

MISSED CONNECTION

by

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Lawson was already regretting the decision to go shopping by the time he was standing in line waiting to buy a ticket for the tube. All but one of the time- and labour-saving automatic ticket dispensers was either closed or unable to give change, and it was all he could do not to let out yelps of irritated despair at the inability of those in front of him to understand the process of getting the machine to yield up its wares. The station seemed to be unusually full of squalling children and jabbering mad people, and the flu which he'd thought in decline was thriving in the damp mildness of the winter afternoon. All in all he was beginning to feel like death cooled down, and he was barely on step one of the afternoon.

His ticket finally obtained, Lawson walked through the subway to the steps down to the Victoria line, where a discouraging number of people were already gathered. He'd realised before venturing out of the house that going into central London the Saturday before Christmas was a bad idea; but several weeks of late nights at the office with no time to take lunch-breaks meant that virtually none of his nearest and dearest had yet been ticked off the present list. The fact that so many other people from Finsbury Park alone were going in at the same time boded very ill for the state of London proper.

But he had his route planned, and knew which exactly shops he was going to. Damage limitation. Essential. Simply meandering about on a day like today was a recipe for disaster. You had to go in, buy what you wanted, get out and go on to the next one. Then go home immediately, at least an hour ahead of the general exodus. Only way to do it. Feeling rather like a commander in the field maximising his chances of surviving a difficult and potentially dangerous mission, Lawson walked up to the very far right end of the platform, until he was up against the wall by the side of the tunnel. Experience had shown that when people came on to a platform they either stood exactly where the entrance put them, or walked about twenty yards either side. Very few bothered to walk all the way to the end of the platform: thus it was in the very end carriage that one stood the greatest chance of not having one's lungs imploded in the crush. Commuter-savvy: one of the very few skills one acquired by living in London.

With what Lawson had come with suspicion to recognise as the Victoria Line's characteristic efficiency, a tube pulled into the station within less than a minute. It wasn't especially crowded, but – he thought as he climbed into the particularly non-full last carriage – it could have been. Actual results were not really the point. The point was that the tube, fearsome and irritating though it was, could be understood as a system.

Once understood, mastered.

Settling into one of the seats near the double doors he ran over the rather vague ideas he had for presents for his mother and sister. They were the difficult ones; everyone else's had been decided months ago. Neither were easy to buy for: his mother because she seemed to have just about everything she wanted; his sister because Lawson had no clear idea what she thought or felt about anything whatsoever. He tried to remember if she'd expressed an interest in anything in particular (or indeed anything at all) during the past year, but found himself unable to concentrate, the problem continually slipping away from him.

The carriage was hot and humid, and his flu made Lawson feel dislocated and strange, as if he wasn't properly engaging with what was around him. It was a feeling he associated with being drunk, a state he disliked. It was all the more disconcerting because his mind at the same time felt quite sharp and alert. Throughout the last week at work he had felt like this, which had worried him. It was all too possible to forget something, to fail to get to grips with a problem and realise its significance, whilst still apparently being in control. Whitehead would keep coming in and reminding him to do things. He did this all the time, even when he knew Lawson was on top of his work. When he felt like this, however, Lawson found it difficult to remember if he'd been told before, or if he'd actually done the things he had to. He normally worked on the principle that if Whitehead didn't start chivvying him about something, it wasn't a problem. But what if he had hassled him already, and he'd forgotten about it? It was all rather unsettling.

As it made its way into central London, the tube began to get more and more crowded, and during a two-minute pause in a tunnel, Lawson elected to get off at the next stop. Not only was Warren Street actually quite convenient, as it was at the top of Tottenham Court Road, it was a station which comparatively few of the mass now blocking the aisles would be familiar with. When the tube eventually started moving again he stood up and made his way to the doors, so as not to be obstructed when the time came to disembark.

Lawson of course knew which side of the tube was the right one to go to, the one that would open on to the platform on this particular station; and so when it pulled into Warren Street all he had to do was step lightly off. He was gratified to notice that no one else left the carriage with him. Even the tube driver appeared to realise that the station would not be a popular choice on a pre-Christmas afternoon. The carriage doors seemed to shut and the tube to whip out of the station almost before Lawson's feet had reached the platform.

Shouldering his bag into a more comfortable position, he turned to the right and started to walk. He didn't get very far, however, before almost running straight into a wall. Confused, he looked up. He was standing at the extreme right

hand side of the platform (as one saw it from the train), up against the wall next to the tunnel.

Turning slowly, Lawson looked around. Behind him were the tracks, to the right the wall, and extending out to his left was the platform. The Exit signs pointed to his left.

As they should. Shaking his head, Lawson walked down the platform. After a few yards he realised the source of his confusion, and stopped. The way out should have been to the right. Puzzled, he turned to look back at the platform. He'd got on the last carriage to the right of the platform at Finsbury Park. When the tube got to Warren Street, he should still have been in the last carriage to the right. Instead, he'd got out at the far left of the platform.

Walking through the archway into the area that funnelled passengers from the two opposite platforms towards the escalator, Lawson struggled to get his mind around the problem, sure that there was a straightforward explanation, but unable for the life of him to work out what it was. A possibility was that the tube had somehow pulled much further through the platform than usual, pulling his carriage up to the left-hand side of the platform instead of the right.

Unfortunately this was also impossible. It would mean that all the people who had got on to the left of him at Finsbury Park would have been pulled through into the tunnel past the platform, unable to get off. And where had all the carriages behind his come from? People who got on to them at Warren Street would be unable to get off at other stations, which was bound to be rather unsatisfactory.

Not that other people were exactly a feature of the station. He'd been right to choose it, as no one else had got off there, and the way to the escalators was empty. Smiling, sniffing and consigning the problem to his mental 'Strange things that have happened to me on the tube' file (which was pretty small), Lawson got on to the escalator.

Halfway up he noticed that the down escalator was working too: that they, both of them, were functional at the same time. That is, that people could use escalators to go both up and down simultaneously. Now that was an incident for the 'Strange things etc' file. The down escalator had been broken so long that to see them both working at once was like an optical illusion. Part of what had irritated him so much about the broken escalator was that he'd never seen anyone working on it. This presumably was the explanation – they beavered away at night.

Reaching the top, Lawson scanned the posters for anything new or interesting as he made his way to the next set of escalators. While there was nothing particularly interesting, there was certainly plenty that was new. Side-by-side with the escalator-fixers the billboard stickers had obviously put in a hard night's work. He recognised none of the adverts that festooned the walls.

His temporary goodwill towards Underground engineers faded rapidly as he reached seeing distance of the next set of escalators. Both were roped off. And roped off, he noticed as he drew nearer down the cylindrical corridor, with an emphatic irrevocability that seemed to speak of the despair of the engineers that the escalators would ever work again, at least in their lifetimes.

Shoulders slumping, Lawson stopped a few yards short. His flu had brought with it attendant aches in his back and the thought of struggling up about a million stairs was not a very pleasant one. Why couldn't the damn things have waited another day to stop working? They'd been fine yesterday, when he'd manfully made his way in to work; but now he was coming in his own time, they had to grind to a halt. He stared at the escalators bleakly, trying to galvanise himself into moving in search of an alternative route up, and wandered up to their feet.

Where he noticed two odd things. The first was that the stationary escalator was filthy. The sides were covered with dust, as were the handrails, normally rubbed smooth with the grip of countless hands. Not only that, but the steps themselves were liberally strewn with rubbish: cans, wrappers and yellowing newsprint. It seemed hard to believe that even a particularly festive pre-Christmas evening could have generated this level of debris.

More disconcerting still, the top of the escalator appeared to disappear into darkness. Instead of the familiar reflected light from the outside – not to mention the lights which normally lined the roof of the ascending tunnel – the escalator seemed lit only by the area he stood in, this glow fading into complete darkness about two thirds of the way up the shaft.

Lawson swore with exasperation. Clearly some mishap had befallen the escalator up from the Victoria Line, and the way was closed. Everyone else had known this, and that was why he been the only person to alight from the Victoria Line at this station. Perhaps there had been an announcement on the radio.

Where the back stairs for the station start? Not here, clearly. Mind still sluggishly working at the enigma of his confusing entrance on to the station platform, Lawson peered round, a little surprised that he was still alone. He had a vague memory of the stairs leading off a corridor somewhere near one of the Northern Line platforms. The irritating thing was that the people in his carriage who hadn't had the tube-sense to get off here were probably already at Oxford Circus.

There was nothing for it but to make his way to the Northern Line and get out that way. As he walked, blinking hard and rubbing his eyes against a faint headache, he looked again at the posters that covered the walls. The posters seemed to fuel his flu-engendered feeling of dislocation, telling him of drinks he'd never heard of and shows he didn't realise were on. He'd had no idea that they changed all the posters in a station at once: perhaps it was some new edict. As he approached the corner which would bring him to the steps down to the Northern Line he listened to the flat echoes of the noise his heels made, and still he saw no one else walking the tunnels.

He turned the corner on to something so unexpected that he stopped dead in his tracks. In front of him were the descending steps which he knew led down on to the southbound platform of the Northern Line. But they did not lead down into the usual shuffling melee of irritable shoppers.

They led down into total darkness.

Lawson was so confused that he unthinkingly looked at his watch, as if checking that night had not fallen without his realising. To his surprise, his watch wasn't there. Or rather it was, but strapped to his right wrist instead of his left,

breaking the habit of 30 years. He must have been very vague indeed that morning to have done such a thing. It was only after confirming that it was still early afternoon that he realised how little sense checking the time had made. He knew what time it was.

He stared down the steps into the darkness, feeling a little perturbed. Why should the platform be dark? What was going on? He was suddenly glad he had checked his watch, and did so again, feeling he needed confirmation that he hadn't somehow got completely mixed up. For an instant, everything about being at the station, from arriving at the far left of the platform through the roped-off escalator to this, seemed altogether odd, a sequence of related events. He felt only precariously tethered to reality, and also as if there was something that he was missing. Almost as if Whitehead were hovering just behind him; as though he'd forgotten or misunderstood something important.

Then the rational side of his mind, which was well-developed and used to being dominant, stepped in. For some reason the Northern Line was shut at this station. To ram that fact home to passengers in passing tubes, they'd turned the lights off.

Or there was a lighting failure in some parts of the station, or a general electricity problem. Hence the dysfunctional escalator, perhaps.

Either way, it was not worthy of 'holding the front page'. Just a little strange. Lawson remembered what it had been like when, for a number of years, Stepney Green station had been shut. Passing through the dimly lit station as a child had given him a similar feeling to the one he had now, of the eeriness of seeing something familiar looking disused.

But Warren Street was not a disused station, and all that this proved was that he ought to listen to the radio in the mornings more often. He'd already wasted enough time. What he should do now was find the steps and get out of this disaster of a tube station. Yes, and compose a letter of complaint to London Underground. It wasn't good enough, abandoning people in a station that was in this state. Feeling invigorated with a sense of indignation, Lawson started to descend the steps.

He hadn't realised just how black it would be, just how complete the darkness is underground. By the time he'd progressed a few yards from the bottom of the steps he was in pitch darkness, unable to discern any features ahead of him whatsoever. Although he was reasonably confident that the stairs were accessible from this platform somewhere, he had no real idea how far along they were. If he went down the wrong corridor, he could search for ages and not find them, all the time getting further away from any area that he had a rough mental picture of.

After about twenty careful yards he stopped. This was no bloody good. He was in utter darkness, with no idea of how far, or indeed in which direction, he should go. The more he tried to remember, the more the undifferentiated blackness pressed in upon him. He could recall less and less which corridor the stairs came off, and whether, once in the right corridor, there were several choices of sub-corridor, and which of those he should take. The route ahead of him – which would have been so simple with light, or perhaps even without it if he hadn't been so worked up – had now begun to fragment in his mind, left and right merging into one.

He had lost confidence in the whole idea of the stairs.

Almost immediately the possibility of going down on to the line occurred to him. It wouldn't be that far to walk: Goodge Street was only a few hundred yards further down Tottenham Court Road, and there he would be back into light and sanity. Even the thought of being suffocated in a press of Italian shoppers and German tourists was beginning to seem attractive.

Lawson wiped his forehead with his sleeve, feeling hot and extremely bothered. He couldn't go down the tunnel. Not only was it more traipsing off into total darkness with no clear sense of where he was going, but what if a train came along? He had no idea how wide the tunnel was once it got out of the station, or how much room for manoeuvre there was between it and a passing tube. The idea of being the fall-guy in an enactment of the old joke about the light at the end of the tunnel being an oncoming train didn't really appeal.

He slowly backed up, turned around, and shuffled back the way he'd come. He'd get to the stairs, go back up to the escalators, and think about it there. There was probably some simple solution that he couldn't think of because he was feeling put upon, and not entirely well.

Once he was back in the light everything would seem clearer.

When he reached the stairs he immediately felt more confident, and trotted up them, relieved that here at least the lights were still working. The clacking of his heels, unnerving only minutes before, was now reassuring in its direction and purpose. Well, purpose, at least.

Back at the foot of the escalators, Lawson drew to a halt and took stock. Clearly things were significantly out of line. The Northern Line, if not shut, was certainly not operating a full service. The Victoria Line was, or at least had been: Lawson toyed with the idea of checking to see if the lights were still on down there. He decided that it was not germane to his purpose, and also that he'd rather not know if they weren't.

Either way, there was a problem with exiting Warren Street station, and given that, it was fairly logical that they should have shut down parts of the station. It was not logical that they should have dumped him at the wrong end of a platform in a station which appeared to be shut. After over ten minutes, he realised, he had still seen no other passengers.

He could feel that parts of the problem were resolvable, their solutions tugging distantly at his mind, and felt that his inability to grab hold of some central dilemma and solve it was important. But he had no clear idea why he felt that, or of what the central dilemma was, so it wasn't much help. Instead he turned his mind to the more immediate problem of how to get himself to the point where he was just another Christmas shopper, i.e. out on to the bloody street.

There appeared to be only one possible solution. The escalator. Although broken and submerged under debris, it

was a straightforward route up to the entrance, and unlike the stairs, he would be starting only one level down from the street. The question of why the entrance should appear to be so dark was a little worrying, but one that could safely be postponed, and which he would have to deal with whatever way he managed to get up there.

Lifting one rope of the barrier up and pushing the other down, Lawson slid between the two. Tentatively putting one foot on the bottom step he tested it to make sure that whatever was wrong with the escalator wasn't something that was going to make scaling it hazardous. It felt reassuringly solid. The next few steps were a bit more problematic, as Lawson had to dislodge a number of cans before he could even get his foot on the steps properly.

By the time he was about half-way up it was quite hard going against all the rubbish, and he was in semi-darkness. Something brushed against his foot and he kicked it away vigorously: from the harsh flapping sound it made he realised it had been only newspaper. It was as if someone had upended a skipful of rubbish down the escalator. Perhaps the cleaning services had an accident with yesterday evening's haul and it had ended up cascading down the escalator, recreating the impression of years of detritus. Feeling rather tired and depressed, his hands grimy with dust from the rails, Lawson put his head down and grimly ploughed his way towards the top of the escalator.

By the time he felt the gradient on the handrail begin to level off, he couldn't see anything. The sliver of light from the level below was spent on an area far down the ascending tunnel's ceiling, and was no help at the top. This was a shame, because Lawson felt that he could do with some help.

Something was very wrong.

The entrance to Warren Street station is a roughly rectangular area, about 20 metres by ten, open on two sides to the street, with the ticket window and machines over to the left. Not only was the area Lawson found himself in in pitch darkness, but, the flat short echoes told him, it only extended about three feet. This made no sense at all, and Lawson felt panic rising rapidly within him.

Then the lights at the bottom of the escalators went out.

Lawson gripped the rail at the top of the escalator. He refused to look back down the dark escalator shaft, and instead concentrated on trying to come to terms with what was in front of him; or in the short term, trying to stay in a state where he had some chance of doing so.

They'd blocked off the escalator. Of course: that was it. There'd been some problem with it, and they'd boarded up the way to the escalator to stop people trying to go that way. Lawson felt his panic subside slightly, until it was humming reasonably comfortably at mild hysteria level. If they'd blocked off the escalator at entrance level, the station must be shut: there was no other way down or up. Except the stairs, and they led down to or up from what was currently a closed platform.

So, apart from the fact that he'd been dumped here at the wrong end of the platform, everything was understandable. The station was closed, the light had been on at the level below because they'd been working on some problem, and they'd turned it off again not realising that some hapless passenger, abandoned here by oversight, was trying to get out.

It all made sense, more or less.

Slushing his feet forward through what felt like cardboard boxes, with his hands held out in front of him, Lawson reached for the boarding in front to him. It felt very smooth, almost varnished. He knocked on it, trying to get a sense of how thick the boarding was. The sound made was short and sharp. He banged harder with the heel of his palm, and succeeded only in hurting his wrist. There was no give in the wood at all, and no sound from the road outside the station. Whoever had boarded the escalator had made a proper British job of it.

As his fingers traced across it they came upon a regular edge, and the surface sloped inwards for about half an inch before reaching another edge, where the wood stuck out again. Puzzled, Lawson brought his hands together in the depression and ran them out in different directions along it. After about a foot each way, they reached corners, and the recess changed direction and ran upwards instead. This continued for several feet up the board, until Lawson was having to stretch. Then the two sides came inwards again until his hands were touching once more. There was a big rectangle in the boarding. Two, in fact three, he discovered, sliding his hands out to either side.

To Lawson, whose panic was now on the rise again, this meant nothing at all, except ... mouth gaping slightly, he fumbled in his pockets for the book of matches he felt sure must be lurking in there. When you've smoked for 20 years you don't get caught without matches, however badly you've got flu and never mind how much smoking might hurt your throat. He found a dog-eared bundle of cardboard and pulled it out, fingers finding about eight or nine bent matches. He was rather disappointed, but not very surprised, to find that his fingers were trembling as he struck what felt like the least bent of the lot. Nothing happened. He tried again, and the match sprang alight, spitting burning sulphur over his hands and into the darkness.

"It's bloody panelling," he said quietly, and the match went out.

Lawson stood for a moment, not bothering to hurry to light another match. The after-image of what he had seen was still fading on his retinas. Three feet in front of him was a wood-panelled wall, which made a corner two feet to his left and continued until it was flush up against the top of the escalator. It looked for all the world like the corner of the sitting room in some gentlemen's club. That explained why the boarding had felt so solid, so unlike a thin and temporary barrier. It was good to have an explanation. It was just unfortunate that it was extremely bizarre.

Lawson let himself topple slowly forward, until his forehead rested against the smooth wood. So long as it had been explicable, he'd been all right. He'd always been game for a laugh. Not much that could throw him off balance. Lights being off, platforms being shut, he could deal with, explain. He laughed in the face of them.

This was different. This was back to being left at the wrong end of an ordinary tube platform. The two were part of the same world, and it wasn't a world that he felt he could make any headway in. The whole of the world, this world,

was standing behind him, mutely making him feel that he'd forgotten something; that he'd misunderstood, that he'd done something wrong. And he still had no idea what it was.

But he could find out. If one had a problem, the first thing one did was break it down into its constituent parts. One dealt with those which needed to be solved first, and then soldiered on until the whole became clear. Ultimately one would be able to step outside the particular and see the general problem, and start tackling that. And the general problem that Lawson very much wanted to have solved as soon as possible was getting out of the station.

He pushed himself upright again and retrieved the matches from his pocket. Fumbling one alight he slowly looked around. As the match guttered and spat he thought he saw something to his right, some difference in the otherwise perfect regularity of the panelling. The right-hand wall was not flush with the side of the escalator, but recessed about two feet beyond it. Before spending another match, he shuffled over to it to see if he could determine what it was by touch.

At first all he could feel were the contours of another panel in the wall. But as he moved his hands outwards his fingers found notches in the wood either side, a notch that could be traced both up and down. Slightly further in, down low on the left hand side, there was a small wooden handle.

It was a door. There was a way out.

Mentally steadying himself, Lawson prepared to open the door, a match poised to light. The knob turned rather stiffly, but with a click the door was soon open. He pulled it a few inches, then paused to light the match, foot hooked round the bottom of the door to pull it open further once he was ready. In the insubstantial light of the quickly flaring match he slowly drew his foot towards him, pulling the door ajar with some effort: the hinges were very stiff and let out small rusty squeaks.

When it was open a couple of feet he stopped. Conscious that his supply of light was limited, and feeling rather like someone playing a video game who, having attained some new level, is forced to play it by ear with some rapidity, Lawson quickly took in what was behind the door. A small squarish chamber, about two feet to a side, panelled in the same dark wood on two sides. On the left, however, there appeared to be some steps.

Pain in his fingertips.

First casting a glance behind him into the darkness, Lawson walked carefully forward into the chamber. He could climb steps in the dark. There was no point wasting another match. He put a tentative foot on the first, and then, reassured by its wooden solidity, walked up several, using the banisters that stuck out from the evidently still panelled walls on either side. This ascent at least seemed to be easy, with no rubbish to impede his progress. He took a few more steps, slowly, anxious not to run smack into the door he felt must come soon. Then he stopped.

The escalator at Warren Street stopped at street level. You walked off it, through the barriers, and then straight out onto the street. He put his hand out into the darkness. Nothing. He took another step up. Still nothing. Hand out in front of him, fingers splayed, Lawson took a few more steps. He must be going up some back route which lead to an area a few feet above street level. A staff area of some kind, perhaps. Quite apart from the issue of quite what part of the station he was now headed into, Lawson was nervous of continuing when it felt as if he could be wandering blindly off the edge of a cliff. He found the matches again and struck one, peering forwards.

What he saw was not a door, or even the foot of a door, but steps. He tilted his head backwards slowly, assuming the door would appear by about 10 degrees. It didn't, just more steps. Holding the match, which appeared to be the one good one in the book, higher above his head, he looked further and further up until he was looking up at 45 degrees. The light of the flame glowed warm against the dark wood of the staircase, reflecting orange round the walls far up the staircase. He could see about 30 yards, and all he could see was steps.

When the match eventually burnt out, Lawson sat down abruptly. What he had seen had looked like a passage from a stereotypical nightmare, except he wasn't being pursued, and the staircase hadn't got longer. It simply was that long. Longer, in fact, because had the light penetrated anywhere near the end, then highlights of the end door would have shown in the flickering light: the light wouldn't simply have faded out into darkness. And he wasn't asleep, sadly. He was awake. He was awake and on his way up a staircase that led, at a conservative estimate, to a point at least 20 yards above Warren Street station's roof.

Lawson got up again, and resumed his climb. There didn't seem to be much else that he could do.

When he'd climbed 90 steps, and thus about 30 yards, he slowed down, and continued with one hand out in front of him. He could have lit a match to see how far he had to go, but feared that the result would probably only depress him.

It was a couple of increasingly tiring minutes before the changing echo of his feet on the stairs warned him that he was coming to the end.

Another door. Lawson didn't have an accurate sense of how high he'd climbed, but estimated it to be at least the height of a third storey. Trying to remember the buildings around the station, whether any of them were high enough for him to somehow have been diverted into their upper floors, he turned the handle of the door and opened it. Like its predecessor, it was stiff, further compounding Lawson's impression that whatever back stairway he was on, it hadn't been used in a long, long time.

Once through the door he found himself in a smallish room, dimly lit from some external light source, the direction of which it was impossible to determine. Piled high with haphazardly jumbled furniture, it looked very much like a loft. Somehow, as he had begun to suspect, he must indeed have managed to climb into the attic of one of the buildings around the station.

At the opposite side of the room there was another door. Lawson headed for it gratefully, for it had to be the way to another, descending staircase, which would lead down through the building. He wasn't entirely sure how he was

going to explain to anyone he might meet what he was doing in the building's attic, but rather pitied the fate of anyone who tried to give him a hard time about it – especially if they were an employee of London Underground.

The door led through into another room, larger than the first, but equally full of disused furniture and other miscellaneous objects. Lawson edged his way along one of the walls until he came to a narrow panelled corridor off the room. This led towards another door. He was slightly puzzled to see that the few steps led up, rather than down, to the door, but reasoned that the interior architecture of lofts was seldom straightforward.

The door looked solid, clearly a portal to a different area of the building he was in. Reaching for the knob, Lawson had a horrible suspicion that it would be locked. It wasn't. The handle turned easily and the door, though stiff as all the others had been, opened.

On to the street.

Moving very slowly, mouth a stupid O of astonishment, Lawson stepped out on to the pavement. A minute ago, all he'd wanted was to be safely out into the street. But not this way. Not when he should be 40 metres up in the air.

And not when the street was like this.

Still shambling forward, Lawson looked at his watch. It was four o'clock. More than that, it was four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon just before Christmas, and he was on Tottenham Court Road. So where, he pleaded silently, looking up and down the street, was everyone else?

The whole of the street that he could see was utterly devoid of people. Of cars, either moving or stationary. He looked left, where the Euston Road, usually a passable facsimile of the Indianapolis 500, lay quiet and empty. Walking a few yards to the curb he looked to the right, down towards Centrepoint and the hub of Christmas shopping madness. No one. No one at all.

Behind him there was a sharp bang. He turned quickly: the door he had just emerged from had swung shut, and was now virtually indistinguishable from the wall. The building appeared to be the kind of disused shop that springs up every now and then on Tottenham Court Road, rapidly to become a temporary sell-through video shop and then another electrical goods outlet. The ground-floor windows were boarded up, the first floor whitewashed. It bore no resemblance at all to Warren Street station, although it occupied the corner where the station should be.

Lawson backed down the street, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. Unexpected people were one thing. Unexpected buildings were a bit different.

He turned and walked slowly across the road, something that should have been impossible. The building didn't look any more right from the other side. And neither, he realised, did the one he was now standing next to. It should have been Maples, a large and ugly department store. It was still Maples, actually, as a large sign proclaimed, but the building looked different: the architecture anonymous, as if from some unknown and bland school.

Walking down the street towards Centrepoint, Lawson surveyed the buildings and shops with disquiet. Were they different? He'd never really studied them before, could not swear to what they'd been like; but felt absolutely sure that they had changed somehow, become more amorphous, interchangeable.

It was, he realised, like going down a road the wrong way. He had always found that if he drove or walked down a route he knew well the opposite way to usual, everything looked very different, and it was hard to reconcile the two views, to merge them into being the same place seen from different sides. Left and right, two different sides, two different worlds: the known and the unknown.

And where were all the bloody people?

Suddenly galvanised, Lawson started to stride more quickly. A little way down there was an area he knew better, and a shop where he'd recently bought a CD player. He'd recognise that if nothing else. As he walked, he listened once more to the sound of his feet, the only sound there was to be heard.

After about four minutes' fast walking he slowed, looking carefully at the shops, his inner milometer telling him that the road should be around there somewhere. He came to the corner he was expecting and then stopped, suddenly unsure. The building on the corner looked different, newer. Or older: different, anyway. The CD shop should be next to it, in a colonnade of recessed shop fronts.

The colonnade was there, in the sense that the front of the shops were further back from the main road than most. But as Lawson crossed the sideroad and drew closer, he saw that the shops themselves were all interchangeable, undifferentiated. The building could have been anything. And the windows were not full of matt black stereos and surprisingly small video camcorders.

They were empty. All of them.

For the first time genuinely frightened, Lawson stared at the windows. This was the place, he was sure, but everything had changed. In desperation he trotted several yards past the building, to the next corner. Then he slowly turned round, until he was facing back up the way he had come. He had been coming down the road: now he was going to go up the road.

Left and right, two different worlds

Maybe it would look different that way, maybe he would be able to see what the difference really was. Left and right: two different sides. Lawson walked up the road as slowly as he could. It did all look different. The shops he was looking for should now be on the left, and Maples in the distance was now on the right, instead of the left. But not different enough. The buildings were still all wrong, the street was still empty and unnaturally quiet.

Left and right.

Lawson stopped dead in his tracks, with a terrible cold feeling of falling. Left and right. Two different sides, two different worlds. But the worlds shouldn't actually be different, just different views of the same thing. To place yourself, all you had to know was which side you were coming from. Which side...

Suddenly he knew what he'd done wrong, where his mistake had been. When the train had stopped at Warren Street, when he'd got off at the wrong end of the platform, it was because the platform was on a different side to the one he'd got on at.

At Finsbury Park he got on at the far right, on the right hand side of the train. At Warren Street, the platform must be to the left of the train. Befuddled with crowds and flu and memory, he'd lost track of left and right in the symmetrical carriage, and had got off expecting to be on the right of the world. All his attempts to explain what had happened, his logic, had been based on coming up the road the wrong way.

That was what he'd misunderstood. He'd come at it from the wrong side. And somehow he'd stayed there.

Left and right, two different sides, two different worlds: the known and the unknown. Slowly, Lawson turned to face the street that was empty on a Saturday afternoon before Christmas; the familiar but different buildings; the quiet.