

Blood and Custard

A sequel to "Lychgate Tunnel"

by Rob Davis

It was only the first few times I saw her that I thought she was real, but by the third or fourth time she had appeared I had twigged that she wasn't. Having been an almost daily passenger of the Dewkeston-London line for almost forty years, I knew every trackside telegraph pole by its first name, and I was even on nodding terms with some of the maintenance workers in their hi-vis jackets, as they stood in small cautious groups as the train passed by.

Whilst the telegraph poles and the maintenance workers were real enough, as far as the girl was concerned there were several vital clues which gave the game away concerning her lack of reality. First of all, much as I had originally resented the passing of the blood-and-custard paint scheme of the old carriages, it had to be admitted that the modern equivalents with air conditioning and comfortable seats were in fact a great improvement over the corridor type rolling stock, although I never really came to care for the open carriage seating arrangement which made even the slightest degree of privacy completely impossible.

(Say what you like about the old style carriages, but in times gone by you and a co-operative partner could be alone in one compartment, have a snog or a feel – or even the full Monty - in one and nobody else was any the wiser.)

Apart from the occasional puffs of steam or black sooty smoke which shot by the windows, it was the presence of the old decorative colours which provided the first clue.

Even if the mind dulled by another day at the office didn't pick up the carriage changes – and I dozed a lot on these journeys, with my commuter's brain able to wake me at the right moment – it was, of course, the sound of steel wheels singing their time-honoured song to the rails. On welded rails the modern trains just don't go diddly-dum any more, and the sound is as anachronistic as parents describing trains to young children as choo-choos. That is, unless you count the tourists enjoying nostalgic trips on the Lychgate & Dewkeston Steam Preservation Trust, a worthy recipient of Lottery funding. Ambitious plans to excavate and re-open the almost-forgotten tunnel at Lychgate came to nothing, following some curiously obstructive behaviour by the Department of Transport, for which nobody was able to account.¹

I don't know if anyone else ever saw her. It was always on the way home after work, never on the way in. I'd usually nod off after leaving London, and as King's Cross was left behind and the Coronation Street style vista of back-to-back housing and grimy factories gave way to open fields, I'd drop into a comfortable doze, waking up as we came out of the tunnel at East Madding and ran over the noisy points by the goods yard there. On opening my eyes I'd look out of the window, see the new housing estate at West Madding – houses which seemed to spring up, mushroom-like, overnight and gradually swallow and take over the old Battle of Britain fighter aerodrome until nothing was left of it – and four and a half minutes later we'd be squealing to a stop at Dewkeston. There I'd get out, buy an evening paper from the platform vendor, a bloke I was on more than nodding terms with, and walk the half-mile home.

¹ See "*Lychgate Tunnel*" also by Rob Davis

I didn't see her every day, of course. That would have spoiled the pleasant surprise of sharing my compartment with her, and anyway it was not something you could predict. Something would prod me into wakefulness about a minute before the East Madding tunnel. I guess this was more the diddly-dum than anything else. The smell of pipe tobacco and cheap unfiltered cigarettes ingrained into the upholstery and wooden racking would assault me – another aspect of rail travel which has thankfully seen bygone days. Anyway, I'd look up and see the blood and custard colour scheme of the carriage, the compartment partitioning, the leather window strap and general oldfashionedness of the scene. And, over by the window, standing right at it and looking out, was the girl.

Leastways, I'd call her a girl, although nowadays she'd be called a young woman. She looked about 20, dressed in a cheap utility mackintosh, headscarf and tweed skirt. At first and before I twigged that she wasn't real, I'd try to speak to her, but soon realised that such was a waste of time. Accordingly there I'd be, hovering comfortably in the fuzzy grey no-man's-land between sleep and wakefulness, and once I was used to seeing her I just admired the view, because she was a stunner. Blonde hair escaping from the edges of the headscarf, blue eyes, a fine nose and cheekbones, almost Nordic I suppose you'd say. I couldn't see much of her figure for the mac, but it looked pleasing enough and in those few moments of being in the grey area, she was easy on the eyes enough not to wonder much about anything else.

As the train came within a hundred yards or so of the tunnel, she'd turn and look at me, a desperately painful expression on her face. I became accustomed to this, although to begin with it was a concern. She looked as if she was trying to catch my eye and direct my view out through the window and after half a dozen or so episodes spanning three or four years, I twigged what it was that she wanted, and having had no response to my voice, I'd look past her, out of the window to where she was gazing so intensely.

Peering through the grimy soot-stained glass availed me nothing, and no more than ten or fifteen seconds later the locomotive would gleefully squirt itself down the entrance to the East Madding tunnel and by the time it ejected itself at the West Madding end and I was once more able to see out, there was the growing housing estate – and the girl had gone, along with the diddly-dum and the blood and custard carriage.

I had no idea what she was called, but in my head I named her Bathsheba, as she seemed to be as far from the Madding crowd as it was possible to be.

I think this must have gone on for over thirty-five years. I suppose I saw her three or four times a year, at random intervals; it didn't seem to be something I could make happen. I don't know why I never mentioned it to anyone else but it seemed to be a kind of a private thing between her and me, and we never fell out over it.

Making some Internet enquires turned up nothing of any interest. There were no reports of girls missing in proximity to the railway; no grisly murders had happened thereabouts and there was nothing to suggest any reason why she had decided to show herself to me in my half-awake state. My short walk home from the station never revealed any shadowy figures lurking in dark corners of the road, and nothing untoward ever presented itself to give me any cause to believe that she was focussing on me in particular. But it was clear all the same that she was trying to make me understand something, and I often wondered what had happened to her to make it all so important.

It caused quite a stir when the men working on the housing estate moved on to start the final part of the building plan and drained the old Quarry lake, because at the bottom of it they found a very battered Hawker Typhoon fighter aircraft dating from late 1941. Inside the cockpit and

intermingled with the workings of the huge Napier-Sabre engine, they found the remains of the Sergeant-Pilot, a young man of Argentinian descent. Up popped the military historians, and the local paper carried the resultant story. It appeared that the early model Typhoons had a design glitch with the exhaust system and that carbon monoxide somehow seeped back into the cockpit. The young pilot had disappeared soon after takeoff and the consensus of opinion at the modern inquest was that he had been overcome by the fumes, gone unconscious and crashed.

He was buried with full military honours yesterday morning, the Royal British Legion and Royal Air Force Association providing an honour guard, bugler, and wreaths. It was on the local television news; maybe you saw it.

I saw the girl today, on the way home. I knew it would be for the last time, because she was holding the hand of an RAF Sergeant-Pilot. She smiled at me. She looked very pleased and from this I made the logical assumption that she had been travelling that particular train journey, on her way to meet him, for a fair old while.

She mouthed her name, a single word, before the train squeezed itself into the East Madding tunnel. I don't lip-read, but it was clear enough.

I'll miss Sarah, but I won't miss the blood and custard carriages, the smell of pipe tobacco and cheap cigarettes, the harsh wool seating, or the sooty puffs trying to get in through the rattly windows.

But I will miss her, as well as the diddly-dum. I never found out who left the Airfix kit of a Hawker Typhoon fighter on my kitchen table, along with the Hornby model carriage in its old, old, colours.