

# Terminus

Iain Whiteley

The photo, on the wall, is of a black and white tram. Underneath, on the fireplace, stands a tiny, tin 1960s double-decker bus. And by the fireplace, next to the window, sits a driver, coffee in hand, staring out across the boats to a horizon interrupted by the distant shores of the Isle of Man. A heron picks its way along a water pool, the morning sun's reflection breaks in two as the bird's beak hits the surface; then, rippling, comes together and is a bouncing, golden bubble.

“Where's that?”

Jack leans forward, looks at his grandson looking at the picture, puts his coffee cup on the saucer, the saucer on the fireplace, and china tinkles.

“Recognise the street, city boy?”

“Well, it's London – isn't it? But I've never seen the tracks.”

Tom knows the road. Of course he does. At eighteen, a Northerner in a new home, leaving an indie club full of skinny boys and pretty girls circa '96, emotional, drunk; not just from alcohol – from new adventures. But he has never seen the tracks.

“When did they stop them?” Tom asks, ashamed not to know of their former existence in his adopted city. He's like a teen who thinks there were never cassette players in cars, or even, a child who thinks there were never cars.

“Seven years after the war,” Jack says, and the heron darts across the sands.

This is Jack's measurement of time:  $x$  years after the war,  $y$  years before. As time winds on, 1945 remains the anchor.

“Same year your mum was born, we moved back up here, that's when I started on the buses.”

Jack nods to the cream and brown double decker. A Stardrops advertisement is glued wonkily on the side.

Tom knows the road. Of course he does. At twenty-two and a night of techno at The End, wired, talking rubbish, heading the wrong way down the Southampton Row and High Holborn intersection, thinking he'll hit Tottenham Court Road but finding himself halfway down Kingsway, missing the 27 night bus that should have been getting him home.

Outside, where the fresh sea air hits them, they board a miniature railway, the one Jack volunteered for when he retired. Too frail to drive now, he travels through the mountains at every opportunity – whenever someone visits the home.

“Keep these, son. More souvenirs than tickets. Made for the tourists, really.”

Shaking and twisted, Jack presses two thick, recycled cardboard stumps into Tom's younger, bolder hands.

And Tom knows the road. Of course he does. At twenty-three, after a day working just off Chancery Lane, as the wheres and whys and streets of London begin to meet together; walking along Bloomsbury Way, killing time so as not to reach the bars of Soho too early, and saving the bus fare to put towards a pint; ignoring the plastic, yellow guards of the iron gates and looking down at damp leaves on a rainy day; watching for traffic – but not trams. He doesn't remember the gates being open, and he has never seen the tracks.

The line of the little train ends at the foot of the mountains. And there they sit on a bench, eat sandwiches, admire the view. The golden bubble has floated up high now, just behind Scafell Pike, and a low-level aircraft nearly bursts it. The two men look, think, and Jack remembers.

He knows the road. Of course he does. Southwards on the 33, ending at West Norwood, home for dinner (or nipping off to play dominoes en route, getting too merry to walk, back to the new estate, too late for supper). Then, northbound every morning, rising from the subway, like an angel, to Angel. He has seen this road so many times. But never without tracks.

Back at the home, Tom looks at the tram, down to the tin bus, over to the driver, who sits, looking out towards the Isle of Man. A heron dips its beak in a pool of water, which frames an undulating moon.

“Know what, son?”

“What's that?”

“They could build a tunnel from here to the Isle of Man. It'd take half an hour to get over.”

The heron flies off.

“Instead you've got to catch the ferry from Heysham.”

He chuckles to himself.

“Takes over three hours.”