



Source: Paul McGeough, 'Hell moves a step closer',
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The Underground train lurches and roars, hurtling itself like a wild thing through the catacombs of London towards Waterloo. That business card again. Suddenly struck with the significance of the printed name and the little letters after it, I begin to feel faintly sick. I crumple it in my plump gloved hand and push it into my pocket. But it has hypnotised me. I have to keep re-reading it. And yet each time it only serves to increase my terror. I remind myself I have prepared for this my whole life. I am hot now beneath my winter layers, my clothes are sticking to me. My waistband bites into the bare flesh with savage concentration and I feel the many undulations of my stomach leaning over the belt loops. The trousers had not been sufficient in themselves when I was shopping for today's outfit. They required the moral support of brand new shoes, over-sized handbag, scarf, gloves, blouse and jacket. I had hoped the clothes would give me a fresh confidence for today, deflect in the interview from my nervousness and from my size. I wanted to be disguised, like all the other business women.

So here I am, sitting bolt upright on a maimed upholstered seat between a suspicious chewing-gum mark, blackened and furry, and a relaxed old man whose splayed legs are pushing my own knees tightly together. My heart is pounding with loud, widely spaced thuds. The train brakes to a standstill and I jump up automatically. It is not my stop, but I need air. I step from the carriage into the drunken maelstrom of the platform crowds. I am swept towards the exit. The platform is thick with soldiers en route. They have been indulging only recently in a few for the road. Or a little Dutch courage. Something (perhaps everything) about me seems to amuse them.

I should tell you now, I'm enormous. I feel I'm as wide as I am tall. I stoop. I grow hotter, a prickling rash creeping up from my cleavage. I am seized by my elbows and thrust into the soldiers' midst, a swirl of khaki, hoots of laughter. 'I'll pay for Weight Watchers love! I'm sure there's a thin girl in there trying to get out! Or did you swallow her?' More laughter. I turn to a soldier. I scream in English: 'Get off me, you—pigs!' and a chorus of pig-imitations abound. There is always something of the circus element in these encounters—being surrounded, heckled and poked at.

I never usually fight back, but today I swipe through the bars. I manage to lift an arm, and I take a swing at the nearest oinking soldier, catching him on the chin with considerable force with my handbag. He stumbles backward and the group loosens. I wrench myself and my handbag free at the barrier and search for my travel card to swipe me through. I hear them calling me worse names and then to my relief, hailing a fresh victim behind me.

I struggle through the barrier. The tops of my arms are

itching. I hurry through the tunnels to the main concourse and step breathlessly onto the escalator. I scrape my fingernails on the rubber hand-rail. People struggle to get past me. I can see the unlit, taped-over Eurostar departure board and hoards of people hoping their trains will miraculously arrive. But the over-grounds are at a standstill. The city is blockaded. On the concourse I hurry to the exit. My wide feet are throbbing in the pointed shoes. I edge back onto the pathway, but stranded tourists with wheeled suitcases block my way. I make for the brick wall to my right and stop.

There is nothing left for me to do. I can go home. I look into the distance at Waterloo Bridge, taxis skirting the bombed round-about where the giant cylinder of a cinema has been pounded into the ground. I can see the bridge clearly now, the traffic moving unconfidently back into the city centre. The afternoon is grey. I think in my grey suit I must be invisible. That almost makes me laugh. I step slowly down to the taxi-rank. The cabbie is jolly and overly polite. I am about to give him my home address but my mouth won't open. I walk silently away from his rolled-down window. I cross onto the opposite pavement and make my way to the South Bank. I think about calling home, but they would ask about the interview. I think of the house, frying sausages permeating the rooms, the television on, the folded bedding, the light from the gas fire. I sit down on a bench facing the Thames. The water is high and still as a lake. There is no water traffic. The river moves with a tide, small waves breaking the black water like whale backs. A line of helicopters rides high over the opposite bank. The day is closing.

The big clock begins to chime, once, twice, and then a low roar distorts the bell. A sudden light rockets into the air from the Houses of Parliament. I see shards of roofing and mortar igniting the sky. The dislocated clock hands fired upwards in the explosion hover mid-air. The helicopters jolt backwards. And then the smoke appears. I close my eyes and imagine the scenes inside. I see the little man in the oak-panelled office with his stack of business cards on the table beside my fabricated CV. I recall his unmasked disgust as I entered the room, filling the doorway. I recall his pompous strides to the window as I fixed the last device beneath his desk. His monotone voice, his glances at my cleavage. I recall his final cold handshake, his unapologetic little face.

My mobile rings. People around me are running. I shift my weight and answer the call. A voice speaks in a quiet congratulatory tone. I do not hear all the words. I work alone, giant and invisible.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Clara Brennan.