

The Beast from the East

The platform at Westerton station was busy with angry commuters exposed to an icy sub-zero wind. Points were frozen and signalling disrupted by the severe weather conditions. The platform surface had been 'treated' half-heartedly with a few scoops of dirty yellow rock salt. There had been a string of announcements from *Scotrail Abellio* advising of cancellations, delays and request for travellers to stay well behind the yellow lines as trains 'skipped' through Westerton at high speed, playing 'catch-up', trying to arrive at their final destinations on time to fool the punctuality statistics by which they were judged. The platform was a sheet of ice.

'Tom, move along to the end of the platform, quick!' said Perry Vernon. 'The very last thing we need is my former step-father haranguing us with his tales. And be warned, he's a nosy old bugger. Tell him nothing, Tom! Right? Nothing!'

'Sorry?' replied his partner, looking up from his free *Metro*, his hands encased in large furry *Eskimo Mitts* in a fluorescent orange colour, a recent Christmas stocking-filler present bought by Perry from the charity shop on Byres Road, described as 'an unwanted present, never worn'.

'Oh, hello, Perry. Perry, wait! Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me. Thanks, so kind. Well, Perry, how are you today. Dreadful weather. Is this Tom, your new beau I've been reading about on Facebook? My, he is a hunk! I didn't realise he was . . . **DOWN** Oscar! SIT! He's on heat, I'm afraid. It's the bitch upstairs, she's been yowling for him all night long. **Oscar**, Oscar. . . Now wait until I get your little mat down to save your botty from the nasty, dirty cold platform. There we are. Now, Oscar, SIT! Good boy. Good boy. And before you say it again, Perry, no, I'm not too old at eighty-three to take on another Great Dane. Normally Oscar is the soul of calmness, well, for a two-year old anyway. It's not his fault, not really. And Marcia's wee Sasha is adorable even though she is a miniature poodle and well, let's face it, it's a romance which isn't going to come to anything, is it? Reminds me of your sainted mother and me. It remains a mystery why she chased me into a corner and married me. But let's not rake over old coals, eh? That spark has been dowsed, if you get my drift. Now, Tom, let's get to know each other. You first? Are you visiting our dear country? Is this a holiday romance I see before me?'

'Reginald, Tom was born in High Burnside, you know, near Rutherglen. He's as Scottish as we are!'

'Oh, I see. Sorry, Tom, I didn't catch your surname?'

'Yes, Ndoku.'

'Oh, I see. So, Tom, your parents are from?'

'Mum is from Stornoway, Fiona MacLeod of MacLeod, as she always introduces herself. She met Dad in Botswana, sent by the Scottish Government. She's a specialist

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in birth control and AIDS. She met Dad who was an administrator at the hospital where she was based and, 'boom-bang', they fell in love. They live in New Zealand now. Dad runs an IT company there. Specialises in medical databases. His company developed SDS the 'Share-Data System' you may have read about recently.'

'I see, 'boom-bang', how terribly romantic. But the 'Share-Data System'. No, we haven't heard about *that*, have we Oscar?'

'Yeah, empowering. If a person needs treatment anywhere in NZ, the hospital or emergency services can access a person's medical records with a few keystrokes from a laptop or tablet.'

'Well, Tom, my turn. Reginald St John Clements, you know, from the tele? 'The Archaeologist visits your Garden' programme on BBC Alba. That's where we're off to now, isn't it Oscar. And you? Tom, do you work at the same call centre as Perry?'

'Tom works at Glasgow Caledonian.' said Perry, haughtily.

'Ah, let me guess, Tom. 'Nursing Studies?''

'No, try again,' said Tom.

'Ah, yes, I see. Got it. That huge sports bag; those are squash rackets? Right? You're an Instructor, Tom, a Fitness Coach, is that it?'

'No, not really. I'm . . .'

'Tom's high up in the Department of Physical and Psychological Wellbeing,' snapped Perry. It's all on his Facebook link from mine. He's written dozens of papers which have revolutionised thinking about how to lead our lives with Full Empowerment.'

'My, my, my. So, Tom, have you written any books? I have sixteen books, all selling quite well, isn't that right, Oscar. You must have heard of my children's book, "How to find Dinosaurs in your Garden". But, oh we do miss having a garden, don't we, Oscar? But I have a nice poo-pee-pee mat for you on our veranda and we. . .'

"ATTENTION! ATTENTION! Will all passengers please stand well behind the yellow line. There is a fast train about to transit this station. ATTENTION! ATTENTION! Will all passengers please stand well behind the yellow line. There is a fast train about to transit this station.'

From the opposite platform a high, tremulous female voice called across. 'Coo-ee, Reginald, darling. Ha-loo-ooo. It's us, Marcia and Sasha.'

At the sight of his true love, Oscar leapt straight from his mat into the path of the onrushing train, dragging Reginald St John Clements with him.

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The dog was saved because his lead was whipped out of Reginald's hand as the octogenarian fell onto the tracks.

Reginald faced his death with the screech of the emergency braking system bearing down on him.

Tailpiece

In accordance with his Last Will and Testament, Reginald's 'body' is to be donated to Glasgow University Medical School. The term 'body' was taken to mean the remains of Reginald, recovered as puree from the three hundred metres of track over which it was smeared and from the undercarriage of the train; a train 'formed of six coaches', a delayed express from Helensburgh heading for Edinburgh.

The royalties from Clements' books' will be donated in perpetuity to the Kennel Club 'to promote the Great Dane as a breed ideally suited to urban living.'

Westerton Station, one of the busiest rail junctions in the UK, was closed for nearly 36 hours, causing massive disruption but the publicity generated by the tragic death of Reginald St John Clements boosted the sales of his books, benefitting the Kennel Club.

The tragedy brought a surge of interest in the work of Dr Thomas Macleod Ndoku and his research team at Glasgow Caledonian University. This resulted in Tom Ndoku's accelerated promotion to the rank of Professor, as the administration attempted to head off other universities rumoured to be trying to poach him and cash-in on his enhanced Facebook reputation.

Tom Ndoku took the opportunity to promote his father's website and the Auckland-based business has been inundated by hits from firms and health boards throughout the UK, all wishing to partner with him to bring his system 'home' to the place where it was first developed but rejected.

Regarding the patchy treatment of the platform surfaces at Westerton and other stations, *Scotrail Abellio* have defended their corner claiming their service teams were delayed by the atrocious and unprecedented severe weather caused by the *Beast from the East* and the chronic shortage of grit and salt supplies.

The Scottish Government has formed a special sub-committee to consider options to prevent a similar tragedy from ever happening again.

Marcia and Sasha have adopted Oscar.