



## BACKGROUND

### Lee Jackson

It began with a simple error, when I had Julia Parameter travel home by underground railway. Do not get me wrong. I am normally quite precise in these matters. For example, before I had written a word, I had given a good deal of thought to her clothing: the exact percentage of wool in her loose-fitting ‘jumper’; the cut of her tight black trousers.

From the shoes upon her feet (padded ankle collar and foam sockliner) to the spiky crop of her hair, and the gel she would have used to sculpt it into shape – all of it had been lovingly researched. Indeed, for a week or more, before I began, I had sketched her petite figure on my artpad, in an effort to get to know her personally. I had even made a note of the date of her birth, though I did not plan to divulge it in the text.

Instead, I began the piece by describing her home in South London; her unhappy childhood; the reason for her unfortunate lisp; the noise she always made when she . . . well, let us not speak of that. My readers enjoy such things, of course, but there is no need to dwell upon them.

In any case, it was the journey home in Chapter III that let me down. A simple mistake. I did not have the relevant library files, so I merely guessed

the number of stations. I left my conscience somewhere between Camden Town and Covent Gardens, and that was my undoing.

The reader of historicals is an unforgiving beast, you see. My first complaint was from the Covent Gardens Redemption Society. It was, claimed the secretary, common knowledge that three stations, at least, separated Covent Gardens from Camden. Moreover, my heroine would have been obliged to change railway carriages at Leicester Square. The implication was, of course, that if I did not have this information at my fingertips, then what right had I to write anything in the first place? I replied saying that I was very grateful for his interest.

A second notice came from the Editor, a week or two later, a more serious business. Did I know, she inquired, that I was suddenly garnering a poor accuracy rating on major sites? 84% of first-choice readers had doubted my description of the underground transport system. I replied, of course, that its dirt and inefficiency was notorious, as recounted in numerous core texts; I cited chapter and verse of contemporary works, like Amis's *Bore*, and Kagouleh's *Dark Secret City*.

This, so she told me, was irrelevant; my image had been tarnished. There was, I felt sure, a whispering campaign directed against me.

What could I do? I resolved to impress them. I threw in more period references, to politicians and long-forgotten wars. I mentioned the suicide of Blair, the ill-judged campaign in New Palestine; the rise of the National Centre Party. But no-one knew what I was talking about; 'no-one is interested in politics' said the Editor.

I narrowed my canvas. I described, in detail, a walk Julia made from the Covent Gardens to the fields at Lincoln's Inn; it was a time, after all, when people still did such things. I gave it my best: there was no particle of air, no speck of dirt upon the cracked concrete and asphalt paving that did not tell its own unique story.

I painted every railing, polished every street sign. I had a motor vehicle drive past and I hymned the hum of its Higher-output 6.6L SOHC V16 engine

and the rich beauty of its painted metal sides, with their dark blue pearl metallic finish. At Lincoln's Inn, a vagrant made Julia the traditional supplication for alms, his head bowed down, his hat upon the ground. She stopped and he told her his life story. As he talked, I described the impact of low-grade intoxicants upon his body, the effects of government stimulant-rationing. I swear, there was not a single burst blood-vessel in his deep swollen red eyes that escaped my attention.

'Too much detail,' said the Editor. 'Too many adjectives. Sales are down.'

So I changed tack. I had bought a revealing history of outdoor recreation and early twenty first century sexual dysfunction. I directed Julia towards The Green Park; I had her take off her outer garments, and lie back upon the grass. I waxed lyrical upon the dark brown complexion of her skin; the moist radiation cream that she rubbed into her damaged flesh, down her hips, across her breasts, the willing exposure of her body to others. I showed the admiring gaze of passing strangers, and the activity of those who lay down beside her. There were children present, of course. Sickening.

'Implausible,' said the Editor. 'You must carry the readers with you.'

I despaired. What if Julia was the problem? Again, I altered my plans. I sidelined her from the narrative, took the metropolis as my theme: the broad concrete sweep of the Western Avenue; the noise and fumes of 'cars' over Waterloo Bridge. I praised the bombed-out ruin of St. Paul's, preserved in its entirety by far-sighted civil servants; the Bankside Memorial, beautiful in its simplicity.

I had Julia climb The Great Wheel, and gaze down upon the old City at night, with pin-prick yellow lights punctuating the darkness. I talked of 'telephone kiosks' and 'internet cafés'; trams, taxis and 'traffic lights'; the roaring motors of the new steam omnibuses that plied the river, after the hydro-revolution. I described the gothic monstrosity of Westminster, demolished by the Bank Governors, only the clock tower left standing; I walked her through the pleasure gardens at New Battersea, in the shadow of

the old theme park. I had her drive along the covered carriage-way that once ran down Oxford Street.

‘The past,’ I had Julia remark, cleverly, ‘is like dust. Some of it settles, some of it is blown away.’

Now, I thought to myself, this will convince the doubters.

‘I don’t want a history lesson,’ said the Editor.

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