

2015 English Short Story | Sample Answer

Write a short story in which the main character is transformed when faced with a daunting challenge.

The Piccadilly Line train was densely packed with people. Among them was Julia Byrne. At sixty years old, she could easily pass for a woman in her late forties. Years of martial arts and combat training had seen to that. Despite a limp from a decades' old injury, Julia was fitter than most people half her age. She often reminisced on her army days, remembering the excitement and the rush of adrenalin it gave her. She missed it. She'd probably have been a Major at this stage too. Julia's civilian job was as a HR manager at a firm in Covent Garden.

People had always been her thing, even from the very beginning. But she felt as if she was only filling in time until she could retire at sixty-five. It was not that Julia hated her job; it was more that it bored her senseless. Every day, without fail, employees would come in with small, petty complaints about a boss who they felt had overlooked them for promotion or overloaded them with work. Any number of reasons really. Julia would smile with her kindly face and suggest setting up a meeting to resolve the issue. Nine times out of ten, the employee would rescind their complaint before she could finish her sentence.

Julia was sitting on the train, people watching. This was decidedly her favourite part of the day, as she journeyed home from work. She enjoyed observing people and trying to read their character, it was her job after all. The burly man sitting opposite her looked like a policeman, with his hardened face and eyes that had seen far too much for their approximately thirty-five years. Julia could spot them a mile away; they mirrored her own. She turned her attention to a young, anxious looking woman holding on to the handrail. It was interesting because her face was petite and very small in proportion to her stout body. Perhaps it was the big puffer jacket, Julia thought, she'd never found them to be particularly flattering herself. The woman started moving through the carriage as the train pulled away from the station. The man opposite Julia muttered into a radio before getting up and following the woman. Julia's suspicions were confirmed, he was police. Anywhere else such activity would be unusual, alarming even, but this

was London. It was simply another day, another crime. Julia looked away. She needed to use the bathroom but the toilets on the train weren't particularly enticing. She'd have to risk it. Reaching the bathroom was an obstacle course in itself. Julia climbed over bags, dogs, suitcases, even people. Not to mention the train stopping and starting as it made its way towards its final destination. Finally, she reached the small toilet at the end of carriage C, the very middle carriage. Julia noticed the policeman standing behind the glass sliding door at the entrance to carriage D. He made brief eye contact with her before looking away. Julia paid him no heed. Putting her hand on the unlocked bathroom door, she pushed it inwards. It opened to reveal the woman in the puffer jacket, standing at the small sink. "Oh sorry!", Julia started, "It was unlocked. I--." Perhaps it was the look on the woman's face or the fact that she was visibly shaking that Julia halted her retreat. "Are you alright love?", she asked "You don't look so good." It was in that moment that Julia noticed the tube-shaped object in the woman's tightly clenched fist. A thin blue wire ran from the bottom of the tube and disappeared into her jacket. Julia instantly connected the dots. Suddenly, the puffer jacket made sense. It was big enough to hide the bomb strapped to the woman's chest.

In those initial moments, Julia liked to think that she looked calm and collected. The reality was that her mind was racing as panic began to surge through her body. It quickly dawned on her that if the woman triggered the bomb, Julia, along with everyone else on the train, would die. She couldn't let that happen. Taking a tentative step back, she made eye contact with the woman, "Hey, take it easy.... you don't want to do this." The woman's eyes filled angrily with tears. "How would you know what I want?", she cried "You don't know me!"

"No, but I know a bad person when I see one. I don't see that in you."

"I am a bad person! I'm wearing a bomb. I could blow up this entire train with you on it!"

"So, what's stopping you?"

The woman paused. Julia seized her chance.

"What's your name?"

"Hazel."

"Hazel, I'm Julia. I want to try and help you, okay? We're going to get you off this train. Nobody has to get hurt."

Julia sounded a lot more confident than she felt. Moving her left arm out of sight, she lightly tapped on the sliding glass door. The policeman put his head through, flashing his badge. "Sergeant Buckley, Metropolitan Police. Is everything alright, Madam?" Julia breathed an

inward sigh of relief. He must have been following Hazel and was waiting for her to come out of the bathroom. His eyes widened as he took in the scene, hand creeping towards his gun. Julia gave him a warning glare. She turned back to Hazel, "I'm just going to talk to Sergeant Buckley, Hazel. He's going to help you, okay?" Hazel's eyes darted between Julia and the police sergeant. Finally, she nodded. "Former Army Captain Julia Byrne," Julia muttered "We need to get everyone off this train." Before Buckley could respond, the announcer's voice boomed over the speakers, "Next stop is Acton Station. Please mind the Gap." Startled, Hazel jumped backwards, clenching the detonator with a renewed strength. Julia quickly evaluated the situation. Acton Station was less than ten minutes away, they had to act fast. "Get them to meet us at the station," she hissed at Buckley "We need bomb disposal too." He nodded and stepped away to mumble into his radio, one eye on Hazel. Julia took a deep breath.

"Hazel, listen to me. Don't do this. These innocent people don't deserve to die. Who gave you the bomb?"

"M-My husband"

"Your husband? Why would he want you to do this?"

"It's for the greater good, you wouldn't understand!"

"Make me understand Hazel."

As Hazel launched into a rapid, rehearsed speech about the greater good, Julia realised that she was getting nowhere. Somewhere down the train, a baby screamed. Buckley leaned in to tell her that police were waiting at the station, they'd take it from there. All Julia and Buckley had to do was survive the next four minutes.

They felt like the longest four minutes of Julia's life. Her leg was beginning to ache from trying to keep her balance, her knuckles were white. She kept Hazel talking. After a careful diversion from the topic of why Hazel was where she was, Julia managed to get her talking about her hobbies. She enjoyed swimming and hiking. It baffled Julia how normal Hazel sounded, even with a bomb attached to her. Julia's plan worked and it distracted Hazel for long enough for the train to arrive at Acton Station. Police cleared the blissfully unaware passengers as the bomb disposal team boarded the train. However, as they surrounded Hazel, she started to panic, her eyes wild. Julia started talking to her again, reminding her that she was doing the right thing and that it would all be over soon. From then on, it was all a blur. Julia gave statement after statement, retelling the story to multiple police officers. They had a long investigative journey

ahead, trying to put together the pieces of the story. Who was Hazel? Was she part of some terrorist organisation? Was her husband? The information Julia provided would prove to be very useful. Eventually, one of the police officers drove her home, with the promise that they'd be in touch.

The aftermath of the attempted bombing had been overwhelming. Julia had requested to keep her name out of the public report but somehow it had been leaked. Everyone wanted to shake her hand. Flowers and 'Thank You' cards had flooded in. It was all a bit much, but she appreciated it all the same. A week later, Julia was escorted to police headquarters in London to give a final statement and help them with some lines of inquiry that were being pursued. Many of the officers came out to thank her. However, the most extraordinary thing happened when she was greeted by the Chief Negotiations Officer. He smiled and shook her hand. "That was some incredible work you did, Julia" he said, "I've spoken with my superiors and we'd like to offer you a job."

"I beg your pardon?" Julia exclaimed.

"We want you to work for us. Your army experience and your HR skills would make you a great asset to the team."

"Oh..."

"Sergeant Buckley spoke very highly of you. He said that without your quick thinking, everyone on that train would have died."

"Oh my... I don't know what to say!"

"Say yes."

Julia thought about her cramped office in Covent Garden, the colleagues she didn't like and the job that she now realised, she hated. She smiled, "When can I start?"

