

The Recent 86 Tram Disaster as Outlined in a Series of Ten Character Studies



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The Driver

Ron has a plastic knee and very little hair left. He's been driving the trams since '79 and likes to think about the early days when it was still fun, when the passengers knew your names and the turn signal required a whack of the elbow to get it moving. Ron especially misses Archie, the conductor who used to partner with him along the 86 line, who would regale the passengers with Gilbert and Sullivan numbers by day and take Ron into his hairy arms after the tram was parked at the Preston Depot at night. But those days are gone, and even if Archie was still alive they'd just be two old closeted queers in a world where young men don't appreciate how easy life is, or how exciting it can be when it's hard and love is illicit. When the explosion knocks the tram over Ron will have a heart attack. He'll recover, but retirement will be mandated by head office.

The Teenager

Madison is thinking about the usual teenage issues when the explosion happens: Justin Bieber, Schoolie's Week, VCE exams, and the need to keep thinking about said issues in case someone asks for her opinion. It is traditional at this point for character studies to point out a hidden depth or special personality feature, but to be honest Madison is very like almost every other teen in Northcote. Not everyone has to be uniquely fascinating to external observers, okay? She isn't prepared for the explosion (teenagers are never prepared), but she copes with it as best she can (teenagers always cope, except when they don't). She screams, cops a cut on the forehead, crawls from the wreckage, her cut is treated and she eventually makes it home. Later she will tell everyone about her experience, write an article for the school paper and get a special Principal's Award for Bravery. Maybe she will lose it during Schoolie's Week.

The Nerd

Colin wears one of those Batman t-shirts that lots of cool hipsters wear, but he's had it longer and he wears it because it's Batman, not because it's cool. This is good, because in being worn by Colin the t-shirt becomes uncool. He's sitting on the tram, drinking Coke and reading a *Star Wars* novel on the way to his D&D session, and does that make him too clichéd? Cliché or not, he enjoys his life and his hobbies and even if he wishes he was confident and popular, he knows that life is what it is. Until (BANG) it changes. In the wake

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of the explosion, Colin will pull three people safely from the wreckage of the tram and visit them in hospital to make sure they're okay. Nobody calls him a hero. Nobody has to. It's something he'll get to carry inside himself for the rest of his life, and his Batman t-shirt will never sit quite the same way again.

The Mother

When the bomb (or whatever it is) explodes, everyone looks at Nesayem, the same way they do whenever a car backfires or an alarm siren wails or Alan Jones comes on the radio, because she wears the *niqab* and everyone thinks she is covered in dynamite underneath. If not that, they assume she is forced to cover herself and hide from the world, a slave to sexism and repressive religion. They don't understand that she wears it because she wants to, that she does not cover but instead keeps her soul a secret, her beauty a treasure to be shared only with her husband, her children, her god. But no, no-one sees that, and when the tram is knocked over by the explosion everyone will think it is terrorism and somehow Nesayem's doing, and eventually the family will move to escape the hate of the neighbours. Same as last time.

The Accountant

Irena doesn't normally take public transport, but her car is getting detailed and the office isn't that far from High Street, so tonight she's slumming it. Actually, she's rather enjoying the tram ride; it let her indulge her imagination and make up stories for other people's lives. That girl is a ballerina, that woman is hiding explosives under her burqa, the young man scowling in the stairwell is an undercover policeman monitoring the tram driver... oh, this will make great fodder for her writers' group meeting! The explosion knocks those ideas from her, replacing them with noise and fire and second-degree burns along her midriff. Character studies and chick-lit novels somehow become less of a priority when faced with skin grafts. When she recovers she will refocus herself on accountancy in order to pay her medical bills, but every now and then she will wonder who else might have been on that tram, what studies and stories might have been so suddenly and permanently rewritten.

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The Hipster

Niles has a Batman t-shirt at home, but a better one than the one that guy further down the tram is wearing. He's not sure why it's better, but he knows it is. Niles is going to a cafe for a quick coffee (and to act obviously disinterested in any cute waitstaff that might find that attractive), then it's off to St Jeromes to get pissed with his friends and make fun of hipsters. The irony is lost on him, although he'd deny that if it was pointed out, because irony is very important. By day he works in a call centre, which isn't ironic. Not yet. Anyway, life is pretty damn fine at the moment, and the future is too far off to worry about, and when the tram thumps to one side after a deafening BANG he pees himself in the explosion, but just a little. He escapes with a broken eardrum, which will cost him the call centre job but land him a compensation payout. Irony! Or something.

The Barista

Sarah is pretty sure she once slept with that hipster sitting further up the tram, and is trying hard not to catch his eye because she doesn't need to retread that particular road to nowhere. It's an occupational hazard of slinging coffee along High Street – both the temptation to follow up an ill-advised invitation and the tendency to run into your mistakes again when you change jobs. The gigs come and go along here, but hey, it's better than bar work. Sarah's starting today at the fourth café she's worked at this year, and God, she hopes that hipster isn't going *there* for his daily fix. The explosion is almost a relief, but on the whole isn't, especially when she breaks four ribs. Is it realistic for her to fall for the pudgy comics-shirted nerd who visits her in hospital, rather than the slim hipster? What's more important in a character study, realism or drama? Let's leave both questions unanswered for the moment and see what else is going on.

The Angry Student

Gareth is angry because he received poor marks for his last essay. He's angry because his housemate ate the last of the two-minute noodles. He's angry because his next Austudy payment is a week away. He's angry because his four o'clock lecture is crap. He's angry because he'll get in trouble for missing said lecture and going to the pub. He's angry that the girl he likes won't be coming to the pub. He's angry because he hasn't had sex in five months. He's angry because the tram is full and he has to stand in the stairwell. He's angry

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because there's an explosion and people fell on him. He's angry because his shin is broken in the explosion. He's angry because he wants to make a difference in the world, and being angry almost feels like achievement, almost feels like doing something, and it's much easier to be angry than to actually *act*. But mostly, right now, he's particularly angry about his shin.

The Factory Worker

Dave isn't really invisible, although he likes to think of himself that way sometimes. It's just that people don't tend to notice him. Actually, no, they notice him and quickly categorise him, because he wears overalls and reads the *Herald Sun* on the tram ride home. For a long time this made him angry, but he's come to relish the anonymity, the fact that people don't see his hidden depths and complexities. They don't know that he studies graphic design online, or has written three novels (unpublished), or installed a hidden camera in the women's toilets at the factory. Nobody knows anybody. Not that well. (This is a line from *Miller's Crossing*, which no-one else knows is his favourite movie.) Maybe with more insight Dave would realise that he's crossed the line from secretive to just plain creepy, but he lacks the godlike perspective that you enjoy, gentle reader. He breaks his neck in the explosion, and you miss the chance to explain to him where things went wrong. The funeral will be sparsely attended.

The Child

Miguel is five. His main interest in life used to be drawing, but recently he's become very interested in this whole writing thing. He loves to sit in Mum's lap on the tram and write down words and draw pictures under them, like BANG and a big bang shape. That's the best thing in the world. He hasn't learned yet that imagination can make things real, that you can turn an idea into words on a page and make them matter to anyone who reads them, invent people and the terrible things that happen to them. So he thinks about an explosion, and someone writes about an explosion, and then he is in an explosion, and maybe there is some kind of causality there. Now Miguel is in a coma, very sad, and will he recover? Will he wake up? There are questions a character study can't answer, because they should always be about before and during, not after, despite the occasional lapse of the author. So if you want a certain outcome you'll have to write it yourself. Try not to blow anything up.

Afterword

The 86 tram is one of those Melbourne touchstones. Its route takes you through cultural strata of the city, from the heart of the CBD through the raggedy bits of Collingwood, the increasingly upscale length of Northcote, the run-down suburbs of the northside and then finally out to RMIT in Bundoora, which is so far away that it may as well be in Wollongong.

Travelling along it, you can see all these different faces of the city, hear half-a-dozen languages, eavesdrop on a thousand conversations. And it occurred to me one day, while sitting in the tram on the way to somewhere or other, that you could tell a story that reflected that mix of people, using something dramatic like an explosion to throw them all into relief. And that then got me thinking about the nature of character studies, and the omniscient point-of-view required to observe characters in that style, and this story was the result. It's all a bit wanky and metatextual and plotless, which is great if you're into that sort of thing, but I suspect most people aren't. If you liked it, you should check out my other ebook titles; if you didn't, well, at least it was free.

The cover image is a shot of the 86 tram that I took from Wikimedia Commons (thanks to 'Ottre' for both taking the picture and making it public domain) and tweaked with my minimal Photoshop skills. Man, the covers to the ebooks I actually sell are so much better. I'm jealous of them.

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