



Epping...2 Mins

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With our hearts still threatening to burst from our chests, we came to a stop by the steps down into Bethnal Green Underground Station. I was sure we'd ran for a mile at least, but I knew I wouldn't feel safe until I could close a door between us and them. The men in the night had taken my wallet and my phone. They took some money off Gared, and a couple of his rings. After that they'd drawn their knives on us anyway, a two-on-two struggle in the dark. Both of us had bolted as soon as we could get out from under them. We weren't fighters.

We'd ran through the streets where the infamous Kray twins had built their criminal empire, and I'd thought to myself inanely that I'd prefer to get mugged by someone like that instead. The types of men to stop for a chat with a neighbour, pet the dog, then slip a roll of cash to the officer round the corner. Real classy shit.

Our assailants were a far cry from that. Thin stooping men in black ill-fitting leather, with tobacco-choked voices to match.

Since my wallet was gone, Gared touched his card on the barrier and I ran through after him before they could close. There was nobody there this late anyway, I'd take a chance on getting a ticket. When we got down to the platform it was empty, deserted. We must have missed one by seconds. I spent the next two minutes listening for their footsteps as the display up ahead blinked in sickly orange.

Epping...2 mins

1 min

due.

A rush of warm dry air announced the arrival of our carriage, which shrieked and then whispered to a gentle stop. We got on and the doors slid closed, and for the first time in what seemed like forever I let myself exhale. It was only then that I considered calling the police.

No signal? Oh yeah, that's right. Underground.

I didn't feel like talking, and I could tell that Gared didn't either. He had his elbows braced against his legs, maybe trying to stop himself from trembling. His jaw was set. There was only one other person on the carriage, an elderly man with a long mane of hair that almost reached his waist. He had glasses that shrunk his eyes to tiny blue droplets, and they were fixed on me.

I couldn't help but stare for just a few seconds, then I stopped myself from looking. I didn't need any more trouble after tonight. I didn't need more of anything. Instead I busied myself with reading the advertisements overhead.

"Yes", the old man suddenly said, and I could hear he was pointing his voice at me.

"Seeing as far as I can does have its price," he continued.

"Aaaah shit." I thought to myself.

Gared lifted his head to look at the man. "Sorry what?" he said.

Fuck's sake, Gared. Why take the bait?

The old man straightened himself in his seat. "What happened to you two?" he asked. Gared sat up and met his gaze. "We got mugged." he said flatly.

The words hung in the air and the old man laughed, like a father would laugh at his children, watching them chasing ducks at the park. Then his eyes darted from me to Jared and back again. "Are you hurt?" he asked us.

Jared and I looked down at ourselves. Suddenly I felt a pang of panic and ran my hand under my shirt over my chest. *Did they get me?* I drew it out again and looked. No blood. Jared did the same with his neck. We were both fine.

The old man nodded solemnly, "People don't often consider that."

I was confused, and I was starting to feel like something was wrong. Jared was getting agitated.

"I'm sorry, who are you exactly?" he asked, with hands outstretched towards the old man. "You some kind of creep?"

"No."

"So why are you speaking to us?"

The old man sat back and snorted. "Well, I don't see many folk while I'm working." he laced his fingers together in his lap. "Company's good when it happens."

"What do you do?" I quickly asked him to change the subject. I didn't want Jared pissing anyone else off tonight. It was Jared's own fault that the men had turned on us. I'd handed over my valuables quickly and mutely, but Jared had opened his stupid mouth. "*Lowlifes*" he'd spat at them, and then the knives came out.

"I'm a ferryman," the strange old man said. He wasn't dressed like a ferryman, I thought. Long silver hair and a grubby, faded suit. 3 buttons. He looked more like a thespian, or a fortune teller, or maybe a lunatic.

"Have you been sailing today?" I asked him, and I got a nod and a grin in response.

"I don't often get much of a break." he said, and then he chuckled. The strange noises bounced off the inside of the empty carriage.

Jared was sitting motionless and staring at the man. "I think he's on his boat right now," he said.

I looked at him, and he was totally transfixed with the man.

"Jared, what...?"

Jared kept staring, but tilted his head toward me. "I think we are too." he said.

The ferryman leaned forward in his seat and pointed straight at Jared. "Bingo!" He looked delighted, and then he turned to me. "Well, at least your friend gets it."

He looked up at the LED sign that showed the destination. "And would you look at that. It's nearly his stop."

As the carriage sped on, the ferryman introduced himself. Above the wailing of the train which seemed to get louder and louder with every word he spoke, he told me he ferried the dead to their final destinations. Jared and I were two of them. This was our last ride.

Jared already knew of course. He looked at me with tears in his eyes. "They went for us because of me," he said. "I know it was my fault. I know."

He got up slowly and walked over to the carriage door, peering through the window, and then I saw him smile through his tears.

"I'll be seeing you."

As the reality dawned on me and the carriage slowed to a stop, the ferryman spoke up. His voice came out of his mouth and the speakers above us at the same time. "Jared Thompson, this is your stop." The carriage doors slid open and I could smell brackish water. There was a river burbling underneath the carriage, a bird sang a foreign song in some distant tree. Then a chill wind blew into the carriage, and Jared was gone.

Before I could call to my friend the carriage screeched and I was pushed back in my seat. We were moving again. The ferryman was eyeing me not unkindly, and after a short while he spoke. "You'll not see him again, I'm sorry. Nothing I can do about that."

"Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"A little further."

My stop took just a few more minutes, and when I looked out the window at my final destination I knew it could have been nowhere else. Wherever Gared was, I knew that the ferryman was right. I wouldn't be seeing him again. I got up from my seat.

"Mind the gap!" the ferryman called cheerily, and the doors slid open for me.