

The Loneliness of Edgar Crane

By Ben Williams

There were no flies on Edgar Crane, or so said his colleagues, who were not quite sure what they meant by that, but may have meant it ironically on account of the fact that he rarely stepped across the threshold of his bathroom.

He was a big man, in height and girth, though not so much in personality, a bear of a man with a tangled, unkempt beard which more often than not retained elements of at least whatever his two previous meals had been. Of the three meals a day that he ate, discounting supper which was always a more variable affair, two would see enormous doorsteps of bread slathered with butter or, the morning after a joint, the congealed dripping from the pan that would have sat on the stove overnight mellowing at room temperature. He liked white bread, the sort of bloomer that he could cut himself, so that the width of the slices could fit the size of the ache in his belly.

His beard was a reflection of a more general state of sartorial disarray, his clothes ill-fitting and uncomfortable, much as they had been for most of his life. He had a headland of a stomach, that jutted out over the wide grey sea of his trousers, and which made for a distinct silhouette in a certain light and from a certain angle. His shirts were tight, the buttons fit to burst, and, being a big man, he suffered from a degree of perspiration that led to his shirts yellowing under his arms and around his collar. His shoes were a painful fit, too, and he had long since ceased to be embarrassed by the fact he had to slice them open and fix them with strips of Velcro to ensure that his feet blistered less. He had hoped, once, to be able to afford shoes that were custom cut to the shape of his feet, but he reluctantly recognised a few years back that this would never be so.

Edgar Crane was a slow man in his movements, though not his mind, more prone to lumbering than strolling and never what one might call a “hurrier”. He liked to take his time, which was serendipitous, as his physical condition precluded him from doing anything else. But, as is often the case, especially with bigger people, external appearances and a propensity for pondering combined to lend him a demeanour that often led those who did not know him to describe him as “slow”. By that, of course, they meant something quite different from the speed of his actions.

Rising from bed was a painful affair, his bones crooked by sleep and his muscles aching under the bulk of his frame. He stretched as best he could, which was not very well, and brushed the sleep from his eyes. The curtains, usually tired and shabby, were glowing orange in a way that made him feel cheerful for no definable reason. He drew them back and pushed open a window, drawing the air deep into his lungs, the sunshine and blue skies making everything feel as alien as a foreign land.

He had a happy thought of red shoes and smiled. Today would be a good day.

This morning the world had decided to emerge from winter’s dowdy lethargy, shedding its cold and wind and rain and adopting a sunny disposition that was redolent of the sort of fine spring that might once have moved a poet or a painter before introspection became the fashion. He recalled how, a small child on a once-in-a-lifetime holiday across the Atlantic, to the Canadian Rockies, the eddies of warm breeze had tousled his hair one day in early March. He recalled, too, an old man telling him earnestly about Chinooks, Foehn winds blowing from the West that could banish winter in a day. There were of course no mountains nearby, and that was all a long time ago, but he hoped that what the old man had said about Canada held true for England. He also hoped that, unlike the native folklore of the Americas, the winds did not bring people in great number. He felt there were already too many incomers to the quiet suburban corner where he had spent most all his life.

Dressing was, oddly, less painful than usual, perhaps because he was distracted by memory and the happy prospect of a warmer walk to the train station than he had experienced for months. His buttons were no easier, but for once he did not notice the way his fingers fumbled like clumsy sausages. He felt lighter on his feet, too, though he knew this not to be true, as he had recently had to let out his trousers to accommodate his still-expanding waist. He decided to dispense with a tie. A tie was not essential in his workplace, but he had always felt it proper to do things the right way, and that included dressing for work. It was definitely too warm today, though.

Once he was dressed, Edgar Crane ran his hands through his thinning hair, as he did every morning, and then plodded slowly out of the bedroom. Sunlight was streaming into the kitchen and he felt improbably merry. He recalled a snippet of a favourite verse:

“A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms;

The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag;

The delight alone, or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-sides;

The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun.”

He laughed, loudly, a deep belly laugh, but then his eye caught the lunch box perched on the corner of the counter. It contained the sandwiches he had prepared the previous evening and he was suddenly sad, remembering his mother and the way she had loved him. He recalled her embrace, her reaching round of arms, and the morning brightness seemed to fade a little in the missing of her.

His mother was the kindest person he had ever known. Sadly, she had never understood that the expression of that kindness was also the source of so much of the hurt that he endured. After school, after the bullies had exhausted their torments, and after he had run

home, panting and crying and cursing his weakness, she would gather him up and remind him how much she doted on him in the large dinners that he would forever associate with love. He could never refuse her, as he knew how much he meant to her, and even though he knew what was happening to his body, he also knew that nothing made her happier than the smile that flirted with his lips when he felt satisfied by her generously-portioned meals. To hurt her would be an unbearable pain and so he had decided to wear his tribulations, literally and stoically.

Her kindness was not confined to evening meals. She had always been concerned for his welfare, wanting him to grow up “big and strong” and so had taken care to prepare a packed lunch for him every day. She would cut the cheese in slabs, telling herself that she could spend her days a little more easily if she knew that he smiled at lunchtime as he did at night. She had told him once, when he felt particularly low, that she took great pleasure in imagining him unwrapping the stiff waxed paper to reveal the soft, heavy slices sandwiching cheddar and chutney and him biting down into their homely goodness. He had smiled and renewed his commitment to himself to ensure that he ate everything that she put in front of him. When, after college, he had returned to live with his parents, she had continued to make his lunch and dinner right up until the day she had passed from him.

It had been good to be loved.

For just a moment he wondered why he always thought of his mother in happier moments, never his father. His father was a man who came to mind rarely and then only as a figure of studious silence, sat amidst piles of papers and books and wreathed with blue smoke from his old cherry-wood pipe. He couldn't decide why, however, and so dismissed the thought almost as soon as it had arrived.

The ding of a clock jolted him from his daydreaming. He was well aware that a day's work lay ahead of him, that the trains would not wait, that people depended on him, and so, reluctantly, he began his journey to work.

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It was with some difficulty that he climbed down the front steps of his parents' old bungalow. Mercifully, it was only a short walk to the station. Even so, for months he had worn a vest under his shirt and a jerkin under his coat, not least because the latter was too small for him and he couldn't make the buttons and the buttonholes meet. This morning, though, that did not matter. He wore only his shirt and he let his chest swell a little in the warmth of the sun. And he found it was impossible not to smile as he headed along the lane, past the few remaining bungalows that, like his own, were architectural echoes of a less anonymous time.

As he walked he began to hum, a tune he remembered, perhaps from a film. He had a faint recollection of Richard Burton and Mary Ure but nothing more and, like so many things, it was a long time ago.

Work, on a day like today, seemed more palatable.

He could remember his mother's pride when he told her that he had secured a job in the city.

"You're on your way, now, Edgar," she had trilled and she told her friends in the Women's Institute how he would soon be a tremendous success and that they should mark her words.

And then, one morning soon after:

"You'll meet a fine woman, soon, Edgar."

She had nodded thoughtfully and wisely as she said this, her voice measured and authoritative. She had been convinced that his path would follow that which had been set out for him by family example and the experience of her own friends' offspring.

He had never told her the details of his new employment. Merely that he had been successful at interview and that from now on she would see much less of him as he would be working "in town". He wasn't sure that she would approve of the appointment, anyway, and he enjoyed her pleasure at his success and the fact that she had something to be proud of with her friends.

He continued to hum, frustrated that the name of the film still eluded him.

Edgar Crane had always been a musical sort, so much so that he had once studied the cello and had aspired to a concert career. He had studied earnestly, earning a scholarship to a prestigious music college, but he had always been good, never brilliant, and fancy lost its fire soon after graduating and he had never played since, telling himself instead it was a skill he could fall back on if he ever needed to make a pound or two.

He still loved his music, though, and he often wondered if the people he met, so often surprised upon discovering this quiet passion, could really believe him capable of being moved to tears by Dvorak or Elgar or Brahms. Perhaps he deliberately hindered such understanding by never really talking about the way music made him feel. The scrape of bow on string and the rich resonances produced transported him to divine places that he didn't want to describe, lest that, in the telling, they lost some of the character that made them sanctuaries. Or could they imagine him stirred by opera, a fat man aroused by the romance of its protagonists, even as, in their apparent, uncomprehending surprise, they were moved by the sweetness of a fat man singing?

There were children passing him on the pavement, all neatly uniformed, and walking to school. They looked at him oddly and so he stopped his humming. He had learned many years before that it did not pay to draw attention to himself.

The school would be the same school that he had once attended, though really it was the same school in name only. The old building in which he had learned, and which had been the neighbourhood's sole establishment in his childhood, had been supplemented by a bright and modern primary school. The old building became known locally as "The Annex" until an enterprising headmaster commissioned a significant extension to the new buildings and the Victorian schoolhouse, falling into disuse, was sold to a care home franchise.

Edgar Crane was struck by the thought, and not for the first time, that it must be strange, sad even, for those whose earliest memories would meet their last in the confines of its severe stone walls.

He recalled his own time in "The Annex", but not with fondness.

He had been a tubby boy, later to become a chubby teenager, and he had often been the object of that reflexive and unfocused hatred that seizes children as they become aware of the power of appearances. He had quickly become accustomed to their derision and, since then, being widely read, he consoled himself that, as with the *dalit*, some things were simply the way of the world.

One incident remained with him, though, and still caused him hurt to remember.

It had been a Thursday, a hot day, uncomfortable for a boy of his size. He had spent the morning fretting and had decided to plonk himself down under the large oak tree that dominated the southern corner of the playing fields. Its foliage provided more than welcome cool against the cruel heat and he took time to consider his predicament.

The entire community knew that the afternoon was due to be given over to the school's yearly celebration of sports in which all those pupils in their final year were obliged to participate. After all, how could they not know? There had been leaflets and posters and plenty of gossip at coffee mornings and in Sunday services. His fellows had talked excitedly about nothing else for weeks and how their parents would be coming to watch them compete and set an example for the younger children who would be dutifully made to watch each event.

By contrast with his cohort, Edgar Crane had panicked when he received the letter to his parents, neatly printed with the school shield and motto, *Esto quod es*, solemnly proclaiming that two gifted and able children would once more be crowned Victor and Victrix Ludorum. Of course, he had often imagined how it might feel to receive such accolades. The tumultuous cheers of classmates and their parents. Proud and envious eyes upon him. The admiring words of the headmaster, extolling the virtues of an able body as well as an able mind, even though their mental faculties had not yet been tested in examinations, nor any comparable achievements similarly celebrated.

But Edgar Crane knew, too, that it would never be him. Not this year or any other year. He would never be able to run or jump or throw for his class, nor would they ever want him to. Instead, he would be encouraged to take part in the "fun" events, the events that were for "special" children, but children never so "special" that they would be crowned Victor or Victrix Ludorum. *Esto quod es*, after all, and he was a fat boy who could think but not leap.

From the moment he received the letter he knew he did not want his mother to read it. He did not want his mother to come and cheer him on, as she would, with vocal enthusiasm and so much proud love. And more than anything in the world he did not want his mother to see how the others would tease him and laugh at him when he stepped into the dusty Hessian sack and blunder heaving and sweating along the longest one hundred yards in the world. He

didn't want to know that his mother, powerless in the crowds, would see him trip and fall as he approached the finish line or see him choking back the sobs that would accompany his inevitable humiliation. *Esto quod es*. And so he did not deliver it, but instead dropped it into a bin on a street that could only be described as being on the way home if the route taken were circuitous.

Sitting there on that Thursday, enjoying the cool respite afforded by the heavy hang of the oak tree's boughs, he took comfort in the fact that she would be spared this indignity. He unfolded his sandwich and felt the familiar sense of comfort as he took his first bite.

Just then, a group of children from the next door class passed by with their teacher. They muttered and giggled and whispered to each other and he tried to pretend he couldn't see them or hear them. In truth their jibes were hard to miss.

"Fatso Crane," mocked one. "Well-fed Edgar," laughed another. "Balloon Boy," he heard, too, and "Moby Dick!"

"Children!" said the teacher. "We'll have none of that!"

Edgar sighed, relieved at the intervention of an adult. He had always held his teachers in the highest regard, even if the sentiment was not always mutual.

And then, just as they were moving away, he heard the teacher say: "Just be thankful you're not like him."

It was not a tremendous slight. They were not words uttered with cruel intention. It was not intended for his ears, even, but rather to remind the children about their own good fortune. Then, out of sight of the departing teacher, a boy with a flinty look in his eye darted back from the gaggle and slapped his sandwich to the floor. He poked his tongue out and ran off, hooting with laughter, to join his friends.

Edgar Crane stood for a moment, gazing at the remains of his sandwich, now lying forlornly in the dirt. As he thought of the care and attention with which his mother would have made it, tears welled in his eyes. And so Edgar Crane simply walked away. He gathered up his satchel and walked out of the gate and wandered to a local park where he remained until just before his mother might expect him home.

He never said a word to her about it. As he was shortly to leave the junior school, nothing was said to him about his absence, either. Instead, he discovered that strange peace that comes with not being noticed.

Esto quod es.

In the days after, he had wondered if his friends, though few in number, were thankful they were not like him. And down the years since, as the hurt of the words faded, but their meaning lingered, he had often wondered who he was supposed to be if he was not supposed to be him, and if the people he met were thankful they were not like him.

Throughout those years of teasing, and the intermittent bullying that shaped his view of people generally, he had enjoyed his mother's love. And her love ensured he left his school years considerably flabbier than when he arrived. Also, notwithstanding the teasing and the bullying, he took pride in having been a well-behaved child. He was studious, never surrendering to the temptation to visit similar harassments on those smaller than him, which was most children, and felt confident in the knowledge he had acquired, both there and subsequently at the local grammar. College had been different, of course, but he had regarded that learning then as principally the acquisition of technique, not knowledge. He thought now, when he allowed himself to dwell on such things, that this might have been a contributory factor to his failure to achieve a career in music.

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Edgar Crane caught the same train he always caught. It began its journey at the station, arriving from the depot, not from further down the line, thereby ensuring he could always be assured of a quieter start to his commute. He always sat in the same seat, too, one designed for the convenience of bicycles or prams, and which was set away from the rest of the carriage. It was, in fact, two seats, but he was confident that no-one would choose to sit next to him and so he balanced the sadness in this realisation with the fact of his comfort: that, with no bicycles permitted before ten o'clock, he was able to spread across both.

So he sank into his seat. That is perhaps the only way to describe it as the seat did give more than a little under the weight of his bulk. Trying to believe that he had imagined it, he pulled open his free newspaper, just as he did every morning, and pretended that he was the only person in the world.

Of course he knew he wasn't, but he had devised a creative way to decide who he wanted to pay more attention to and who he wished to have nothing whatsoever to do with. Whilst the seat he chose was, in some ways, very exposed, it also afforded him a tremendous vantage point for seeing who climbed aboard his carriage. By virtue of being someone who liked to keep his head down, he had discovered that he could see their shoes without looking up, merely bending back the corner of his newspaper and snatching a surreptitious glimpse. By carefully listening to their conversations he could make associations between the way they said what they said and the shoes that they wore. And over time he noticed patterns emerge.

For instance, he had decided he did not like men who wore pointy brown shoes. Worse, still, were those whose shoes were decorated with tassels. In his experience they were boastful and arrogant and demonstrated little respect for those who patiently tried to show

them affection and love. On the other hand, men who wore the Oxfords he would never wear were generally confident and calm and polite in a manner that suggested good breeding.

He was less confident with women, but he had learned that those who wore what he had discovered from one conversation were “Mary Janes” were generally positive, funny and gentle souls. Those who wore stumpy boots were quick-witted, fiery and intelligent, but usually with a love of loud music that he could not bear or comprehend. Heels were, of course, confusing and over many years he had grown to accept that they would forever elude his attempts to categorise.

Where he had very definite views was trainers.

They had two very different wearers. Either they were sensible professional women, attempting to ensure their feet were given respite from the heels they carried with them or left under the desk (it seemed some places of work valued appearance above comfort, a thing that concerned him on many levels). Or they were loutish miscreants, often intent on causing misery to those in Oxfords or “Mary Janes”. These idiots would also make comments to those in heels, sneering distastefully or making sexual innuendo. When such trainer wearers appeared, like sneakered devils, only those in pointy brown shoes laughed along.

Edgar Crane looked nervously at his watch.

There was a particular pair of shoes he was hoping would cross his line of sight, as they did every Monday morning. They were a minute or two later than usual and just a minute or two more and his train would depart. Were he a smaller man, he could alight easily from the train and wait for at least the next one to London, but he knew that was not an option for him. He felt the sweat beading on his brow, despite the air-conditioning, and so he mopped it with a handkerchief, the grubby cotton square sopping up his perspiration.

And then they appeared.

A pair of red suede heels.

Slim, pale feet tucked neatly inside. Delicate ankles leading to shapely calves. The dark tights that had covered them in the winter months absent. He felt his heart quicken, something that always thrilled and alarmed in equal measure. He chanced a glance over his newspaper and he felt the sense of longing he always felt when he saw her, for companionship and a reaching round of arms.

She was slight and dark and neatly dressed and, as every morning, deep in conversation with a friend who many would consider more attractive. But not Edgar Crane. She was younger, about half his age, and when her eyes caught his, just fleetingly, he dropped his head embarrassedly and read about lazy road workers painting over a pothole and a man who had discovered the image of Jesus Christ on his t-shirt, in a patch of spilt fabric conditioner. And as he did on every occasion that he saw her, he feared for what people might think of him, a fat man with ordinary desires that somehow became monstrous in a person of his size.

In his own, slight way, Edgar Crane knew he loved her, or at least the idea of her, and had done since he had first noticed her red suede shoes, so many months ago.

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She left the train long before him. She always did. He never knew where she went and he was far too slow to keep up with her. He was also fearful of blocking the door or the stairs and so he felt it best to let others make their way first. He did know, though, that he could collect a coffee before leaving the station and still arrive at work on time. His employers had made a special allowance for him after all, letting him begin his working day in a different place to most other colleagues.

Like every other day he wheezed down to the station exit and paused to buy an extra large latte, sweet and milky, to help fuel the start to his morning. The cheery Italian student who served him every morning acknowledged him with a nod when he saw him in the queue and reached for the extra large cup he knew he would need and the bottle of syrup.

When it was his turn, Edgar Crane handed over his five pound note with a little flourish and the Italian dispensed his change with an airy smile.

“I will see you tomorrow, sir,” he said.

“You will,” replied Edgar Crane, enjoying the normalcy of their interaction.

The streets outside looked different bathed in sunshine and he smiled to see the tourists hanging around with bemused expressions, searching for guided walks and cabs and the way to Parliament Square.

There was no rubbish piled along the walls. The homeless girl was not there. The wine club did not have serried ranks of empty boxes at the top of its gated stairwell. No-one was swearing at the purveyors of free magazines.

Somehow, the sunshine made the world feel a better place for everyone. At least, it seemed that way.

As he entered the Tube station he saw a couple holding hands and he wondered what it would feel like to have her entwine her small fingers around his. He knew that he would almost certainly never experience that, but he also realised that, on a day like today, he could at least contemplate the slightest possibility of it.

He smiled to himself and hoped that the rest of his day would proceed so gently.

Passing through the ticket barriers, Edgar Crane paused at the top of the stairs before deciding to start down the right-hand flight, against an oncoming flow of commuters who were intent on departing through the most convenient exit.

Such ignorance, he thought, and dangerous, too. What if there were a fire? It wouldn't be the first time, after all. And there were clear signs, too. Couldn't they read? And what about those with greater mobility problems than his own?

He tutted, loudly.

Normally he wouldn't make such an issue of these things, but he felt emboldened by the sunshine and the exciting possibility – however unlikely – of what could be and so he spread himself with exaggerated deliberation as he descended. His breadth caused those climbing toward him to flatten against the wall to pass. They muttered and swore under their breath about the selfish fat man, but even though he felt a momentary tremor of guilt he was sure he knew who the truly selfish were.

And then, on the crowded skirt of the platform, he saw her again. Her shoes, red and beautiful.

His heart leapt and he told himself it was a reward for having done the right thing. An uncontrollable smile spread across his face and he hoped he looked no more ridiculous than he usually did. He wondered if today might be the day he plucked up the courage to say something to her. After all, it had been so many months, years even, and just to exchange a word or two on such a fine day would make it a better day than most he had endured since being alone.

Perhaps he could offer a thought on how busy the platform was and how the carriages were far too crammed these days. Or perhaps he could remark on the change in the weather and how he always worried when he had to remove his jacket because it was too warm.

But Edgar Crane was suddenly conscious of a knot rising in his throat. His breath became shallow and laboured and he felt wet beads gathering on his forehead. He identified this as panic and he decided that today was not the day for introductions and that he should bank his good fortune at seeing her twice in one morning and not risk offending her with clumsy words. Rather, he would allow himself to stand next to her, pretending not to notice her, and hoping that she did not notice him.

He did just that and looked over his shoulder at the train waiting on the other platform, hoping that, somehow, he looked nonchalant. He did not want anything about him to suggest that he might be more than casually interested in anyone on the platform, let alone her.

He glanced again at the train. He knew for a fact that it was currently driverless. He could picture the front of it; headlights dim like wide white eyes in a square face peering into the black. He knew that the Underground was a strange place, full of old, disused stations in which the past was preserved in bricked up doorways, lithographed posters, fleeting shadows and empty platforms where illicit lovers had once met to write their stories in last trains and cheap wine.

If there were such things as demons, and he was not sure as, though he still clung to a sense of the Divine, he had long since foregone a belief in God, these tunnels were their haunt. Dark and abandoned. Forbidding and forbidden.

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The young woman in the red suede heels screamed when she fell.

She landed painfully, too, her ankle twisting in an ugly fashion on the stones lying between the rails. Where the rats played between trains.

It was because of the man in trainers forcing himself through the crowd. He was oblivious to those about him, lost in his headphones and his smart phone. He hadn't seen her standing there, too close to the platform's edge, anxiously peering into the gloom for a train because she was later than she intended to be for her first day in a new job. He didn't feel her as his elbow clipped her off balance and sent her spinning over the side. He didn't even hear her screams and so he simply slipped away, the wrong way up the steps, like almost every other passenger that morning.

Edgar Crane saw her fall.

He forgot his usual fear of unnecessarily drawing attention to himself and bellowed. He fell to his knees and heard and felt their caps crack loudly against the concrete. He reached out to place down his Styrofoam cup and flapped his arms uselessly. His belly stopped him from reaching forward comfortably and he wailed for help, waving and jabbing his fingers. All about him people stood, slack-jawed and motionless, whilst below him she screamed and screamed.

Why didn't they help her, he thought?

As anger and fear surged through his body he felt alive in a way he could not recall and he marvelled how in this calamitous moment his mind had space to think in this way about the events now occurring, let alone feel ashamed that it had taken this to awaken such energy. But even as these thoughts and feelings tumbled through him he felt surer hands on his shoulders pulling him away from the platform and reaching over him to clasp her slender, flailing wrists.

Relief lifted him and he was grateful for the comfort of strangers and that occasional sudden selflessness that seizes people in moments of crisis. He was very conscious that he

was not a help, but rather, as so many had made plain in the past, a hindrance. He was a bloated and ridiculous figure who was, in this moment, quite literally an obstacle.

He tried to curl up, to take himself out of the way, but he knew it was futile. There was too much of him to move and too little of him that could move. Instead he squeezed his eyes to a squint and hoped and hoped that she would be safe.

So it was with a sigh of relief that he saw those stronger and more agile reach past him, confidence and strength grappling to pull her safely to the platform. He felt a pang of guilt, also, as he often did when others were more able than him - a reflex envy as he witnessed her gratitude towards those who had secured her safety. And more unexplainable guilt, too, as he wondered if any one of them had once been Victor or Victrix Ludorum.

Then he could hear voices.

“He’s just so big,” he heard someone say and he could see her nodding tearfully.

“He is,” said another, “I don’t understand how anyone could let themselves get so big.”

“He followed me,” she said and he could hear that she was fearful.

“That’s so frightening,” came the first voice. “Do you want to report him?”

“No, no. I just want to get away.”

He felt his eyes become hot with tears. His cheeks prickled. And he found himself struggling to believe that anyone would think he could possibly intend her harm.

He wouldn’t hurt her. He couldn’t hurt her.

He wanted to tell her. He wanted to push her helpers away. He wanted to show them who he was.

There was nothing to say. Nothing that wouldn’t make her more scared or him hurt more. As he rolled to his knees, the crowds on the platform fell silent. They stepped back, watching

him heave himself upright and clumsily scoop up his cup. No-one leant him an arm to steady himself or a kind word to assure him. He could hear the blood roaring in his ears. He could feel the bang of the pulse in his eyes. He could make out the tinny rattle of a dozen private worlds and the scrape of shoes on cement.

His head hung low, he shuffled along the platform. He was conscious of the eyes of the crowd following him, eyes that were filled with loathing and revulsion. He thought he could still hear her stifled sobs. He wished and wished for the hours and the days and the years to wind back and take him away to the shade of a low-hanging oak tree or the park in which he had hid or the sanctuary of a divine place.

At the far end of the platform he crossed to the front of the waiting train and climbed aboard. As he took his driver's seat, the door hissed shut and suddenly there was a blissful, calming quiet. It was a quiet that he looked forward to every day. Where he couldn't hear the whispering or the guarded chuckles or the name-calling. Where he couldn't see the finger-pointing of giggling teenagers or the smirks of bronzed tourists or the panicky fussing of worried parents. And it was one that he met today with all the gratitude he could muster.

No stifled sobs. No screamed silence of the crowds. Just quiet. An absence of anything that might hurt. A quiet that reminded him of the moment he first discovered that strange peace that comes with not being noticed.

Suddenly, a voice croaked, electronic and detached. A man, barking orders. He blinked, and looked about himself, and took a heavy draft of the large creamy coffee now balanced between his knees. Seconds later, a second disembodied voice came. A voice, clear and calm, assured and feminine, in which, before the red suede heels and before the smile and before the fall, he had hoped he could detect the promise of something other than Richmond and

Ealing Broadway. She explained carefully where they would be going and he tried to visualise her, with neatly bobbed hair and a comforting smile – just like his mother had had.

He looked at the dials in front of him and adjusted his seat.

Alone.

Sighing heavily, he raised a huge paw of a hand and pressed it down firmly on the large button in front of him. His job in the city. And for the first time that day, as the six-carriage train slipped away from the platform, Edgar Crane led his small corner of the world into darkness.