

ROBERT RILEY

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The Messenger Arc: The Underground Inanimate

Two weeks into my journey to Australia, I have had ample time to look back and reflect on the path that got me to this place. The symbolic message that Talia had given me at the age of 6 had appeared several times in the recent months. What it means, I do not know... yet. At the age of 22, I was asked for a favor from a person who once gave me freedom.

It was during the parachute accident cover-up case through which I met the Deputy Commissioner Graham Harvey. He was the only person who acted with an open mind in the case of Amanda Jones. Enough to believe that the audio recording that panicked Grant Taylor into his confession was not falsified evidence. In our final meeting he told me, "Robert, it was what it was. I don't want to see you getting involved in anything like this ever again!"*

He called me no less than a year after. I'd kept my end of the bargain, but now he had something important for me to see.

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The shutters on the Elephant and Castle Underground station had only been down for at least ten minutes before they were raised to let DC Harvey and myself through the gates. We were greeted by men wearing white hard hats and full orange luminous body suits. They escorted us to the control room and within seconds, a night time contractor pushed a hard hat in my eye-line. I expect this of the dead, but sometimes the living do things that also take me by surprise.

'Once we get down to the tunnels, you will need to be wearing one of these too.' He said with raised eyebrow. I immediately looked at DC Harvey who nodded that I should remove my "Venice bought short brimmed hat" and put it on a spare hook next to the wall of monitors. Off we all walked into the depths of mystery... quite literally. We strolled down the inactive escalators deeper and deeper into the guts of the Underground.

Along the way, I asked again for a little more information; something to fill in the void between here and the tunnels. I knew that the underground was a pretty impressive place. I knew that in the still of the night, there was something unknown surrounding the experience that is otherwise consumed by the sound of the many people who packed these stations out day in, and day out. The silence allowed for all the other sounds to play out from the pipes, the creaking, the escalators and the sound of newspapers fluttering in the breeze that came from the pitch black tunnels every now and then.

D.C. Harvey didn't want to tell me anything until we got into the tunnels. Flashlights and hard hats - I really didn't like the idea. I figured whatever spirits were down there spent a good amount of the day being ignored. I imagined they'd take all that energy from the day and blast through the night: The pipes, the electricity pumped into these networks would be immense too, so there would be a degree of psychological and philological circumstances that would stand out putting more color into the mix.

We had the spiel from the head underground foreman: 268 stations, 400 KM of rail road track. I learnt more about the underground tube network than I knew my reason for coming down here to the London Underground station at a quarter to one on a Tuesday morning. I asked Harvey again as we passed

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through the turn-style and onto the causeway that led to the cold and drafty platform station deep below.

‘Nothing but shit scared workers.’ Harvey said. We walked through a staff only Exit onto the platform. Three workers in hard hats were there to greet us, one of which cautiously moved forward to shake my hand; this is where I got embarrassed, as I reached out to shake the hand, I realised too late that he was a spirit, and there were only two men there to meet us. The ghost of the worker glided away and vanished into side corridor leaving me with my hand outstretched, clasping the hand of dead air. This has happened to be once before. Sometimes I get nervous and don’t see as I should. That’s another reason why I shouldn’t say yes when I’m invited in on these cases. I decided to move on.

‘Is there a chance one of you TWO are the reason why I’m here?’ I asked using my shaking hand as a pointer instead.

D.C. Harvey introduced me to Harrison from Sierra Leone, a strong silent type, and Brian, whose accent led me to believe he was from Glasgow – or thereabouts. They explained that they saw somebody in the tunnel a tall man wearing a hat, not too dissimilar to mine which I’d left in the control room office up top. I looked past an image of an old lady waiting for a train that never came, past a boy with a shaved head waving at me from black pit of the track and finally, my eyes *settled* further into the blacked out tunnel where I couldn’t see anything but darkness. I turned and gestured to Harrison and Brian to lead the way.

Before hopping down with them onto the track, I was told about safety: where to walk and where not too. For the most part, the tunnel had been shut down, but there were other concerns - concerns that the boy on the tracks behind me laughed at before melting down in tears; I don’t need to explain what his deal was but it was obviously a sad ending to a deeply troubled young man.

Down into the train tunnel we went. For the first few minutes of walking I looked back to see the light from the platform fade gradually behind me, and to see D.C. Harvey who had only just been joined by a worker and had started on behind, giving me plenty of room to be with Harrison and Brian as they explained what they saw.

‘He breathed heavy, and seemed to move from side to side as if looking for a way out.’ Brian said.

Harrison didn’t explain a lot beyond saying, ‘it is farther doon-deh.’ And ‘watch out for de rails and de splitters.’

With our flashlights dimly illuminating the ground, I have to admit that I felt uneasy in the darkness, worried about two things: falling on my ass and more importantly, seeing a light from a train coming towards us. At one moment, I heard what sounded like a train, followed by a chilled gust of wind that blew dust into my face.

‘Is that a train?’ I said as I threw up a flashlight to my own face so the workers could see me.

‘No.’ Harrison responded, also throwing the torch onto his dark face, ‘it just an echo from one of de service lifts at de next station.’

‘Any sound, anything you see or feel is ten times worse; you know what I mean, laddie?’ Brian added.

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I nodded and threw the light back down into our path. It was then that I saw movement. A vague shadow moved back, out of the beam of my flashlight. I stopped and calmly asked if they'd seen it too.

Harrison seemed to be more nervous now. 'What? Do you mean... you see 'em?'

I couldn't answer. I didn't know what a "him" was in these dark tunnels at least. As we started to walk ahead, we heard the sound of slow paced feet moving up ahead.

'Who's there?' I said loudly, hastening my pace to catch up. My instincts were suddenly getting clear. As Harrison and Brian stopped, I moved forward even faster. I heard D.C. Harvey call behind me asking if everything was alright. I moved forward until I knew I was walking at the same pace as the noise I was following. Two feet plodding out of step with my own. I moved quicker, and then my flash light caught sight of the shoes, the legs, and the torso. I flipped the flashlight higher and caught sight of the hat. The boys behind me called out, asking if I'd seen him. I hushed them down and suddenly, the dark form stopped still. I unfortunately hadn't stopped moving, and within a breath, I stumbled, falling through the man with the wide brim hat, and landing on all fours inches away from the rails. Sitting up, I turned to see D.C. Harvey, Harrison and Brian approach me. I looked around and couldn't see a thing. I reached for my flashlight that had been flickering after landing on the ground at my feet. Swinging the light to see further into the darkness, all I could see was the darkness reflecting back.

'Did you see him?' Harrison paused, but then insisted on an answer, 'Well?'

I told them that there was somebody there, but I had to go on without them if I were to make proper contact with him. I asked if they would go back. D.C. Harvey and the workers relayed safety regulations to me as argumentation against it.

'What if it's a real living person?' D.C. Harvey said as he stretched out his hand to help me to my feet. I threw him a look with my flashlight and told him straight.

'I went through him.' I said brushing the dust from my hands, 'Believe me, he's very much "dead"!''

I finally got them to agree to one hour alone in the tunnel. They would return for me when the time is up. I watched as they walked back to the station platform cutting through the darkness with their flashlights as they went. I sat on the ground, flashlight aimed downwards until they were gone. The cold air made me shudder as it passed me. I was more aware of the feeling, the sounds that surrounded me. I picked up my flashlight, faced the darkness and announced.

'It's just you and me now.'

I turned off the flashlight. It was time to think sensory. I kept the flashlight handy, just in case, and began to walk deeper. My anxiety rose. I would like to say I was sure about what I was doing, but it seemed this entity was into playing games. He may need a touch of fear to get him closer. I carried on walking. Traces of light darted as I scanned from left to right. The sound above me of movement caught me off guard. I refused to be taken into this time, and despite my heart going ten-to-the-dozen, I remained focused on the darkness that lay ahead.

The air suddenly changed. I could smell old books. You know... that dusty smell you get when you flick through an old reference book in the public library. It was an odd scent and I was drawn to it. I walked three steps before I heard what I thought was a firecracker followed by a heavy thud echo through the

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tunnel. The thud was close; no more than ten feet in front of me. I expected to hear somebody behind call and ask if that was me. Nobody said anything.

I crept gently towards the possible origin of the sound. With my torch now on, I aimed the beam at the ground. There it was - a rectangular block sat amidst a black miasma of startled dust. I approached it. It was a brown hardback covered book. The picture and the smell of old books matched perfectly. I reached down and carefully turned the main cover. Inside was blank paper. Suddenly my flashlight tilted upwards as if by its own will. I found it hard to move. Suddenly, in my view was a face of a man, complete with hat and heavy rain coat. He reached down and closed the book before fluttering away into the darkness before I even had a chance to breathe. I wondered if there was something he didn't want me to see. I watched as the dust settled around the book. I looked into the hazy blackness in the distance, but saw nothing, and I heard nothing more than the beating of my heart which throbbed through my ears.

I picked up the book, waited for a moment for the figure to react. Nothing happened. It actually felt okay to hold it. The atmosphere went from one of fear to one where I felt right at ease. I took the book back with me through the tunnel, back into the ambient light of the station platform. I thought about concealing my find, but I didn't see the point.

To my surprise, I arrived to see D.C. Harvey, Harrison and Brian sitting looking bored waiting for me to return. They claimed they heard no firecracker sound or even that heavy resounding thud from the tunnel.

'Oh?' I replied wondering if it was all in my head. The two anxious workers didn't care to ponder anymore on my confusion and asked me what I had discovered.

'I found this.' I said holding the book up for them to see. They all looked at me very puzzled once more. I looked over at the reflection of me in one of the back lit advertorials that was out of order. My hand appeared empty. This was another moment of embarrassment and something of a mystery for me to work out for myself. *They must have thought I was another one of those crazy loons waving their hands over, acting out all weird just for show... how foolish did I feel.*

I lowered my hand and acted as if I had not finished my thought which now turned into a humiliating stutter. I had to think quickly... '...this tunnel... is very disorientating. The darkness and the sense of not being able to see far enough ahead is probably making you see things that you want to see.'

I felt myself get hot under the collar with what was a lie and brushed beads of sweat from my forehead, *which left a black streak of soot as I wiped away the last shred of dignity I had left.*

'Perhaps taking portable floodlights down there would be a good idea.' D.C. Harvey looked at me knowingly. He was trained to spot a liar. 'Harrison, Brian, when all said and done; There's nothing down in that tunnel that's going to hurt you. The lack of human element takes me out of the picture. The rest is in the hands of your superior. Thank you.'

There was a round of mixed pleasantries. Harrison stayed quiet however. You could tell he wasn't happy still with the work he had to do late at night in those tunnels. Brian seemed okay with it although he was skeptical that his superior would agree to spend more money on equipment that would help suppress their "fear cage" anxieties.

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Once we were outside and clear of the station, D.C. Harvey and I went our separate ways. I went home and looked at the book that nobody else could see. *A Phantom journal?* I thought as I stared at the cover. When I opened the first page, I was eerily surprised. Written on that first page was a letter... addressed to me directly.

Dear Robert,

Thank you for taking this diary into your hands.

Three things: Yes. It is true; nobody else can see it but you.

Yes. I was in that tunnel, but I won't be there anymore.

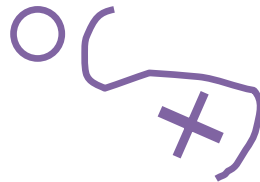
I'm right here.

I'd like to introduce myself: My Name is Jiri Ivanov and I've been looking for you specifically.

I need your help... I will let you know more, in good time...

Arrivederci in cielo, Jiri

The moment I read the words, in my own time, the ink faded. I closed the book and noticed for the first time an embossed symbol on the cover. I traced my hand over it and knew that it was already something I had seen:



I felt for a pen and paper and frantically started to jot down the words I had read. I stared down at the symbol until I remembered that it was the same one that I had seen years ago in that school classroom. It was as if I had been reunited with something from my childhood.

It was then that I started my long and inexhaustible search, with the book that Jiri Ivanov gave to me. I was some kind of chosen one. How ridiculous a cliché was I? The journey up ahead didn't go on smoothly, I hasten to add. I came with my own teething problems. I was a reluctant disciple – to say the least. One thing I did realize however that night was that fear was not something to steer away from. It was something I had to face more and more. From that night on, I knew I would no longer be doing it on my own.

Jiri Ivanov would be with me.

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