

THE APPLICANT

*by Kate Barker*

"The train lurched into Aldgate East station and coughed out four stinking drunks. One of them asked me for change. I told him no. He wobbled off for a bit, then came back and asked me again. *Piss off*, I said this time. I was sick of him. He was better dressed than me, for Christsake—'spare some change mate' my ass. I only had eighty p myself. So I got onto the train. The car was empty except for another drunk, who balanced himself against the armrest and slept. Never spilled a drop from his tin of Amstel, either. Funny that. Conditioning, or something. I was feeling ill. The fumes from the sleeping bastard with the lager didn't much help. The train shuddered along, that slow sickening pace that makes you queasy and all. I felt terrible, horrible, and the wait between stations was never ending. I don't know why we waited, what was causing the bloody delay. Bomb scare? hardly. I doubted the IRA would give a toss about blowing anything up in the East End. I doubted there was any reason at all why I waited, pickled in booze vapours and vomit, somewhere under a street where women were being raped, while my train slumbered in the stink."

"Don't be so dramatic."

"Fuck off. I'm telling the story."

"Now is not the time to realize some vague failed ambition to be a novelist." Peter tapped his fingers. "Tell me about when it happened."

"You know when it happened." I shifted in my chair and lit a cigarette.

"I want you to tell me. And you can't smoke here." Peter rose from his chair and snatched the cigarette from my mouth. "Go on, Larry," he instructed, resuming his position precisely behind the green leather topped mahogany desk.

"A bit over done, that." I nodded at the desk.

"I have to maintain a certain image. It's in my contract." Peter slung his Italian shoes up onto the desk and laced his fingers behind his neck. He was wearing a Rolex. "Please, continue Larry. There isn't much time."

"I was going to East Ham station, where I could catch a mini cab the rest of the way home. Bloody car in the shop—again. I hate the tube, I really do. Then an announcement came over the speaker at Bromley by Bow—an announcement of sorts. You can never hear the bloody things. I heard enough—East Ham Station—closed... sorry for the inconvenience... due to power out." Power out, bollocks. They were doubtless occupied by scraping the guts of some poor sod off the rails, and sprinkling the bits that wouldn't wash down with sawdust. They do that you know, with suicides on the rail. Saw dust. Lovely job for the local P.C. So, a bastard jumps, and I have to get off at Upton Park Station. You never want to get off at Upton Park after dark, ever."

"And that's when it happened." Peter flipped through some notes on his desk.

"That's when it started." I eyed my cigarettes but didn't have the nerve to light another.

"Please, continue." Peter was oblivious.

"I got off the train and walked along the platform. that's when I saw him."

"Who?"

"I don't know his bleeding name. The messenger. The one who lets you know. I'm sure you've met him, Christ. At first, I didn't take much notice. I just thought he was another drunk who had missed the last train home."

"What did he look like?" Peter was suddenly attentive. He cracked his fingers, one by one, and stared at me. His eyes were a passionless, pupilless grey.

“He was wearing a long black coat. I couldn’t see his face, because he was looking down. I heard a train rumbling near and thought that odd, as I was sure I had been on the last train. I kept walking down the platform, as the train rolled closer. It sounded like it was going at a hell of a clip. I remember I was jealous, wishing I’d been on that train instead of the awful clunker I caught home. I was halfway up the stairs when I realized that the train wasn’t going to stop, that it was roaring right through the station. I was terrified—thought it would crash—that the brakes were gone, or something. So I turned to see. That’s when I knew. The drunk in the long black coat was staring at me. He didn’t have a face. Only eyes—like bright blue lasers. It was hideous. His coat flapped behind him, flying like a huge black cape in the wind of a passing train—only—there was no train.” I shivered. I really needed that cigarette.

“Yes. That was definitely him.” Peter relaxed and turned back to his notes. “Go on.” He seemed bored.

“I was in a panic, naturally. I raced up the stairs, hoping for a change to find an underground inspector. But the station was deserted. I calmed down sufficiently to rationalize what I had seen as an acid flashback.”

“You dropped acid?” Peter asked, stupidly.

“In 1972, who didn’t?”

“Point taken.” Peter knit his eyebrows.

“Does that count?”

“Hardly. But we have no record of it. Interesting. Alright, get on with it, tell me the rest.” Peter closed his notebook. I had the distinct feeling that Peter didn’t give a toss about ‘the rest’, that it was all mere formality.

“I was frightened. Anyone would have been. I looked around, worried about twelve year olds with guns and knives. There were none. So I took a few deep breaths, told myself to

be a man and not such a bloody coward. That did the trick, and I felt almost confident as I strode out onto Green Street. I moved quickly, wanting to get home and well aware of the fact that I was in a dodgy area of town. I had nearly passed the empty market, and felt reassured that I was as good as home. There were people ahead of me, and the lighting is markedly improved once past the market. I thought I was quite safe." I sighed. I was tired, and thirsty, and wondered when I could sleep.

"You were wrong." Peter smiled. He even laughed.

"There's nothing funny about it!" I was livid. I wanted to stuff his expensive shoes straight down his gullet. Peter remained unperturbed.

"Shouting won't do you any good." He yawned. I snatched his papers from the desk and flung them across the room.

"Four bastards the size of telephone boxes jumped me, dragged me screaming into the pitch black of the empty market, and stabbed me twenty-six times, you fuck!" Clearly, I had snapped.

"Yes, yes, I know. You were dead after the second wound. A rather nasty slice which severed your jugular. It was quick, and relatively painless." Peter patted my hand. "Messy, of course, and a bit terrifying for you, after all, but it could have been much worse. You were quite lucky to have it over with so quickly. Don't you think?"

I suddenly felt quite weak, and sunk back into my chair. "Why did they have to kill me?" I wished Peter would offer me tea, perhaps a cut sandwich, or a scone. He only smiled.

"You annoyed them Larry. That simple. They were all, incidentally, under the age of twenty. Sad really, don't you think? Youth, the faith of it, the strength of it, the imagination of it. All for the contents of your wallet, which was of virtually no use since your MasterCard is quite at its limit." Peter lowered his grey-flannel legs from the desk and stretched.

"We're nearly done, Larry. I just have to process your form and send you along."

I craned my neck in an attempt to read what Peter was scribbling madly on a form. "Now then," Peter snapped the file folder shut under my nose. "I will explain why you are an unacceptable applicant."

My stomach dropped. I realized there was no chance of tea and scones. I felt quite cold.

"No need to look so worried, Larry." Peter chuckled. "Good god, man, you don't actually believe in hell, do you?" Peter slapped my shoulder. "Would you like a drink? I think you rather need one." He pulled a cut crystal decanter with matching glasses from his desk and poured two long ones.

"Thanks." I took the glass shakily.

"Do try not to spill, Larry. The rug is rather precious."

"Sorry." I steadied my hand and licked a dribble of scotch from the edge of the glass.

"You'll be alright, Larry. There are just a few formalities, then we'll be finished."

"Sure." I gulped my scotch and found an ounce of courage. "Don't I get a chance to present my case?" My voice was reedy—not unlike a small child's.

"If you insist, though it won't make much difference now. Please, try to be brief, Larry." Peter settled back and my mind went quite blank.

"Well," I coughed. "I've always been a nice enough chap. Really, I have. I have never hit anyone who didn't throw the first punch. I'm generous. I put my sister through three years at the local Poly-tech. I'm a good father. My kids like me. My wife doesn't, but that's hardly my fault. We are unsuited. And I strongly suspect she has taken her—affections—elsewhere. So of course, I have as well. That's only fair. People at work like me..." I was stumbling. People at work hated me. I was a

bastard to my secretary. I doubted they would scrape together enough for a decent floral arrangement to send to the funeral.

"Larry, this really isn't necessary. I am satisfied that you were a perfectly mediocre fellow."

"But does mediocre get me in?" I finished the scotch and Peter graciously poured another.

"Let me explain. We are not interested in the summation of your life. We are only concerned with the actions and thoughts of your last conscious fifteen minutes prior to death."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Only the last fifteen minutes count, Larry. And frankly, you failed."

"You must be joking." I stared hard into Peter's eyes. The bastard didn't blink.

"It wasn't always like this," Peter continued. "Now we simply haven't got the time or resources to study reams of documentation for each applicant. Who really cares if you were a pleasant child or an evil adolescent. It simply isn't cost effective. We can't keep up. As a result, our think-tank instigated a policy of time limited testing, which has proved to be remarkably effective and saves us loads of work. Your test began at Aldgate East Station, at 11:45 p.m., Friday, March 26, 1993. And I am sorry to say, you failed decidedly. In those fifteen minutes prior to your murder, you did not engage in a single decent act or thought towards another human being or animal." Peter delicately sipped his scotch, his silver cufflinks tinkled against the crystal.

"Fifteen minutes!" I sputtered. "I lived for forty-six years, and all I got was fifteen bloody minutes?"

"Fifteen minutes is all anyone has had since industrialization really took off. Larry, soon we will be cutting it down to a mere eleven minutes, by the time your son is due as an applicant. You'll be glad to know, by the way, that young Nigel won't meet

me until he is sixty-eight years old." Peter straightened his tie.

"I don't give a flying fuck about Nigel right now." I lit another cigarette and blew the smoke into Peter's face.

"Charming." Peter coughed. He made no motion to take my cigarette. I think he was afraid I would hit him, which was true. "I'll be brief." Peter's smile had evaporated. He tapped his fingers. "First, there was the homeless person, whom you refused to give any money. That was, incidentally, St. Paul." Peter checked his notes. "Yes, Paul was on duty in East London tonight. He was booked on the District Line tube run."

"St. Paul?" I was dumbfounded. "He got in?"

"Naturally." Peter nodded. "Paul asked you on four separate occasions if you could spare some change. You had exactly 1.24 in coins, not 80p, as you told me. Even 20p would have got you in. Paul was only supposed to ask you twice, but he is a bit of a zealot. He's in competition with St. Joan to get the most successful applicants this year. At last count, St. Joan was winning. You left Paul in a foul mood, by the way. He thought you would give him a few coppers just to shut him up."

"Jesus Christ," I muttered.

"He is not available just now." Peter was very concrete.

"At least he got in," I bitched.

"Actually, he didn't." Peter smiled. I shook my head until my eyes hurt.

"Next, there was the sleeping drunkard in your train car."

"Let me guess. John the Baptist," I spat.

"No. Clarence."

"Who in hell is St. Clarence?"

"Have you never seen 'It's A Wonderful Life'? Jimmy Stewart, Christmas Eve and all that? Clarence was the angel who earned his wings." Peter checked his watch.

"I hated that bloody film." I was getting a bit drunk. "What could I have done for Clarence, the Hollywood angel?"

“You could have woken him to tell him that East Ham station was closed. Failing that, you could have at least checked to see if he was still breathing, or even thought something decent towards him. ‘Poor old chap’ would have done the trick.”

“That’s it. A homeless St. Paul and a stinking old drunken angel—they were my two chances to get in?”

“It is standard policy to give an applicant three opportunities to earn a place.” Peter continued.

“Well I didn’t get a third chance. You screwed up. I want a re-match. Send me back! I only met two people, plus the goddamned Angel of Death before I snuffed it, you supercilious bastard! You made a mistake. Check your bloody notes.” I poured myself a third drink, to the rim.

“No mistake, I can assure you. The third chance is understandably more challenging and requires considerable more effort on the part of the applicant. In your case, it involved the rescue of a rape victim at West Ham station.”

“I never saw anyone being attacked at West Ham station!” I sputtered.

“No, but you thought about it. Larry, you told me that when your train was delayed, you imagined women being sexually assaulted on the streets above you. Seriously, how often does that occur to you? Never. We infused you with the absolute knowledge of the fact. You were not simply imagining an atrocity, you were aware of one occurring. Despite this, you failed to disembark from the train at West Ham to intervene on the woman’s behalf.”

“Had I got off the train at West Ham, I would still be alive, so it wouldn’t be an issue.” I countered.

“Not at all,” Peter insisted. “The woman’s assailant would have shot you dead.”

“Lovely.” I slumped into my scotch.

"These things are preordained, Larry. Your life was due to end between 11:57 and 12:08. If the gang hadn't finished you off, a black cab would have mowed you down right outside your front door."

"Shut up." I sulked.

"I understand that you're upset. I'm finished now. If you haven't any more questions, then I'll make the arrangements to send you back."

"Back?" I wondered if the scotch had affected my hearing.

"Naturally. You didn't get in, so there is no alternative. We must hurry. You only have a few minutes. Are you sure you haven't any more questions?" Peter grabbed a fresh file from his drawer. I didn't answer him. My head ached. "I'll tell you the next step then." Peter surveyed the fresh file. "A violent crime is about to take place in the foyer of East Ham tube station. By the way, there really was a lighting failure which is why this crime is occurring. A twenty year old will be raped by two members of the British National Party. Larry, you are about to be re-conceived."

"She's not going to have an abortion!" I was appalled. My father would be a neo-Nazi skin-head and my mother an emotionally scarred wreck.

"Not a chance. She's a devout Catholic, and a rabid pro-lifer."

"I'm doomed." I started to cry.

"She already has a child, by her uncle. That's your big sister, Jenny." Peter tried to look encouraging.

"I'd rather go to hell." I sniffled.

"Larry, you're going to be female this time around, so take extra precautions at tube stations late at night, and around male relatives, won't you?"

"Wonderful." I reached down and squeezed my genitals goodbye. A buzzer sounded. Peter got to his feet. "Goodbye, Larry. And good luck. My next appointment has arrived."

I hauled myself up and headed for the door. "Peter?" I paused.

"Yes Larry?" Peter was retrieving a new file folder from his cabinet. "Who is it, your next appointment?"

"Dwayne Gilbert Drake," Peter squinted at the file.

"The serial killer, from Florida?" I knew the name. I had read that day in the Sun that he was to be lethally injected at dawn. Evidently the governor had not intervened on his behalf. "Is he going to get in?" I just had to know.

"That's confidential information, Larry." Peter frowned.

"Oh come on. I won't remember it in five minutes. My mother is about to be violated by a Neanderthal. Please, Peter, I've got to know." I held my breath. Peter opened Drake's file.

"I shouldn't. But why not. I rather like you, Larry." Peter shrugged. "Drake is getting in."

"How?"

"He offered his guard, St. Joan, his complete collection of Archie comic books as he was escorted to the chamber."

"I see. Thanks." I turned to go. I was about to open the door, when one last question occurred to me. "Peter..."

"You really must go now, Larry."

"Just one more thing. Tell me. What's the point?"

"To what?" Peter was puzzled. He arched an elegant eyebrow for an instant, then broke into a grin. "Oh—that. The bloody meaning of life." He giggled, as he cleared away the scotch glasses. I was afraid he wouldn't tell me.

"Peter, please. What is the point?" I was shaking.

"The point, Larry, is not to go back."

"Oh." I gazed into Peter's smiling eyes for a moment. "Well, goodbye, then." I opened the door.

"Cheerio, Larry. Take care of yourself. Until next time, eh?"

"Thanks." I walked into reception and took a seat, waiting to be called down. Dwayne Gilbert Drake sat beside me, smiling at his shoes.