

The Sound Of A Match Striking

by Richard Bardsley

Fairburn Street is a place of contrasts. It is a curious place. There is a short row of terraced houses a century old decorated with aerials and satellite dishes like cheap jewellery on a duchess. The road surface is tarmac but cobble stones show through here and there like holes worn in a fabric. There is an old industrial building next to a yard full of council vehicles; beyond, an old stone wall with so many holes in it that a bright new modern steel fence has been erected behind it. It's the modern world you know but the past keeps slipping through like a prisoner escaping jail.

Such observations are lost on Sean Matthews as he turns into Fairburn Street. He is more concerned with cursing his luck; he curses the police patrol that spotted him forcing his way into a newsagents; he curses the judge who decided that there was more to be gained from giving this 'reckless teenager' the discipline of a job than simply locking him up. So this run of luck leads him from the bus station in the centre of town, a short way down the hill and all too quickly into Fairburn Street.

Cold winds whistle down the street taking Sean's breath away. They penetrate the thin material of his coat and through to the equally thin frame on which it hangs. He risks taking a hand out of the slight warmth of a pocket to pull a baseball cap down further over short dark hair.

A gate in the shiny new fence marks Sean's destination. Behind it lies the property of a private railway; they are running an employment scheme for the long term unemployed and the young offenders like Sean. He pushes at the heavy steel gate and it swings open, accompanied by squeals of protest. Sean



proceeds into a cobbled yard containing randomly placed piles of scrap metal, a few cars, old railway coaches in a siding and lots of weeds. Dominating the yard is a large modern building; this is the carriage shed that holds the carriages that are being worked on. It is painted a drab brown colour. Modern architecture to house railway history; more contrasts. Sean walks up to the door in the nearest corner of the shed and kicks it to attract the attention of someone inside. Several minutes pass before the door opens to reveal Mr Fennel, the scheme's supervisor, a thin middle-aged man with a dreary care-worn expression.

'I take it you're Sean,' he says in a gruff voice. The lean face cracks a smile. 'Come on in, lad. It's warmer in here, but not much.'

'Thanks,' says Sean begrudgingly. He steps into the shed; his nose is immediately assaulted by the smell of oil that betrays the presence of machinery. The shed is filled with four rows of railway carriages stretching from the back wall where they stand to large doors at the front. Sean is surprised just how big the carriages are from ground level rather than from the normal viewing position of a platform. They are like dinosaurs from another age; the screaming whine of power tools in the shed seems to enforce the illusion.

'Any qualifications?' asks Mr Fennel. 'City and Guilds?'

'No, nothing', mutters Sean in reply.

'I can guarantee that you're not going to find railway carriage maintenance the most riveting job in the world,' says Mr Fennel with a wry smile, 'but you might learn something useful. There are exams you can sit, pieces of paper to earn. They might help you get a proper job, one that pays more than ten pounds on top of your dole money.'

'Great,' says Sean but he is not enthusiastic.

Mr Fennel leads Sean over the concrete floor to some steps up to narrow wooden platforms that stretch down the shed between the carriages. They walk to the far wall of the shed and past the carriages on that side until they descend more steps. The wind still blows making the metal walls shake; moans and whistles seem to come from everywhere.



'This building's alive,' says Mr Fennel seriously. 'It talks to me, all those noises.' He ducks through a door into a store room and emerges with a boiler suit and a pair of boots.

'Stick these on,' he says, 'and we'll find you something to do.'

Once suitably attired, Sean is led over to where similarly dressed men are cleaning metal drums in the midst of a scattered variety of metal components. There is a complete range of ages from young to old and most seem to show an equal lack of enthusiasm.

'The lads are working on vacuum cylinders,' says Mr Fennel. 'They operate the braking system on the coaches. We'll show you how to strip one down, replace the seals, put it back together again. First of all though, we've got a few formalities to conduct, bits of paperwork, Health and Safety training, and so on.'

True to his word, Mr Fennel spends the rest of the morning explaining the Health and Safety rules for the working environment within the shed. Sean has little aptitude for paying attention to anything, especially the rules on safe working. He pays more attention to the valuable tools that he could reasonably steal in a night's work.

'...and finally,' drones Mr Fennel, 'that door leads to the paint store, which must be kept locked at all times. Oh, I nearly forgot, never work on your own in the shed, or after 5 'o' clock otherwise the ghost will get you!'

'What ghost?' enquires Sean, interested for the first time.

'The ghost of Fairburn Street, of course,' replies Mr Fennel with a grin. 'Say no more...' With this, Sean retires to the rest room for lunch.

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The rest room consists of a wooden hut with a flat roof. Inside it is Spartan - three tables with integral bench seats bolted firmly to the floor; the constant background hiss of a gas fire battling valiantly to keep the cold wind at bay; a kettle bubbling nervously on a gas ring. Sean's fellow workers lounge in various states of relaxation; half-eaten sandwiches and tabloid newspapers litter the tables and a thin veil of cigarette smoke keeps watch over the whole ensemble.

Sean sits down and surveys the other men.

'What did you do to get sent here?' says the oldest man.

'Got caught,' replies Sean with uncharacteristic wit.

Another man, as young as Sean, laughs. 'You'd have been better off behind bars,' he says. 'It's a lot warmer than here. And at least you'd learn how not to get caught the next time. This is worse than prison.'

'He only comes here to get the dole off his back,' says a thin man. 'I come here to get the missus off mine.'

'What about Fennel?' asks Sean.

'Not a bad sort, really.' says the thin man. 'He lets us go home early sometimes, and he does try and teach us something.'

Sean makes himself a cup of tea. 'What's all this about not working on your own or the ghost will get you?'

The older man laughs. 'He tells us all that. Do you know the story of the ghost of Fairburn Street?'

Sean shakes his head.

'This area used to be the goods yard for the railway,' says the thin man. 'The original Fairburn Street goods depot stood here.'

'The railways employed dozens of people before the Second World War,' says the old man. 'Everyone of them was proud to work on the railway. Nearly everything went by rail, and usually in small consignments, offloaded from horse drays into the goods shed, checked, weighed and then manhandled into a railway wagon. Every man had his job, and that's the job they did.'

'Must have been easy for things to go missing now and then,' says the young man, grinning.

The old man ignores him. 'In the 1920s there was a chap worked in Fairburn Street goods depot called Stanley Gates. One of the proud type, who'd worked on the railways for nearly twenty years, since leaving school. They say he was an honest man, so when some stuff went missing and the depot manager



accused and then sacked Stanley for it, he was more than a little upset. So upset, in fact, that he returned to the goods shed that night with a box of matches and set fire to the place. It was made of timber and it went up like a light. So quickly, in fact, that it caught poor Stanley out, and he didn't get out in time. He burned to death and he's haunted the site ever since.'

The thin man laughed. 'Or you could believe the Health and Safety rules that say you haven't got to work on your own in a shed like this in case you have an accident because by the time anyone finds you, you might be dead.'

'You won't find anyone in the shed after 5 'o' clock,' said the young man, 'because no-one wants to spend a moment here longer than they have to.'

Sean eats his lunch. The thought of the empty shed with its valuable tools makes him think of rich pickings - and he doesn't believe in ghosts.

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Sean turns into Fairburn Street for the second time. However, it is now well past midnight and he is carrying an empty bag. The strong wind continues to blow. Sean soon leaves the comfort of yellow street lamps behind. The padlock on the steel gate is no problem. He opens the gate just enough to enter the yard and cringes as it screeches like an awakened guard dog. The wind swallows the sound as if starved and Sean is unperturbed as he closes and secures the gate.

Sean carefully threads his way through the jumble in the yard making discrete use of a torch. Its light plays on the strange scrap metal shapes and he feels as if he was walking through a bizarre graveyard. The lock on the door to the shed gives less resistance than the padlock on the gate; a short length of wire takes care of the alarm. Sean enters the slight warmth of the shed, glad to be out of the bite of the wind.

During the day, Sean has memorised the way through the shed to the tool store. He moves swiftly past the carriages. The building creaks and groans in time to the gusts of wind. Moans and whistles complete the symphony of noise as the building talks a language all of its own.

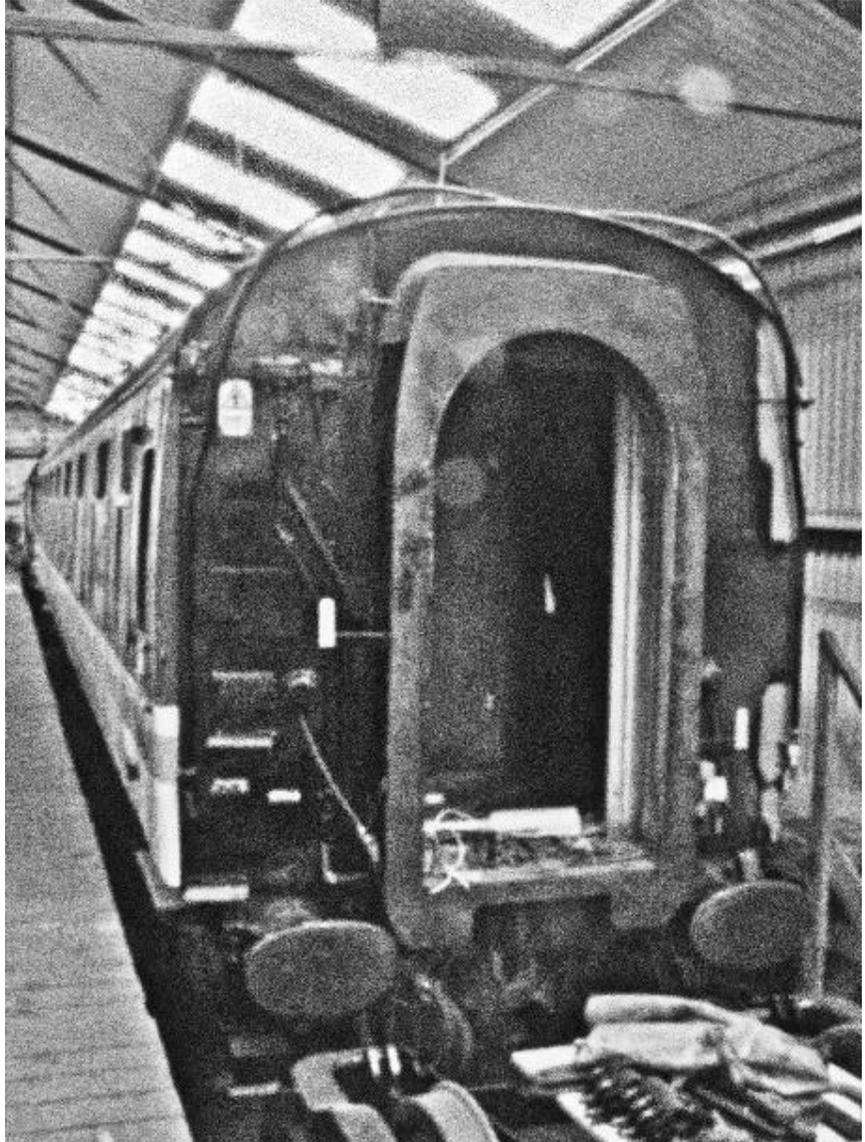
The door to the tool store is easily unlocked. Sean begins to select the best of the electric tools like picking a rich harvest into his bag. He notices that he feels warmer; maybe it is the tension or the weight of the bag. He puts it down outside, turning to shut and lock the door. The wind still conducts an orchestra with the building. There is another sound. It is just audible above the wind and the groans of the building. Unmistakable. The striking of a match.

Sean turns round quickly. The beam from his torch lances the dark shed around him. He is sweating now. Getting warmer by the second. He cannot see another light, from a match or cigarette. Sean begins to doubt what he has heard. The building is shouting and screaming in the grip of the wind; how could he hear anything else? Sean wipes perspiration from his forehead.

Picking up the bag, Sean mounts the steps to the wooden platform heading for the exit. The wind lulls for a few seconds and the building sighs with relief. The unexpected silence betrays that sound once more. Sean knows what he has heard. The tip of a match. Rasping over a rough surface. The rush of air into the combustion of the tip. The hiss of burning. All in a second. Sean looks round. He cannot see anyone. He cannot see the match. But he can smell it.

The wind resumes its onslaught. It seems to fuel the match. The wooden platform is suddenly on fire.

Sean drops the bag and runs back towards the tool store. The smoke chokes his throat, stings his eyes. He does not see the end of the platform, the steps. He tumbles through the air until he shatters on the concrete floor. Broken bones and fractured skull. The torch lies beside him, a ray of hope. Now there is no fire, no smoke, only wind. It torments the building which laughs at him.



There is the sound of footsteps. A figure walks briefly through the pool of light that pours from the torch. Sean sees a man dressed in rough old trousers yet wearing a white shirt and tie. A jacket with brass buttons covers a dirty grey apron that stretches below the knee. A sad face sits beneath a black cloth cap. A huge moustache like a coat hanger hangs beneath the nose. Pride is etched onto that sad face. A man of character and contrast. Black polished shoes step out of the light.

The footsteps recede into the depth of the shed. It is cold now. Sean Matthews knows that he will never see anything ever again. The wind still blows. The building is still laughing.