much. A life she'd led away from them in the decades she'd been absent.

He and Christine were shocked at how little value was placed by various dealers on some of the antiques she had collected lovingly over the years. She needed to dispose of a lot of them, as there would be no room for everything in Raymond's flat. George began to feel that if you were to believe what a couple of the dealers in question said about the parlous state of the antiques market, when justifying their derisory offers, the antiques business was completely dead. It was a wonder that they were able to survive at all. But then, the sight of the same dealers driving away in a variety of Range Rover Sports and Maserati SUVs cast doubt on their plaintive protestations. George began to feel the antiques business was a particularly tawdry one which preyed on the elderly and vulnerable to extend these thieving magpies' margins. It was also noticeable how a couple of them hastily revised their estimates when furnished with the knowledge that George was a police officer.

The sad task, for Christine at least, was eventually completed and she moved into Raymond's flat. George had come to appreciate the benefits of her living with his father. It wasn't so much a weight off his mind – his father had never felt like a burden of any kind to him – as a comfort to know that his father had not just help on hand but, more importantly, companionship. Something George himself could live perfectly happily without.