

FOUR MINUTE WARNING

- R J Burgess -

Two minutes to two.

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The man with the dodgy leg sits in the hollow encampment under the train buffers. He barely moves. He sits hunched like a question mark in the sooty darkness, ignoring the twinges of cramp that shoot up his back. His bad leg lies out flat on the ground before him. The end of it is a ball of soggy rags and gore. Something about it isn't healing right. Even in the darkness of the put where he is hiding, surrounded by trash and vermin and God only knows what else, he can smell it. But this too he ignores.

The butt of a twelve-gauge lies flat against his lap; the muzzle is still warm against the cold sweat of his hands. He waits.

"Come on," he mutters and digs himself further into the darkness, back pressed up against the red and white stripes of the buffers as though they will somehow save him from what is to come.

Save him? He scoffs at the idea. They couldn't even stop a train.

From above his head, the sudden crackle of a walkie talkie. He starts before realising what it is.

"Oscar Bravo Tango report."

Silence.

The man with the dodgy leg holds his breath and tries not to move. He clenches the twelve-gauge tight within his grip and bids the sound go away. It doesn't.

"Oscar Bravo Tango, no sign of fugitive. Heading back, over."

"Rodger that."

The crackling conversation sounds huge in his ears. The man with the dodgy leg pushes himself back, tells himself to relax. The man up there is not Oscar Bravo Tango but he works for the same side. He's one of them, the man with the dodgy leg knows, and they were all the enemy.

In the darkness, a curious rat starts snuffling around his wounded leg. He chases it away with the butt of his gun but he knows it'll be back before long and with friends. He daren't even look at his leg anymore. He's been around killing long enough to know gangrene when he smells it.

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One minute to two.

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From where he sits all the man with the dodgy leg can see is a steady line of shoes and luggage passing by on the opposite platform. It's a long way up and a long way down. His letterbox view of the world is constrictive but he can at least see the clock hanging over the

station, it's hands slowly moving round to their own relentless clunk, clunk, rhythm. Watching it is strangely therapeutic. After several hours of waiting, he's got the timing of a minute down to a fine art. He'll outwait them if he has to.

The sound of the walkie talkie moves away. The man lets out an unconscious breathe. Where there's one there's bound to be another, he knows. How many are out there waiting for him? Not for the first time that day, the man with the dodgy leg wonders if he's really doing the right thing in being here, if he shouldn't just give up now, hand himself in, let it all be over. He checks the twelve-gauge again and tells himself to be quiet.

If you were really such a quitter, he thinks. You wouldn't have made it this far.

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Two o'clock.

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From overhead, the chimes of the clock striking the hour bellow out, echoing around the station and down onto the track. The man with the dodgy leg sits a little more upright and looks out, alert.

The train is now officially late. It isn't exactly a good start to proceedings when this sort of thing happens. You're a fugitive, he reminds himself. You ran away and now they want you back. You broke out of jail and they're after you and they won't stop until you're back with them.

Shut up, he tells himself but his mind won't listen anymore. It fills him with doubts; it nibbles upon his conscience like the rat upon his leg. The train is late. Your plan is doomed. The train is late. How stupid were you trusting in a timetable?

Your leg is gone, he reminds himself. You destroyed it getting away from the guards. You can't walk, certainly can't run. You're waiting for a train you can't even board. They'll be monitoring all travel in or out of this place.

I'll wait here then, he thinks but his mind only sighs back in exasperation and reminds him that if he waits here he'll starve. And besides, a train station is only so big. The police will find him eventually.

You can't win this. So do yourself a favour and hand yourself in.

Hand yourself in...

"No," he whispers to the rat as it returned on cue with his friends. "I ain't no quitter."

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One minute past two.

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Thoughts of surrender fill the man's head. He knows what it will mean. Captivity, food, treatment for his leg and then death. Solitary confinement. Lethal injection. Oblivion. He doesn't care anymore.

He is about to cry out when he looks up and sees before him a sight that almost makes him weep with joy. The two o'clock train to Bedford rolling into the station at a steady fifteen miles per hour. Commuters line the platform, waiting to jump on board and head off to work or to the seaside or wherever it is they're heading now with not a single thought to the man with the dodgy leg and his plight beyond the odd curious look at all the policemen standing around.

And then suddenly, lying there in that heady mix between euphoria and pain, his mind hazing out on natural endorphins, a new idea suddenly grabs the man with the dodgy leg. A grand idea so great he cannot hold himself still but pulls himself upright to the squeals of protest from his leg and the family of rats snuffling around it.

Hardly knowing what he's doing, the man raises the twelve-gauge to eye level and releases the safety catch. He's a crack shot - it's what got him inside in the first place. He can't miss from this range. And now he realises that in fact, this is the very reason he waited here all this time. Not to board the train and escape, but to destroy it. He hadn't even known that until now. He is good at keeping secrets from himself.

I'm not a quitter.

His finger presses tight against the trigger, the man bears himself upright, peers through the tiny window of the sight where the train driver, unsuspecting,

prepares to apply the brakes to the train, prepares to stop it and save all of those hundreds of busy lives gathered on the platform before him.

"No you fucking don't!" the man with the dodgy leg growls. The twelve-gauge spits off a shot, the sound of which roars through the station. Then another: one, two, three.

Chaos erupts. People scream from the platform. The air is suddenly filled with crackling walkie talkies, confused shouting, panic, chaos, doom. And then in front of them, rolling towards them at fifteen miles per hour, the two o'clock service to Bedford continues to roll up to the buffers, the front carriage all but decimated by shell fire.

The man smiles.

"Not bad shooting."

Thank you.

He rolls out the way and braces himself for the impact. Even hiding as he is, this next part is going to hurt a lot.

As the train ploughs into the station, crashing through the barriers, ploughing into the concrete of the platform, chewing through metre after metre of metal and concrete and people that cry out for loved ones the names of whom die on their lips, the man hoists himself up out of his hiding place at last, holding himself upright on

his one good leg, his hands raised above his head in
surrender as he prepares to face his fate.