



UNDER THE RAINBOW

Amy Twort

Joseph: I'm a man and I'm on a tube and I'm wearing pink.

This is not a statement about who I am, it's just a colour I like that appears frequently in charity shops.

I'm a man and I'm on a tube.

This is a clue to where I live but does not tell you about me, it's just a way of getting from A to B that is mostly quick but can be oppressive and is too far underground.

I'm a man.

This is not as important as it seems when you're young and playing Guess Who and to know I'm a male is to be half way to winning.

I am.

And you know I am because you're all looking and wondering about me and my life and the colour of my hat, which is orange, and doesn't quite match the pink tracksuit and trainers, the white gloves and ankle socks, which should be too small for a man's foot. But they fit and I'm no Cinderella.

I.

I'm a man and I'm on a tube and I'm wearing pink. I'm hot because the tube's crowded and I'm struggling to hold onto the bar; I'm just five foot tall with no heels on my shoes. I reach up on tiptoes, a little girl ballerina; balance a skill not yet mastered. I'm on my tiptoes in my pink trainers and my gold lamé bag is hooked over my right arm. It's my left hand that grips the bar; I'm left-handed.

(Anna: He came to us when he was four in a black shirt and grey trousers. They were too big and made him look like an old man. He had the smell of mature cigarette smoke, breathed in and soaked up over years spent in bars and basement nightclubs. But he was just four, his clothes second or third hand.)

Julia: As I walked through the underground, the busker paused, looking up from his guitar, he smiled, briefly but smiling. He smiled at me and I tilted my head the way women do in movies when they want to seem shy. I may have even done that before he smiled, he maybe smiled because I did that, because he knew from the tilt that I wasn't original. I turned the corner and stopped. A man with a briefcase fell into me, muttered something inaudible as I stood, waiting to hear if the busker would sing. He did. That song I haven't heard in a long time, "Where do you go to, my lovely, when you lay down in your bed." The next line escapes me, rhymes, of course, something about wanting to get into your head. And he has. One minute later, I'm on the tube and he and his voice have found a way in. I'm almost hearing gentle whispering that he'll brighten up my day.

I swear I heard it.

Joseph:

I'm on tiptoes holding the bar with my left hand. I look down at my feet or straight ahead. There's a blank space between the anonymous bland suit and the woman with the interesting scar. It's not really a blank space – few of those left down here. Anything that could have once resembled nothing is now

filled with adverts. IT consultancy, vitamin supplements, marriage guidance sessions. Blank spaces are rare and I've not found one. I have, though, found a piece of the carriage that is neither populated by Londoners nor graffitied with heartfelt pleas for blowjobs or tube poetry that is never as interesting as other passengers' newspapers. Or other passengers.

I'm holding onto the bar somewhere between Bethnal Green and Liverpool Street stations. I'm passing unknown beneath houses, offices, gardens. All trying to be green in a grey city. Even the birds are grey in London. I'm wearing almost fluorescent pink. Although you look, none of you are grateful that [whispers] I brighten up your day.

Julia: I swear I heard him.

Joseph:

I'm passing unknown staring at an almost blank space. It makes me delirious. It's the last gasp of air before you go deep under water to the bottom of the pool of chlorinated wet yellowed by urine. That last gasp is urgent and controlled. The space is the last gasp of air, it's a moment of serene panic before you go under, the last thing you see before the world turns blue.

(**Anna:** The social worker saw us the week before he came. She told us his history as it reads on paper. A case of neglect. We asked questions but knew we would not really know the answers until we could meet him face to face and let him cry in our arms until he slept for eighteen hours in his first ever bed.)

Julia: I can feel his voice chasing me through the capital's tunnels, my fingers tracing the notes till they fade in the hot air. My eyes are closed, but I'm not dreaming. My feet are on the ground, but I'm not stood still. I'm floating on the music and feeling like a fool because this man is a busker who just smiled. I check to see if he's followed me down to ask me to dinner so that he can serenade me and write songs about how we met on the underground at 11.59.

But eyes open, not dreaming, I look. No busker to romance me, though the man on my right is the colour of romance and size of Cupid, his gold lamé bag could carry a bow. And just as I'm thinking how the pink of his tracksuit is the shade of my first kiss, he, we are plunged into a lightless dark.

Joseph:

The darkness slows and comes to a standstill. I stand still on tiptoes, equalizing, matching the pressure in my head to that of the dark blue tube filled with people. People who don't know the names of those sharing their underground space. People concentrating only on their own insignificant patch of stained seating or dusty floor. People thinking about their balance and not the hands and mouths of their invisible company.

(**Anna:** Before he came to us, he had been locked in a room with heavy curtains and no bulb in the light fitting. Day and night, he sat on a single mattress with his two sisters staring at the locked door. He didn't know that the sky is blue and the grass is green. His first four years of life had been spent in a dark and emotionless room without sunlight or language.)

Joseph:

I'm a man, and I'm on a blue-black tube. Everyone now as anonymous as the man with the anonymous suit. The woman with the interesting scar no longer has her past [?] on show on her jaw. And I'm no longer a pink freak show.

We're just two of people on a lightless tube.

People living the same moment. People breathing the same air. People keeping the same silence in pristine condition. It's newly made and wrapped in a bow of darkness. The silence is a shared gift among strangers. It's Christmas Eve anticipation on a summer's day in a blue-black tube. Father Christmas could never find us. Without Rudolf, reindeers don't like the dark. Then the bow of the quiet gift slips undone. Thin tissue paper tears under the gentle touch of just-above-scar-level lips. She dares to speak.

'Where are the lights? Why have we stopped?'

Shared silence becomes shared panic. Shared space becomes shared claustrophobia. Once it has been announced, too many people become afraid of the dark.

(Anna: It was too much for him at first. He'd never seen a rainbow nor enjoyed the comfort of a hand-me-down bear. It wasn't long, though, before he laughed. On his third day in our home, I dressed him in a green shirt and yellow shorts. He looked in the mirror and pointed. It was the first time he'd seen his face. We called him Joseph because he filled our lives with technicoloured dreams.)

Joseph:

I'm a man and I'm on a tube and I'm wearing pink. But if that was all you knew earlier, you now know even less. That's why the dark is so frightening. If you see something you can believe you know it. You can look at an orange hat and pink shoes without heels and keep your distance. But now you see me now you don't and pink becomes as blue black as your assumptions.

Amid the shared panic in the claustrophobic tube, I come down off my tiptoes and stand flat on my shoes without heels. There is no need to balance when the world sits still.

Julia: It's only when I speak everyone else seems to notice we're sat in the dark. People are murmuring. The busker's imagined whispers fighting for space with hundreds of opaque voices wanting to know why we're stopped, why we're without light, why we put ourselves underground on a sunny day in June. People begin to talk to themselves as they would at home, where no one could hear their first signs of madness. I feel a hand fold carefully around my arm. With fingertips worn away by guitar strings? My mind, fogged in the colour of Cupid's tracksuit, plays him, the busker, over in the blank space black.

The hand rests on my bare arm. It's not skin to skin, there's a thin barrier, which makes the touch feel the way you feel moved by sentimental television, it's not quite real but it makes your hair stand on end.

The busker's tune plays in front of my eyes in the darkness and my legs are moving, almost dancing but more like shaking, giving into the queasiness of underground air. The hand on my arm holds me steady, tightens its grip as if it feels me lose mine.

Joseph:

Out loud to her: It's only the dark. Things are still the same. Listen and they don't make any more noise when they become invisible. Touch them and they feel no different. Smell them and they still smell of yesterday's newspapers, today's perfume, stale human belongings. They've lost their colour, but colour's never forever lost.

Julia: His voice is soft like unmascara'd lashes waltzing on my paled hip. Tickled, I stand taller, out of the panic back into the train where he has filled what was dark world with technicoloured sensations. And the image of busked love fades as I come to understand it's the man on the tube who's wearing pink who's holding me, saving me, he's romancing me via an underground rainbow, with a gold lamé bag at the foot of its arc.

(**Anna:** We were always surprised that he wasn't afraid of the dark. It was never a threat to him, just an absence he would try to fill. He played a game called "the magics" in which each colour was a kind of power. He would dress in one colour from head to toe and bring that power to life. I remember him in red, which I had always thought of as angry. He wore it and it became smiley. Red lips curved in the corner. He reassured me that the red scab on his knee was a sign from his body that time could heal.)

Joseph:

I tell her out loud it's just dark. I hold her steady as she wobbles on the still train. She, the woman with the interesting scar. I saw her first by the busker. He stopped singing as I walked by. Piss-taking grin at the five-foot pink freak show. He was no different to anybody else. His glance just more obvious because it stopped his tune in its tracks. Deadpan musical notes suspended in mid-air. He'd smirked. She'd turned her head in my defence. I followed her round the corner. She stopped, about to turn back. About to berate the busker for mocking the little colour in an otherwise miserable subway. And then the tube and she got on. She looked to check I was next to her. Then, out go the lights on the train. Now, on goes my gloved hand to her arm. Goosebumps raise red under the bare skin. Colour is never forever lost.

(**Anna:** When he was thirteen, he dressed head to toe in blue. It made me so angry, because he would almost drown in the sorrow of his navy trousers. On balance, though, he painted his face yellow, wanted to make us happy because he was our only son. We became outlines and he'd colour us in, using crayons to make us laugh and oils to make us weep. Joseph's colour would determine our mood. As he began to make things happen, "the magics" lived up to their name.)

Julia: I wouldn't normally speak to strangers, but the dark makes us familiar. I tell him, you're the colour of romance and the size of Cupid.

Joseph:

I tell her, I keep a bow in my gold lamé bag.

Julia: I tell him, that's what I thought.
But I'd been kidding.

Joseph:

I ask her, how'd you get the scar?

Julia: I ask, what scar?

Joseph:

The interesting one on your chin?

Julia: I don't have a scar on my chin.

Joseph:

I realise I'm making this happen. I made the train a dark canvas. The blank space was there and I coloured it in. I wore pink because I wanted her to feel the chapped lips of her first ever kiss. She believed I was Cupid and now I am. And there is a bow in my bag. My hand is reaching to take it. I draw back the arrow and do what she, we, expect me to do. I aim it at her heart.

But I'm a man on the tube who's just five-foot tall and, with my handbag over my right arm, my hold on the bow is weak. I draw back the arrow and the world is filled with colour.

Julia: Flickering-lights-back-on yellow amid the mishmash of passenger skin, he is the colour of romance and the size of Cupid.

Joseph:

I'm only doing what she expects.

Julia: He is the size of romance and the colour of Cupid.

Joseph:

I tug on the vital string in the heart of the carriage. At full bent, I let go, let nature take its course. I watch, breath baited, the arrow fly its short distance in the rainbowed arc of the tube.

Julia: He lets go, but he's a man on the tube who's just five-foot tall. With his handbag over his right arm, his aim is poor. The arrow flies its short distance but only catches my chin. Red blood makes a red scab leaves a red scar. All within seconds; it's 12:01. At 11:59, romance was a busker who sang and who smiled. Now he's a five-foot man in pink who shot me in the jaw.

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