

Source A: 21st Century Non-Fiction

Denman and Maureen Groves' daughter Juliet was killed in a large rail crash outside London Paddington station in 1999. This is an interview they gave to a newspaper 15 years later. Paddington rail disaster: 'Her last words to me were goodbye, Daddy'

Those present at the scene of the Paddington rail crash have said that the worst memory they have endured over the past 15 years is the sound of mobile phones ringing from the bodies of the dead. Among the scorched metal carcasses of the two trains involved in one of Britain's worst-ever rail disasters, a cacophony of telephones beeped and buzzed. At the other end of the line were anxious family and friends, their desperation building with each missed call.



Denman Groves first phoned his daughter, Juliet, at around 8.30am on October 5 1999. He and his wife Maureen had woken up in their home in the village of Ashleworth, near Gloucester, and as usual, switched on the television news. Like the rest of the nation watching that crisp autumn morning, they stared in shock at the plume of smoke rising from the wreckage of the two passenger trains that had collided just outside Paddington station. Neither could even imagine that their 25-year-old daughter might have been on board.

"I didn't even think she was anywhere near Paddington that day," says Denman, a 67-year-old company director, in soft West Country tones. Still, when he left for work, he tried to phone her from the car – just to make sure. There was no answer.

"I thought I'd try again, but then I was so busy that I forgot. It wasn't until lunchtime that I called. I still couldn't get an answer, so phoned her company. They said: 'We're afraid she hasn't arrived yet, Mr Groves, and we're very worried.' At that point my heart sank."

Juliet Groves, an accountant with Ernst & Young, was one of hundreds aboard a Thames Trains commuter service from Paddington station at 8.06am that morning. Petite (she was just under 5ft), pretty and fiercely intelligent – the previous year she had come seventh in the entire country in her chartered accountancy exams.

She was in the front carriage of the train when it passed through a red signal at Ladbroke Grove and into the path of the oncoming Paddington-bound First Great Western express travelling from Cheltenham Spa in Gloucestershire. Both drivers were killed, as well as 29 passengers, and 400 others were injured. Juliet's body was one of the last to be discovered. She was finally found on the eighth day.

The disaster, says Network Rail, "simply could not happen today". Some £550 million has been spent equipping 12,000 signals and every passenger and freight train with a system that automatically applies the brakes if one passes through a red light. Fifteen years on, the network is a far safer place.

But that promise is not enough for Denman and Maureen Groves. Neither have boarded a mainline British train since the crash, and never will again. Their grief would not allow it, nor the sense of lingering injustice.

"I can't do it, I won't do it," says Denman. "I don't want any involvement with Network Rail. The last contact I had with them was at the trial in 2007. I told the chairman he ought to be ashamed of himself."

On the Tuesday lunchtime, when reality dawned that their daughter might have been involved in the crash, Denman and Maureen packed an overnight bag and rushed to London by car, waiting in her flat until 8.30pm in case she returned; hoping, says Denman, against hope.

Then they spent the night driving between hospitals, clutching a photograph of Juliet to show to staff. The police, they say, told them nothing. Even after her death was reported in the next day's paper, the authorities would still not confirm anything.

A few days later, they were invited to visit the crash site with a number of the families of the dead, injured and missing. "It was horrendous," Denman says. "You could smell all the diesel and the smoke. There were still dead bodies in the wreckage. She was still there.

"What we went through in those days was the most horrible feeling you could ever imagine. Everything is frozen. You feel like a zombie and you don't know which way to turn. In the end we came home after five days. Then, three days after that, they rang up to say they had found her."

In the immediate aftermath, attention was focused on the inexperienced 31-year-old Thames Trains driver, Michael Hodder. Yet Denman says this is "fudging" the issue and feels no malice towards Mr Hodder. That is reserved for Network Rail.

As an engineer, he has pored over the technical details of the crash, even commissioning a replica built from model railways. For him, the root cause was the network itself: the position of the points, and the lack of a fail-safe when the signal was red. Despite what he feels were the glaring inadequacies, he seethes at the fact that "it took eight years for Network Rail to apologise. I still think it is an absolute disgrace," he says.

As each landmark anniversary has passed, ever fewer of the bereaved turn up to the small service on the morning of the crash at the memorial stone at Ladbroke Grove. Now only a handful attend, but Denman and Maureen Groves still make the journey down to London and, at 8.11am, lay flowers in silence.

They say they always will. Theirs remains a grief defined by a railway timetable, and an anger that will not subside.

Source B: 19th Century Non-Fiction

The 19th Century saw a huge number of fatal rail accidents; one of these occurred at Staplehurst, and involved the famous writer Charles Dickens. He recalls the accident in this letter to a friend.

GAD'S HILL PLACE, HIGHAM BY ROCHESTER, KENT,

_Tuesday, June 13th, 1865

MY DEAR MITTON,

I should have written to you yesterday or the day before, if I had been quite up to writing.

I was in the only carriage that did not go over into the stream. It was caught upon the turn by some of the ruin of the bridge, and hung suspended and balanced in an apparently impossible manner. Two ladies were my fellow-passengers, an old one and a young one. This is exactly what passed. You may judge from it the precise length of the suspense:

Suddenly we were off the rail, and beating the ground as the car of a half-emptied balloon might. The old lady cried out, "My God!" and the young one screamed. I caught hold of them both (the old lady sat opposite and the young one on my left), and said: "We can't help ourselves, but we can be quiet and composed. Pray don't cry out." The old lady immediately answered: "Thank you. Rely upon me. Upon my soul I will be quiet." We were then all tilted down together in a corner of the carriage, and stopped. I said to them thereupon: "You may be sure nothing worse can happen. Our danger must be over. Will you remain here without stirring, while I get out of the window?" They both answered quite collectedly, "Yes," and I got out without the least notion what had happened. Fortunately I got out with great caution and stood upon the step. Looking down I saw the bridge gone, and nothing below me but the line of rail. Some people in the two other compartments were madly trying to plunge out at window, and had no idea that there was an open swampy field fifteen feet down below them, and nothing else!

The two guards (one with his face cut) were running up and down on the down side of the bridge (which was not torn up) quite wildly. I called out to them: "Look at me. Do stop an instant and look at me, and tell me whether you don't know me." One of them answered: "We know you very well, Mr. Dickens." "Then," I said, "my good fellow, for God's sake give me your key, and send one of those labourers here, and I'll empty this carriage." We did it quite safely, by means of a plank or two, and when it was done I saw all the rest of the train, except the two baggage vans, down in the stream. I got into the carriage again for my brandy flask, took off my travelling hat for a basin, climbed down the brickwork, and filled my hat with water.

Suddenly I came upon a staggering man covered with blood (I think he must have been flung clean out of his carriage), with such a frightful cut across the skull that I couldn't bear to look at him. I poured some water over his face and gave him some to drink, then gave him some brandy, and laid him down on the grass, and he said, "I am gone," and died afterwards. Then I stumbled over a lady lying on her back against a little pollard tree, with the blood streaming over her face (which was lead colour) in a number of distinct little streams from the head. I asked her if she could swallow a little brandy and she just nodded, and I gave her some and left her for somebody else. The next time I passed her she was dead. Then a man, examined at the inquest yesterday (who evidently had not the least remembrance of what really passed), came running up to me and implored me to help him find his wife, who was afterwards found dead. No imagination can conceive the ruin of the carriages, or the extraordinary weights under which the people were lying, or the complications into which they were twisted up among iron and wood, and mud and water.

I don't want to be examined at the inquest, and I don't want to write about it. I could do no good either way, and I could only seem to speak about myself, which, of course, I would rather not do. I am keeping very quiet here. I have a--I don't know what to call it--constitutional (I suppose) presence of mind, and was not in the least fluttered at the time. I instantly remembered that I had the MS. of a number with me, and clambered back into the carriage for it. But in writing these scanty words of recollection I feel the shake and am obliged to stop.

Ever faithfully.

CHARLES DICKENS

1 Balloon – Hot Air Balloons carry passages in a basket suspended by a number of strong ropes.

2 Stirring - Moving