



On the London Underground near King's Cross, commuters battle to escape the post-bomb chaos

BONUS READ

PRIORITY ONE

Within moments of boarding a London Underground train on July 7, 2005, Australian Gill Hicks's life as she had known it was over. This is her inspiring story

IT WAS AS QUICK AS A CLICK OF YOUR FINGERS and the lives of all of us in that train carriage changed forever. But I didn't know it then – I had no inkling of what had just occurred. One moment I was pushing myself forward into a packed carriage, cursing the fact that, at five foot nothing, I was once more sandwiched between tall strangers breathing air on my forehead from their nostrils, and then, in a breath, everything changed. The whole world changed.

It was as dramatic as being on a sunny, sandy beach, drinking and talking with friends one minute, to suddenly finding yourself in the bowels of hell. In an instant I was falling, descending into an abyss, blackness engulfing me. Then the falling stopped and I lay motionless. What had happened? Where did the train go? Where were we now? What was this I was lying in?

I tried to get up and failed. I raised my arms, dazed, barely able to breathe. "Help... help me." I didn't know if I was whispering, yelling or just mouthing

THIS COULDN'T BE REAL, IT COULDN'T BE HAPPENING. MY LEGS ARE GONE, I THOUGHT. DEAR GOD, MY LEGS ARE GONE

the words. I didn't know if I could be heard through all the other calls for help. I just kept saying the words over and over again.

"Please God. Help me, I'm dying," a voice close to me kept saying. It was a woman I couldn't see. Another voice spoke, suggesting help was on its way. There were more cries for help, occasionally followed by reassurance and comfort, then one by one the voices fell silent. Nothing.

The atmosphere was thick with acrid-smelling smoke. I looked down at myself. Oh dearest Lord, dear God, what had happened to me?

A light was shining almost directly through the train carriage over to me and I could clearly see my legs. They resembled an anatomical drawing. I could see the insides: muscle, tendons and bones. Attached to these were my feet – still perfect, still looking like my feet, but just dangling, as though they had been severed at the ankles. My feet were just hanging by a thread. This couldn't be real, it couldn't be happening. *My legs are gone*, I thought. *Dear God, my legs are gone.*

FROM ONE UNKNOWN: A POWERFUL ACCOUNT OF SURVIVAL AND ONE WOMAN'S INSPIRATIONAL JOURNEY TO RECOVERY AND A NEW LIFE BY GILL HICKS © 2007. PUBLISHED BY RODALE, UK. DISTRIBUTED BY PAN MACMILLAN AT \$35



Gill Hicks takes a wheelchair excursion out of intensive care during her recovery

Something kept me calm. An inner voice took hold as I began to register my situation. I knew that to stay alive, I had to remain calm. If I screamed or cried out, my heart would pump more blood. The more blood my heart pumped, the more I would lose – it was streaming from my wounds, flowing from what resembled my legs. I had to be rational. If I allowed myself to be emotional, I would die. I was weak and wanted to close my eyes, but I couldn't. Not yet.

I still had my scarf on and some clothes. They were in shreds but they were there. I had to stop the bleeding. I raised my arm – it hurt – and managed to slip my scarf from around my neck. Desperately, I ripped at it with my teeth, trying not to pass out. My only thoughts as I fashioned a tourniquet were to hold on, hold on.

I opened my eyes and reached down to tie the left leg first, up around my thigh. Then I reached for my right leg, trying to lift it a little. As I moved my hand up to my thigh, my hand sank, disappearing deep into my leg. My inner thigh was missing. It was gone. *How did this happen? What happened?*



London at a standstill: 56 people were killed and about 770 injured by four bombs within 57 minutes

As I battled drowsiness, I could hear two loud and powerful voices in my head. One was willing me to

hold on, to remember those who loved me and needed me; the other was encouraging me to let go, to drift away into a peaceful and permanent sleep. The voice that was calling me to sleep was saying just what I wanted to hear and I was entranced by it. Both sides were stating their case, asking me to choose. “Come with me, sleep, sleep, sleep.” “No – come with me. Stay awake. Help will come, stay awake.” I was being asked to decide between life and death. I had to choose; there was no time left – life or death? LIFE or DEATH?

Was that a light? Someone was here – help had come. I lifted my hand to wave and spoke: “My name is Gill, my name is Gill.”

And then I heard two of the best words I’ve ever heard – “Priority One” – and felt someone put a tag of some sort on me. I was a “Priority One”. That had to be good, very good, very... I started to let go.

A man was holding my hand. He didn’t let go. I was so cold, but I could

feel his warmth. He was telling me to stay with him. He knew my name and held my hand, tight. He said over and over, “Stay with us, Gill. Come on, love, come on, Gill, you have got to stay with us.”

I needed to know he wouldn’t let go – his hand kept me connected, kept me alive.

“HELLO? HELLO? YOU’RE IN ST THOMAS’ HOSPITAL. You’ve been involved in a major incident. We need to find out who you are.” It was a woman’s voice – but it was muffled, like the carriage voices had been. It was as though I was listening to the world from the inside of a fishbowl. My eyes must have opened long enough to see bright lights and people around me. I knew I was safe, but I didn’t know where I was, or how I had got there.

“Can you blink for me? Blink once for yes if you can understand me, OK?” I blinked, closing my eyes as tightly as I could, then opening them again, staring back into the light. “I am going to go through the alphabet, OK my love? When we get to the first letter of your name, blink once. Everything will be all right, my love; we will find out who you are.”

Who I was, before that day, was Gill Hicks, an Australian abroad, living the life of a Londoner after some 15 years working in the UK capital. Following a decade in publishing and running my own business, I now headed an enormous project for the Design Council, the UK’s strategic body for design; was a Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts; and sat on various arts panels, including the board of the Women’s Playhouse Trust. These accolades were everything to me, but as I worked harder, it became more difficult to remain the happy-go-lucky Adelaide girl I’d once been. A lovely relationship notwithstanding, I was driven and defined by my job.

I’d been tired when I awoke that day, having slept only fitfully. My partner Joe and I had argued the night before and the dispute had been serious enough, at the time, to make me question whether or not we should go ahead with our plans to marry in December.

But everything had now changed. Less than 13 hours after slamming the door shut on my way to work, Joe and I were reunited in a hospital ICU ward. As I lapsed in and out of consciousness, a team of doctors explained to Joe that my life was hanging by a very fragile thread. Joe told me afterwards how scared he was of seeing me. He had often contemplated what it would be like to lose a limb, and now, with absolute dread, he had to face his fear.

What he saw was a shapeless face with angry dark bruises covering my usually pale, flawless skin. I had no eyelashes or eyebrows – they’d been singed off in the blast – and my hair was filthy, a bloody, matted frizz. It looked as though I had been electrocuted. I was pumped with so much fluid that both my face and my body had swollen, giving the impression that I was much larger than I actually was. Joe’s eyes scanned me, slowly, yet quickly, flickering, tracing down my body, trying to find my hand among the tubes and dressings. Then he saw.

The sheet that was covering me came to an abrupt end, simply falling flat onto the bed, highlighting the inescapable facts of the medical briefing. There it was – the end of me. Every synapse in Joe’s body was screaming with anguish and despair. “My God, please.” Joe was asking for strength, not only for himself, but also for me.

LONDON HAD NEVER had an attack of this kind, even during a 30-year history of being under constant terrorist threat from the IRA. However, this was a new order of terror – suicide bombs that deliberately targeted civilians en masse, aimed at London’s overcrowded and extremely vulnerable public transport system and, in my case, deep underground. This was the essence of terror: there was no prior warning. No-one could have stopped this. We – the entire population of London – were all bracketed together as “enemies”. No discrimination, no pity, no compassion. Just cold-blooded murder.

Outside, as ambulances swarmed to the various hospitals, the city was in organised chaos: streets were cordoned off, emergency service workers were down in tunnels and police filled the streets, combing for evidence.

Back in Australia, like so many people around the world that day, my brother Graham and his family were watching the news on television, a flash report every 15 minutes or so. Naturally, they felt a connection because I lived in London, but they weren’t overly concerned. Why would they be? What were the odds that I would be involved? It’s just never going to be someone you know, especially not someone close.

Graham’s wife Jo called, expecting me to answer the phone. She left messages on my mobile and at work. She wasn’t worried; I’d call soon enough to say I was all right. If not, she would try again in the morning. They went to bed. Just a few hours later their phone rang – they had those few precious hours of rest before learning that their lives, too, had changed forever.

With experience of the bombings in Bali in 2002, where so many Australian nationals had either lost their lives or been terribly injured, the Australian Government rallied with support that was all-embracing: I was one of theirs and Australian officials reacted like parents. There was no time for red tape – my brother’s journey and arrival in London were fully orchestrated within a matter of hours.

With Joe and Graham at my bedside, I held on, but it was a fragile time. Five days after the bombings, I was still in ICU – the birthplace of what I was to call forever after “Life Two” – and I still had no idea what had happened. Joe worried that I had brain damage because, from what he could tell, I appeared to have no short-term memory. He would tell me something, continuing from an earlier visit, and I would offer a surprised expression, as if I was hearing it for the first time.

HE SAID OVER AND OVER, “STAY WITH US, GILL. COME ON, LOVE, COME ON, GILL, YOU HAVE GOT TO STAY WITH US”

Joe was also constantly looking for new ways to communicate with me other than squeezing my one free hand, or by my blinking eyes. As he considered getting me to write down my thoughts, I motioned to him, pointing to where my legs used to be and made a shrugging gesture. Joe understood that I was asking him what had happened. I knew I had lost my legs, and I knew that I was near death, but what I didn’t know was how.

“Darling, my darling Gill, you were in a terrorist attack. It was a suicide bomber, darling. That’s what happened.”

I was completely shocked. *A bomb! Me?* I felt like I was choking. I found it difficult to breathe. My heart and mind were trying to understand and remember, but all I could do, automaton-like, was cry. Tears rolled from the corners of my eyes. Joe squeezed my hand. “It’s all right. You’re safe now; you’re alive. I’m here and I love you so much. I love you, my Boo Boo. I’m so happy to have you back.”

But I was overwhelmed. I wanted to scream, pull out my tubes and run away. And at the same time, I also wanted to digest the news and give myself time to mourn and reflect. My throat was raw. I had a rasping

cough and was still bringing up fragments of whatever it was I had ingested and inhaled in the tunnel. I wanted desperately for the tube wedged into my throat to come out. I hated being so restricted, unable to talk or to drink. I wanted something to soothe my throat... I could have drunk an ocean dry.

“Here... is that better?” The nurse would drop some water from the tip of a giant cotton bud into the side of my mouth. The drops would glide past the tubing to my throat. Those tiny drops of water were my greatest pleasure. “More, more, more,” my eyes would say and Joe would laugh, learning to drip the water into my mouth. I would close my eyes and think about a time when I would be able to drink a whole cup of water. It seemed unimaginable, but it kept me going. It was one of the things that helped me to stay positive: having that personal goal to drink a cup of water again.

I just didn’t know what to expect in the future. What can you expect when you are lying in bed, unable to get in or out unless someone comes to help you, unable to turn from side to side, unable to wash? I didn’t want people to cry for me. But I also struggled to come to terms with being “disabled”. I couldn’t explain to anyone how distressed I felt at not being able to do anything. I clung to the words of my rehabilitation consultant, Dr Luff, who held my hand one morning, looked me straight in the eye and

I WOULD THINK ABOUT A TIME WHEN I WOULD BE ABLE TO DRINK A WHOLE CUP OF WATER. IT KEPT ME GOING

said, “You will walk out of here, Gill. I guarantee you that.”

It was on hearing this extraordinary news that an idea was planted in Joe’s mind: perhaps we wouldn’t have to postpone our wedding date, now little more than five months away. As for me, I would veer between moments of complete delight and sheer terror. One morning nurses would find me spinning round and round, shrieking like a child at a funfair, when I was ensconced in a wheelchair for the first time. At other times, I would wake at night, panicked, to the smell – that acrid mixture of chemicals, dust, skin and hair burning – that lingered no matter how many weeks had passed since *that* day.



What I couldn’t have foreseen is the degree of unity that Joe and I would build together through these dark times. We’d lived together for seven years, but this was different. I relied on Joe. I needed him. And he rose to the position. He wanted to share the entire experience with me and to never let me feel that I was facing it alone. We created our own impenetrable bubble, a cocoon that we would retreat into whenever the outside world got too much for us. I never had to doubt Joe’s commitment or his love. It was one less piece of the future to worry about.

Gill, who calls her new life “Life Two”, is now an ambassador for charity Peace Direct



Gill was determined to go ahead with her planned wedding, walking down the aisle on prosthetic legs

Then, as rehabilitation began in earnest, one immediate question reared its head: what did I want to call my legs? Were they still legs? I didn't need to think for too long though; I blurted out my response as if this had been something I had been considering for some time. "Let's call them 'Stumpingtons,'" I said. "That can be their English

name." And then, to my astonishment, I went still further: "I also think they're twins. Boys, definitely boys, but not identical. It's hard to

tell them apart, but to the trained eye, like surgeon Professor Burnand's, or to mine, well... we can tell the difference."

This set the tone, not only for that session, but also for the rest of my rehabilitation. My physiotherapists Matt and Nichola dubbed me "Gillington" from then on and most names were translated into our new language. It may have been a touch juvenile, but it worked for us. It was a difficult time for all of us, so our games lifted the sessions.

Over the months, I did media interviews and met people who are now a part of my life forever. Many of the new numbers in my mobile phone are those of the medical teams and my fellow survivors. Each has their own

horrific story and their own perspective, but I have yet to meet a survivor who harbours hatred for the bomber. What we all seem to have in common is a deep desire to "make life count".

Prime Minister John Howard and his wife Janette came to visit me at St Thomas' and stayed for over half an hour. Months later, I stubbornly stood in prosthetics for an entire two hours at a private reception hosted by the Queen, even though Her Majesty personally suggested I sit and rest. I was also invited by Prince Charles to Highgrove and appeared on various TV shows. Lovely as all these moments were, none was as moving as meeting PC Aaron Debnam from the British Transport Police, the man who had kept me alive in the tunnel on the day the bombs exploded.

AND JOE AND I GOT MARRIED as planned on December 10, 2005. My dream was to get through the day without a stumble, and I did. Bridesmaids Maddy and Lily, my niece and stepdaughter respectively, helped me get my legs ready the night before - I had special gold tights to cover the prosthetic casings and my limited-edition Adidas chrome trainers to complete the look. I never expected

to be married in trainers, but they were the best fit and had a good grip for balancing. Jo took a picture of them standing on their own: two gold and silver legs.

The breakthroughs and the triumphs have never failed to excite me. I am in constant wonder at what my body has achieved, how this amazing machine has healed itself and adapted to having its limbs missing. I am in awe. The tasks that may seem ordinary to some are monumental to me, and the achievement of conquering these – well, that’s my version of climbing Mount Everest. It’s exhilarating and often extremely emotional to carry a hot drink up the stairs for the first time, or to go out alone and cross a road.

I am encouraged by my therapists, who have the ability to make me believe that I can achieve almost anything – like walking without staring at the ground, necessary for scanning any dips and bumps that may lead to a fall. And though I’m occasionally kept awake at night with an imaginary itch on the imaginary sole of my foot, I remind myself that that is what it felt like to have a foot, and it’s a nice memory to have.

WITH MY NEW MINDSET, continuing my work at the Design Council no longer seemed as important as it once was. I returned to my office, eager to finish unfinished business, and threw an entire “URGENT” file in the bin. Nothing had happened with that file for eight months, yet the world hadn’t stopped turning. It didn’t mean anything now.

Since *that* day I’ve asked myself many times if it’s good enough just to be alive, or is life about what we do? Not a day passes when I don’t wish that the bombings on July 7 hadn’t happened. If I could turn the clock back, I would, without hesitation. But, as I see it, I had no choice on that morning. Germaine Lindsay didn’t ask me before he detonated his bomb if I was his enemy. He took away my choice by assuming that we all were.

While I didn’t have a choice then, I feel I’ve been presented with many choices since. I could have chosen to let hatred for this act, and for the person who committed it, consume me. I could have chosen to curl up in a ball and cry, asking, “Why me, why me?” I could have done many things, all of which I was entitled to, but I didn’t. From the moment I was given the option of choosing life, I made a vow: that if I did survive, I would live a full and rich life. I vowed I would never take anything – all that I have – for granted again. I would never forget how precious every single day is. ■