

“Tales with a Twist”
A Collection of Short Stories by Pip Burley

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Preface

I SUPPOSE anyone who has written anything knows that the fewer words you have at your disposal the harder it gets. I spent some years writing copy for advertisements and commercials and, believe me, that has a habit of concentrating the mind. No chance to embellish, no opportunity to repeat or go back to emphasize a point - these are some of the harsh restrictions imposed when you cut the number of words down to the bone. Distilling an argument - which is, after all, what an advertisement is - into two or three persuasive sentences can take far longer than writing a whole article or chapter for a book.

Later on, working with scriptwriters particularly, I learned that virtually everything is improved by honing and cutting. Often, it is the writer's reluctance to leave anything to the reader's or viewer's imagination that is to blame, at other times, just feeble, unnecessary stuff that may be beautifully written but doesn't move the story along. In fact, one of the hardest things for a writer to do is cut the good stuff; cutting the bad (once it is pointed out) is much easier. But, either way, done sensitively, the outcome is inevitably enhanced.

So, it might be suggested that a short story is more difficult to write than a novel. I don't think that is true. Writing a good novel is beyond the capability of even relatively skilled writers. Its requirement for plot, structure, strong sustainable characters, good dialogue - not to mention the sheer arduousness of the task - makes it the hardest form of writing at which to excel. But, I would suggest the short story comes a close second.

All the stories in this little book are based on a smattering of personal experience, dressed up, of course, with a liberal dose of make believe. The characters are, however, entirely fictitious.

They have turned out be gentle, quite fragile tales, sometimes a touch sentimental, but all with a twist in the tail.

I hope you find them engaging and entertaining to read.

Pip Burley, Summer, 2013

The Garden Centre

SUNDAY had always been a family day. Max would permit himself a thirty-minute lie-in followed by a light breakfast and a quick glimpse through the papers, before attacking Michele's list of essential household jobs. The kids had their own list. Then the four of them would sit down together and enjoy a traditional Sunday lunch.

He always looked forward to it. His wife was a good cook who did not enjoy cooking. Still, indulging her martyrdom was a small price to pay for a beautifully roasted shoulder of lamb, a succulent rib of beef with Yorkshire pudding or whatever other culinary delights she might conjure up that week. Anyway, if they made themselves useful around the house while she was 'slaving over a hot stove', she would perceive this as a fair exchange of labour and they would be allowed to enjoy their meal in peace. Moreover, they'd discovered that lavishing her with praise afterwards would usually get them out of doing the washing up.

Today was different. Lunch would have to wait, as would the jobs on

Michele's list. What's more, Max had a unique and unarguably selfless excuse. But that didn't stop his wife making it abundantly clear that she was not pleased.

It was hardly a novel observation, but Christmas really did start earlier every year, Max thought. It was early November when he'd received the 'cri de coeur' from the hospice. The young fundraiser had told him that the local garden centre had agreed to build a Santa's Grotto, supply presents for the children and donate all proceeds to the hospice's development fund. All she had to do in return was provide the Santas. So, the hospice was looking for volunteers to work on a rota basis, divided into two-hourly shifts, three Santas a day.

Max had explained that, much as he liked to support them and had done so wherever possible in the past, he was only available at weekends, in fact, only Sundays really. Secretly he had rather hoped this would let him off the hook but, to his surprise, the conscientious young woman had snapped him up.

Today was the day! Second shift, eleven til one. Half an hour to change back into his normal clothes and get home at one-thirty for a delayed lunch. 'For once,' Max thought feeling rather noble, 'Michele will have to wait.'

He found himself picturing what the girl at the hospice might look like.

Since he'd never played Santa before, he wondered how seriously he should take it. On the one hand young children were involved, living out their illusions, hopeful that Santa would be as they imagined and not a disappointment. 'Wise', 'kind', 'generous', 'cheerful' and 'patient' were words that sprang to mind. He didn't want to let them down, after all he had children of his own, Alex and Eleanor, twelve and fourteen respectively, so he was not wholly inexperienced in such things. On the other hand, it was only for two hours and how much could go wrong? He'd probably never be asked again anyway.

Still, without quite knowing why, he wanted to do well and, as he drove carefully through the dank wintry lanes, he began rehearse what he might say. It occurred to him that he was disturbingly unprepared. Now the time had come, he wondered whether he'd been hasty, whether he was up to the task. He was no actor and children could be cruel and unforgiving.

Helena (yes, that was the name of the girl from the hospice) had said there would be a 'Santa's Little Helper' called Maude to assist him. He imagined her as eighteen, blonde, blue-eyed and bubbly. Yes, that was how a 'Little Helper' should be. He hoped she'd be on hand to help him get changed.

It was bad luck that he got caught by the level crossing. The near empty two-carriage train always took an age to go through. Usually, there were ten times as many people waiting at the crossing than there were on the train. Typical. So much for the government's policy on public transport, thought Max, his mind drifting. Irritating.

It wasn't that he was unhappily married, not at all, although they were in a bit of a rut after fifteen years. He had been faithful to Michele and had no reason to believe that she hadn't played with a straight bat, too. But he had noticed lately that he was spending more time looking at girls. Well, women. Okay, women and girls, actually. Not that he'd done anything so far, just looked. So far. It was most odd. Something had changed on his fiftieth birthday, a number of things, in fact, none of them for the better, as if a little mechanic inside his head was switching off certain body circuits and switching on others

He wondered how many customers he'd get at the garden centre. Think arithmetic. Two hours, average three minutes per child, say, twenty an hour. So, allowing for a tea break, possibly thirty children. How old would they be? Surely, these days, no child over eight would want to be seen dead with Santa. Not cool, surely? So they'd be young children, then. Maybe, not so bad.

It occurred to him that he had only ever seen Santa once. Usually Michele had taken the kids as part of a shopping outing, it wasn't an activity he'd have been involved with. Come to think of it, what about his own childhood? His Mum must have taken him to see Santa, surely? There was a vague recollection, nothing more. He remembered hating clowns. They'd frightened him. Never could see anything funny about a human face daubed with paint, features distorted into a ghoulish mask. Why did people find that funny? Terrifying, yes, funny, no. Maybe Santa fell into the same category. Max made a mental note to try not to be frightening.

His train of thought was interrupted by, well, the train. It lumbered noisily over the crossing, engine belching out black diesel fumes. 'I ask you,' Max thought, 'all that pollution for the benefit of one or two people.' He looked in his rear view mirror, there must have been a dozen cars waiting behind him. He was in the process of formulating a letter to the local MP when the barriers flew up and he was away.

He hadn't far to go now and this was his last opportunity to gather his thoughts. What was he going to say? How would he pad out the time? Maybe Santa's Little Helper would have some ideas. Would it be enough to ask their age, where they lived and what they wanted for Christmas? Anyway, the little buggers were probably only interested in a snatch and grab followed by a quick get-away. Kids were so materialistic nowadays. Still, a few, maybe the girls, might be up for a more altruistic experience. Best be prepared.

There was the garden centre up ahead. He checked his watch; quarter to eleven, spot on. As he turned in to the huge parking lot he took in the main building, a sprawling single storey structure lavishly bedecked with coloured lights and seasonal decorations. Cheerful, unrecognizable tunes with lots of chimes and sleighbells were playing over exterior loudspeakers and there were piles of Christmas trees wherever he looked. Then he saw it. High on

the roof, positioned to attract attention from the road, was an absurdly large Santa astride a sleigh decked high with gifts, reindeers in harness and a billboard proclaiming in large letters: “Visit Santa’s Grotto.”

He looked around him. Where were the customers - he’d expected hoards of them. Still, it was early, and chilly. He parked alongside the half dozen or so other cars and headed briskly for the entrance.

He glimpsed up again at his alter ego on the roof. ‘Blast,’ he thought, ‘what are the names of the reindeers? Some little kid is bound to know and make me look a prat. Rudolf, Prancer, Vixen - .’ Keep thinking. ‘Donna, Blitzen - . How many’s that, five? How many were there? Six?’ He wasn’t sure but he was inside now. He began to feel nervous. The sooner he located Santa’s Little Helper, the better.

The inside of the store was even more festive but, apart from the dearth of customers, he sensed something else was missing, although quite what it was escaped him. He glanced around looking for the grotto, his designated home for the next two hours. There it was, tucked in a corner, next to the decorations and artificial floral displays, a painted cottage with snow on the roof, a crazy chimney and a path with a little picket fence and a gate. He was impressed.

Max chose to follow a second path, which appeared to lead round the back. Sure enough, shielded from the inquisitive gaze of customers, was an unmistakably female figure in a kind of abbreviated Santa outfit, bending over a pile of red and white garments. The back view was vaguely encouraging.

“Good morning,” said Max jovially.

The figure straightened up and turned around. Not so encouraging. “Oh, hello, you must be Mr Easton, I’ve been wait - , expecting you. I’m Maude.” She smiled, held out a pile of garments and gestured to a door. “You better get into these, you’re rather short of time. The boots are in

there already.”

Max took the bundle and observed his new assistant with what he hoped was well-disguised disappointment. She seemed rather bossy, but Max was happy to give her the benefit of the doubt, dealing with little kids all day long would account for her manner. Still that wasn't really it. Maude was quite simply not what he'd hoped for. She was sixty if she was a day, tall and angular, plainly made up, with steel grey hair cut in a stern bob part hidden under the little Santa hat.

“Right, then, see you in a moment,” he said cheerfully, hesitating by the door. “Can I give you a shout if I need a hand?”

“Of course you can. There's a mirror in there so you can check the beard and wig. Everything's extra large, so you should be okay. Shout when you've finished and I'll come and give you the once over. I have to put the signs out.”

Max pushed his way clumsily through the door and found himself in what looked like a staff toilet. The door wouldn't lock and persisted in swinging open towards him. Self-consciously, he removed his jacket, shirt and jeans and hung them over the one available peg. On went the famous red trousers, the jacket trimmed with fake ermine and the big black boots. So far, so good. The beard and moustache were not so straightforward, relying on wire hooks behind the ears and a piece of elastic over the head. Lastly, the wig and hat. God, it itched already. He checked his reflection in the mirror above the sink and was surprised at how little of himself was left. It was time to venture out.

Maude was busying herself at the picket gate. The 'open' signs were up and Max watched as a mother and father with two children wandered past disinterestedly. Maude saw him emerge from the toilet and bustled over.

“Splendid!” she cried, making a little clapping motion with her hands. “Now, go and make yourself comfortable in Santa's house and I'll give you

your briefing.”

Bent double, Max allowed himself to be ushered through the little painted door. One wall was piled high with boxed toys leaving barely enough space for Santa’s throne and two smaller chairs. He sat down on the hard cushionless seat and awaited instructions.

“Now, it’s my job to solicit the customers, take their money, and bring them in,” said Maude. Her voice dropped in tone. “I always try to get the children’s names in advance and whisper them to you so that you appear to know them already. They like that.” She sounded conspiratorial and pointed to the wall of boxes. “Once you’ve had a chat, all you have to do is explain that they can choose from anything here and then you give them a cheery ‘goodbye’.” Max waited for more. “That’s it,” Maude concluded, “there’s really nothing to it!”

“So, do I give them a big Father Christmas kiss or a cuddle?” Max asked, realising that he had no idea what the children would expect.

“No, absolutely not,” said Maude sternly. “Remember, you’re Santa, definitely not Father Christmas - that word is not used in this store. And, please remember that touching the children is strictly prohibited.”

“I see.” Max realised he should have anticipated this. “What if they want to take a photo?”

“That’s up to the parents or guardians. We insist that at least one related adult is present throughout. If they want to take a picture with Santa then so be it, but the protocol is to avoid physical contact at all costs. Remember that a photograph could be used as evidence later in the event of a complaint.”

It dawned on Max that it was the word ‘Christmas’ that was missing everywhere. What had things come to? How dismal this was turning out to be.

“I think that’s everything,” Maude fussed. She started to tidy the rows of

boxes. “We had an excellent session last evening. A Mr Wellcome, do you know him?”

“Afraid not, no,” Max pretended to think, “Wellcome, you say, no, I don’t think so. Excellent name for a Father Christmas, though, isn’t it?”

“‘Santa’, please, do try to remember that we don’t use the ‘C’ word. Well, anyway, he, Ronald, was really rather good. All the children said so. We made over fifty pounds - imagine that, fifty pounds in one session!” Maude looked at her watch. “Time to get started. It looks as if it will be slow today, not many customers about. Still, try to keep it to two minutes per session, maybe three if there are two of them. Good luck. We’ll have a tea break at twelve. Oh, just a sec!” Maude bent down and adjusted his beard. “There, that’s better. I’d check it from time to time if I were you, nothing worse than the children spotting it’s false.” She left.

Max settled back on the throne. ‘What isn’t false?’ he thought. Through the fake, glassless window he could see and overhear the family who had walked past earlier. The parents were in earnest discussion.

“Three quid each?” protested the father, “bit strong if you ask me.” The two children, a boy and a girl, stood by quietly, not wanting to get involved.

“It is only once a year, Joe,” protested the woman, “anyhow, I want a picture for Mum, I promised her.”

“Oh, alright. Go on you two, here, give this tenner to the old biddy and make sure you bring me back the change.”

They moved out of sight. A few moments later the ‘old biddy’ appeared in the doorway. “It’s Hazel and Philip,” Maude whispered in his ear. The two children shuffled into the grotto with much encouragement from their mother. “Oh, and their mother, Shirley,” Maude added in her normal voice before withdrawing with the air of someone who has more important things to do.

Hazel and Philip were about seven and five respectively, the mother was a

petite, rather brassy looking woman who Max placed in her early thirties. She wore a low-cut blouse and Max had to remind himself that this was a family outing. ‘So, this is it,’ he thought, ‘it’s now or never.’

“Well, then,” he said in a deep, jolly sort of voice, “how nice to see you. Happy C - ,” he stopped himself from uttering the profanity just in time. “Happy, er, compliments of the season!” The children looked slightly puzzled. He smiled at the girl. “So, how old are you, Shirley?”

“I’m thirty-six, if you must know,” said the brassy woman adjusting her blouse.

“I’m sorry,” Max said hurriedly, “I meant your daughter, I do apologize. It’s Hazel, isn’t it?”

“I’m six,” said the girl decisively.

“Nearly seven,” interjected Shirley. “Go on, tell Santa when your birthday is, Haze.”

“This week,” said the child.

“Yes, but what day next week?” persisted Shirley, “go on, tell him.”

“Monday,” replied Hazel.

“Tomorrow, her birthday’s tomorrow, Santa! She’s a Sagittarius, aren’t you, darling? With Virgo in the ascendant,” she added as if to emphasize her point.

Max was a little taken aback. It was obviously very important for Shirley that her daughter should tell him about this.

“Tomorrow? You’re seven tomorrow, are you, Hazel? Well then, it’s happy, er, Yuletide and happy birthday, too! That’s pretty cool, young lady.”

“Very special,” Shirley concurred.

There was a brief silence whilst Max tried to think about where to go from here. The children were beginning to fidget and he was conscience that it was up to him to make the next move.

“Right, so where will you be over the, er, festive period, Philip?”

“With daddy and Susan,” the boy replied.

“Oh, I see. Susan - is she your - ?” he was stumbling now.

Hazel came to the rescue. “Susan is daddy’s girlfriend,” she explained.

“Daddy lives in Brighton now. It’s right by the sea.”

“Oh, so the man you are with today, that’s not your - .”

“That’s Joe,” Shirley intervened. “Frank and I are separated. Have been for two years. Bastard,” she added, not quite under her breath.

“I see.” Max hadn’t expected anything like this. “So, does that mean you won’t be having a family - ,” oh, sod it, he thought - “ - Christmas?”

“We’ll be having two family Christmasses,” answered Shirley. “Phil’s going to Brighton with his Dad and Haze is staying with me and Joe.”

“I want to go to Brighton, too!” said Hazel angrily. “It’s not fair! Why can’t we all be together!”

Max could see that Shirley was getting anxious.

“Now, now,” he said mustering up as much merriment as he could, “we shouldn’t get cross at this time of year! Remember, Hazel, it’s the season for goodwill to all men.”

“Bloody men”, muttered Shirley, “they won’t get no goodwill from me!”

“You see,” Max pressed on, “everybody makes mistakes, Hazel, we all have to forgive and forget and Christmas is the best time to do it.”

He knew as soon as the words had come out that this was a terrible mistake. Philip started to cry and Hazel looked as if she was not far behind. Shirley stood up, hands on hips.

“That’s asking a bit much, isn’t it, Santa?” she said. “They’re a bit young to take that in, wouldn’t you say? Come on, you two, wish him a happy time, choose what you want and let’s get out of here. What’s in them boxes, anyhow?”

Max looked around at the stacked toys. “Well, let’s see, shall we? There’s

an electric car with batteries, a dress-up doll, a spaceship and a game. You can have whatever you want.”

Philip and Hazel browsed disconsolately through the pile of colourful cartons. Philip took the car, Hazel chose the party game.

“That’s nice, Haze, we can play that after the turkey,” Shirley said to the girl. She put her mouth to Max’s ear. “She’s having chicken really, but I daren’t tell her,” she whispered cocking a thumb at the boy. “He’ll have the bloody lot plus trimmings where he’s going. Bastard.” She took hold of the kids by their collars. “Right then, say ‘goodbye’ to Santa.”

Max felt wretched. “Look, Hazel, take another present, for your birthday.” He picked up the doll. “Here, how about this?”

Hazel looked up at Shirley for approval.

“Go on, love, if you want it. Santa’s trying to be kind.”

The girl picked up the boxed doll. “Thank you, Santa,” she said a little reluctantly.

The little family left with a half wave leaving Max alone with his thoughts. A second later Maude appeared at the door.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“Terrible,” Max replied. “Poor kids. Their father’s walked out on them, they’re split up over Chris - , sorry, the festive period and I said all the wrong things. Oh, and by the way, I gave the little girl an extra present. It’s for her birthday tomorrow.”

“Very generous, I’m sure, but you’ll have to pay for that out of your own pocket,” said Maude. “Everything’s costed out on the basis of one present per child.” She bent down to check his beard. “Incidentally, you *didn’t* ask the kids where they were spending the ‘Big Day’, did you?” Max’s face gave him away. “Never a good idea that,” Maude went on, “too many broken homes these days. Right, the next lot are waiting. Ready?”

“Yup, wheel ‘em in,” said Max. “In for a penny in for a pound.”

“Okay. It’s a little girl called Joyce - she’s five - and her Mum, Christine. I don’t know the father’s name.” She was off again.

Max took a deep breath. Within seconds a rather plain little girl appeared in the doorway followed by a mum and dad who looked no more than teenagers themselves. The young mum pushed the reluctant girl towards Max. She sniffed loudly and her mother wiped the snot off her nose with a used tissue.

“Go and sit on Santa’s knee, Joycee, go on, give Santa a lovely big kiss.”

“No!” exclaimed Max recoiling in horror and wrong footing the little girl who tripped and stumbled against her mother. They both looked crestfallen.

“Under different circumstances there’s nothing I’d like more,” he spluttered, hastily re-arranging his beard which had become maladjusted in the skirmish, “but, you see, I’ve got a rather nasty cold and I wouldn’t want Joyce to catch it. It’s very chilly in Lapland, you know, ha!” This seemed to mollify them and he decided to press home his advantage. “Now, Joyce, you must tell me how old you are and where you live?”

“I’m five and I live at 24, Annersley Gardens. That’s the white house with the green front door,” Joyce lisped happily. She was more self-assured than she looked.

“Thank you, Joyce, and do you have a chimney?” The little girl looked questioningly at her mother.

“Tell Santa we don’t have a chimney because we’ve got central heating, darling.”

“No,” said Joyce.

“I see,” replied Max good-naturedly. “Then how do you suggest I get in with all your presents?”

Joyce had no answer for that. Max carried on fancifully. “You see, Joyce, what I usually do is leave the reindeer and the sleigh on the roof and climb

down the chimney. Then I slip quietly into your room and fill up your stocking with presents while you're still asleep." The child looked to her mother for reassurance, "Never mind, in your case I'll get in through a window."

"But our windows don't open," said Joyce.

"Because of the central heating, you see," said the father in a thin, reedy voice.

"This is my husband, Nasser," said the mother helpfully. "He put in the central heating all by himself."

"Did he, indeed?" Max leant towards the child. "What a clever daddy you have, darling! Well, I'm sure I'll get in somehow." He had no intention of being caught out twice. "Anyway, what do you want from Santa this Yuletide, Joyce?"

"A doll's house," came the instant reply.

"She's been going on about it all week," added Nasser flatly. "Been looking forward to this, haven't you, darling?"

"A doll's house, eh?" Max responded. He looked around him. "Well, I don't have one with me here, but I'm sure we'll sort something out in time for the big day, won't we?" He winked knowingly at the parents but was met with blank expressions.

"She's talked about nothing else," said Nasser. "Must think we're made of money."

"She's only five, Nass, she doesn't know what a doll's house costs."

"If you didn't let her watch that kids' TV with those stupid ads she wouldn't even know what a doll's house was!"

Here we go again, thought Max, don't any of these families function normally? He pointed to the row of dolls behind him.

"Look, Joyce, I might not have a doll's house, but how about one of these beautiful dolls?" He selected one and offered it to her. "Here, isn't she

beautiful?” Joyce took the doll and looked at it critically. Her face broke into a smile. “Good, there we are, then. Well happy Christmas, er, whatever, to you all. Enjoy every wonderful moment, Joyce, and try to help mummy and daddy enjoy it, too. Remember they work very hard all year round for you and they deserve a break.” He was rather pleased with that and made a mental note to use it again.

“Chance would be a fine thing,” said Nasser, dolefully. “I’ve been out of work for eighteen months.” He nodded to his wife. “Her, too. It’s been a tough year.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Well, good luck to you both - oh, and to Joyce, of course, I’m sure next year will be better.” He leant forward and gestured towards the door.

“Is that it, then?” asked Nasser quizzically.

“Er, yes - that is, unless there is anything else I can do for you.”

“Oh, right. It’s just that we thought we might get longer. You know, for three quid?”

“I see,” Max had no idea how to deal with this. “Well, you’re welcome to sit here for a bit longer if you like but I’m sure you’ll understand when I say I’ve got other children to see.”

“Yeah, I suppose so. Okay, darling, say by-bye to Father Christmas.” It was the mother who stood up first.

“It’s Santa, actually,” explained Max.

“By-bye, Father Christmas,” said Joyce.

The three of them left, the child clutching her doll. Max felt sad. This Santa Clause business was not all it was cracked up to be.

Maude was in a bit of a state. “Santa, I’m so sorry, but the first family are back wanting a photograph. Apparently they forgot just now. I’ve explained how busy you are but they - “

Before Maude could protest further, in came Shirley tugging Philip and

Hazel behind her. “It’s for my mum, Santa. She doesn’t get to see much of the kids these days and it’ll make her Christmas. Won’t take a mo, sorry, should have done it before.” She already had her mobile ‘phone at the ready. “Go on, Phil, sit on Santa’s lap, Hazel give him a big kiss on the cheek.”

The two children moved into position like well-rehearsed actors. Max decided not to protest.

“No, no!” cried Maude, hand to mouth. “Santa, you shouldn’t, you really shouldn’t!” But, it was too late. The deed was done and immortalised on Shirley’s Nokia. “I’ll have to confiscate that film!” Maude was holding out her hand.

“What are you talking about, yer stupid cow?” Shirley replied disdainfully. “It’s a mobile, there ain’t no film!”

“Then I’ll take the whole thing,” said Maude bossily, making a snatch for the ‘phone.

“Oh, and who says?” Shirley replied angrily, stealing it away from Maude’s grasp.

Philip had started to cry again and Hazel was panicking. “I want to go home, Mummy, I don’t like it here!”

Max knew he needed to diffuse the escalating situation. “Maude, it’s only a photograph, for God’s sake. Leave it. Please, what must the children think?”

A tall, muscular figure appeared at the door. Shirley passed him the ‘phone. “Joe, tell this interfering busybody to leave it, would yer?”

“Sorted,” said Joe, threateningly. “Right, you two, out.” The children left without protest. Joe pushed his face up against Max’s. “As for you, you bleedin’ fake, if ever you lay a hand on those kids again, I’ll kill you, got it!”

“Not him, Joe, it wasn’t like that.” Shirley pointed at Maude. “It’s her, she’s telling me I’ve got to give her my mobile!”

“I said you couldn’t come back in! First you jump the queue then you push me aside, force yourself on Santa and take a photograph! Didn’t you see the sign outside or can’t you read? We do have rules, you know!”

“Stop it, stop it!” Max shouted. “This has been a complete disaster from start to finish. Now, please, will you all leave my house - now!”

Rather to his surprise, this had the desired effect. The four customers left without a backward glance, with Maude bringing up the rear. “I hope you’re satisfied!” she sneered at him trying unsuccessfully to slam the plywood door behind her.

Max slumped back into his chair and looked at his watch; still over an hour to go. ‘This is ridiculous,’ he thought, ‘I’m not making any of these people happy and I’m being humiliated in the process.’ He was a volunteer, for heaven’s sake, he didn’t need this, the hospice would just have to go without. Let them get Ronald Wellcome back if he was so brilliant, he wasn’t staying for another minute. He stood up and stretched.

“Crap, crap, crap!” he muttered progressively loudly, not noticing the solitary child standing in the doorway. “Oh, h-hello,” he stammered, “Sorry, I didn’t see you there.”

“Hello, Santa.” It was a girl, about eight Max thought, pretty and nicely dressed.

“I was just popping out for a bite and a cup of tea,” Max lied. The girl looked down at her feet. “The reindeer need feeding, you know,” he added lamely, hit by the wave of guilt that goes with upsetting a child.

“That’s alright,” said the girl shrugging her shoulders, “I’ll come back next year.” She turned and started back to the door.

Despite the events of the morning, Max felt himself relenting. He slumped back heavily onto Santa’s throne. “No, wait, a year is too long,” he said resignedly. “Come on, why don’t you sit down?” The girl stayed by the door. “Please?”

She moved to the chair and settled with a measured dignity beyond her years. "Thank you, Santa," she said.

"Why don't you fetch your mummy and daddy," asked Max, "wouldn't it be nice for them to be here, too?"

The girl hesitated. "We're with my father," she replied, "and he doesn't want to come in."

"We?" Max ventured.

"Yes, my younger brother, Tom, and I. They are waiting outside. I wanted to see you, they didn't."

"Just a moment, stay there," said Max after slight pause. He got up, went outside and looked around. There was a small group of children and adults waiting at the gate. Maude started to walk towards him. Max looked frantically about. There was an elderly man with a boy of about seven standing apart from the others. He pushed past Maude and went up to them.

"Are you, Tom?" he asked the boy.

"Yes," came the reply. Max turned to the man. "Do you know where his father is?"

"I am his father," said the man.

"Good, come with me then, I've got your daughter inside and she's feeling lonely."

The man followed Max reluctantly. "I thought the children would enjoy seeing you more on their own," he said. "Then Tom said he'd rather stay with me."

"After you," Max held the door open. Maude was hovering.

"I'll handle this, Maude, if you don't mind," said Max as he hustled her aside.

"Well, really!" Maude protested, not understanding why she was no longer in charge.

Max ushered them into the house shutting the door in Maude's face. A fat lot of help Santa's Little Helper had turned out to be. "Right, now why don't you all sit down and we'll have a little chat," said Max.

He looked at the trio in front of him and thought how old and tired the man looked. Straggles of remaining hair had fallen across his forehead, his face was deeply lined and his eyes red-rimmed. The kids didn't seem much brighter. The girl got up.

"Would it be alright if we looked at the presents, Santa?"

"Yes, of course, if that's what you'd like to do," Max replied.

The two men watched in silence as the children studied the gifts on display. They considered each option carefully before making their selection.

"Tom would like the game and I'll have the car if that's alright," said the girl.

"Of course, if you are quite sure," Max replied cheerfully.

The girl stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, Santa," she said in his ear, "and Happy Christmas. Don't work too hard, will you?"

"Happy Christmas, Santa," said Tom and without another word, they left hand in hand.

"Happy Christmas to you, too," Max said after them, "and thank you."

The man stood up wearily. "No, thank you. That was very kind. You didn't have to go to the trouble of finding me."

"Well," said Max, "that's not quite true. You see, we are not supposed to see children without their parents being present. It's a rule, you know."

"How depressing," said the man, "a sign of the times, I suppose." He pulled up the collar of his coat although it was pleasantly warm in the little house. "Well, I'd better be off, too. I have the children to look after."

"They're lovely," said Max, "and they seem to me perfectly capable of

looking after themselves.”

“Yes.” The man stopped and turned. “I am very proud of them.” His head sunk further into his shoulders. “You know, for every person who loves Christmas there’s another who finds it heart-breaking.”

The man’s sadness was palpable and Max was beginning to feel concerned. “If it would help, you’re welcome to stay and talk.”

“Thank you,” said the man, “you’re very kind.” He sat down again and looked at the floor. When he raised his head his eyes were brimming with tears. “You’ll have noticed that I’m rather old to be their father. Tom and Sarah are by my second marriage. She, my wife, is - was - thirty years younger than me. Six months ago I returned from a business trip in Spain to an empty house. She’d gone off with some young chap, a plumber I think, and taken the children with her. We’d been married for eight years.”

“I’m very sorry,” said Max.

“She was so beautiful and I loved her so much. All I wanted was to make her happy. My first wife died twenty years ago. There were no children. I always thought that was my fault. Then when I met Sally, well, the last thing I expected was to be a father at my age.” The man’s head dropped as if the effort of explaining this had exhausted him. He sat staring at his shoes.

“”You said you’d been working in Spain, what do you do exactly?”

The man took a deep breath and smiled weakly. “Oh, I design and develop golf courses. Have done for years. Of course, it involves a lot time away from home. My first wife didn’t seem to mind but Sally hated it.” He hung his head again. “But I never thought she’d run off with someone else. Since I came home she hasn’t let me see the kids until today. It’s tearing me apart. I can’t bear it.” He raised his hand to cover the tears running down his face. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be burdening you with all this.” It was an effort for him to look Max in the eye. “You see I don’t know what to do. For the first time in my life - I actually don’t know what to do.”

Max let the words sink in. What an unenviable position to be in, he thought. There but for the grace of God. “They are lovely children,” he said eventually, “it’s a shame not to enjoy their company while you can. How do they feel about all this?”

“I don’t know - they’re sad, of course,” said the man, “but I can’t bring myself to talk to them about what’s happened. I hate to think what their mother has been telling them. I suppose I’m in denial. If I admit to them it’s over with Sally, then it will be. The only thing that’s keeping me going is that she’ll come back.” His doleful eyes found Max’s. “Do you think there’s any chance she might?”

The immensity of the situation dawned on Max. Here he was, an ordinary bloke in a silly costume, talking to a complete stranger, a man older and more experienced than himself, who was in desperate need of some words of wisdom, a grain of hope, anything to see him through the next few days. Well, he had a choice: to kick the man out and mind his own business or sit there with him and try to help.

“I’m sorry,” said Max, “I’m an amateur at all this. I can’t even remember the names of Santa’s reindeers.” He recited them, counting them off on his fingers. “Donna, Blitzen, Vixen, Prancer - and Rudolf, of course - you see, that’s only five. What the hell was the other one called? Sooner or later, some kid is going to catch me out. May be you can help me?”

The man looked up balefully, mouthing the names. “Sorry,” he said finally.

“In that case, maybe you can help me with something else, something that’s been bothering me. It’s all a mess, okay? People get things wrong. We just do. And yet, because it’s Christmas, adults, children, families - mostly dysfunctional it would seem - they all come to see Santa. Why do they do that?”

“I don’t know,” said the man.

“That’s what has been puzzling me. It’s not as if they believe in Father Christmas, that’s pretty obvious. They certainly don’t think that I’m him. But, for some reason it doesn’t seem matter, they come anyway. Why?”

“I don’t know,” repeated the man. “I came today because we were driving past the garden centre and the kids spotted that enormous Santa on the roof. I wanted to give them a treat.”

“Exactly.” Max pointed through the window to where Maude was mothering the little line of children and grown-ups. “That’s where you’ve got to look, out there. That’s where the excitement is, not in here. It’s the anticipation, you see, that’s the fun of it, the ‘not knowing’ rather than ‘the knowing’. Don’t you agree?” Suddenly it seemed hugely important the man saw this.

“Yes, I think so,” said the man, his brow creasing into a frown. “But - ?”

“You asked me whether there was any chance that your wife might come back,” Max went on. “Well, frankly, I’d say it was unlikely. You got carried away and married a girl who was too young for you. The chances of it lasting were always going to be slim. Having said that, the important thing is - you don’t know! She might come back tomorrow, next week, next year, or she might not. The question is - what are you going to do whilst she’s making up her mind?”

The man thought for a moment. “The way I feel right now, I can’t see myself doing anything,” he said glumly.

“I know, I know,” said Max, “but it’s not enough, is it?”

Max thought of the dozens, possibly hundreds of times when he had turned down the chance to spend time with his own kids and how, when he was with them, he had been preoccupied with other things. He waded on.

“Why would anyone want to be with you in your present state of mind? You’ve got two wonderful children who you obviously adore, so for heaven’s sake make the most of every moment you share with them, especially if

they're few and far between. Concentrate on them, not on yourself, that way they'll want to spend more time with you, the father they recognise and love, not some bitter, sad old man."

I don't want to end up like this chap, Max thought. Not to become a stranger to my own kids, not to lose Michele. He knew something had to change, but what? "If you're worried about losing them, what are you prepared to sacrifice to be there when they need you?"

"Anything, everything," said the man without hesitation.

"Then let's start with your job, shall we? Can you afford to cut out the travelling, to stay around, maybe set yourself up not too far away from their new home?"

The man hesitated. "Yes, yes, I suppose I could."

"Then do it," Max went on. "Decide what you want and fight for it. Be positive, move forward from where you are and try not to dwell on what might have been."

"Yes, I can see there's no point moping, but it's very difficult." He took a deep breath. "You're right about Sally. She's got her whole life ahead of her. Why shouldn't she get on and enjoy it with someone of her own age. It can't have been easy for her. She's not a bad girl, I refuse to believe that."

"She's young, that's all. Think. You could have another fifteen, twenty years ahead of you. Make the most of it. Don't waste time on the past. The mystery is tomorrow and the day after, and the day after that. That's why it's exciting and frightening, like Santa Claus! Be grateful for what you have and for what you might still have. Accept the 'not knowing', the rest will fall into place." He tailed off. "That's what I think, anyway."

Max had no idea where that had all come from but he knew that, as much as he was addressing the man, he was talking to himself. This would be his creed, too, his way to relieve the monotony of his own life, to turn things around, to go onwards and upwards with the family he loved.

The man smiled and the years fell away. He took a deep breath. “Thank you. That’s what I needed to hear. I have much to be thankful for and, yes, maybe a few things still to look forward to.” He managed a self-deprecating chuckle. “I have always despised those who feel sorry for themselves and here I am wallowing in self-pity! It’s true, Sally probably won’t come back, it would be foolish to count on that, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends. You’ve reminded me that my happiness is in my own hands, not someone else’s. Thank you, Santa, you’ve been an inspiration, just as you are supposed to be.”

The man got up. He seemed to stand taller and for the first time a hint of a smile played around the corners of his mouth.

“It’s funny, isn’t it, here I am, a sixty-five year old man taking counsel from Santa Claus. Well, there’s no shame in that. I’d better go and pay the lady my three pounds, it’s been worth a lot more.” He held out his hand. Max shook it warmly. “I’m glad we found each other. I am very grateful and I shan’t forget our conversation. I wish you a very happy Christmas, sir. Goodbye.”

Max watched through the window as the man re-joined the children who had been playing patiently with their gifts. With a final look back, he smiled at Max and walked off with them, arm in arm, a spring in his step.

Maude had seen them leave and had positioned herself in the doorway. “I won’t begin to ask what that was all about,” she said crossly. “I would offer you a cup of tea but we’ve got quite a queue outside and we really must get through them.”

Max stood up and took off the Santa hat and the wig. “I don’t think so, Maude, I’ve got a family lunch to get home to. To be honest I don’t really think I’m cut out for this so, if you don’t mind, we’ll call it a day.”

“Call it a day!” exclaimed Maude. “We don’t ‘call it a day’ in Santa’s Grotto! There is a job that needs to be done, indeed, has to be done! Now,

no more of this nonsense, please. I'll fetch the next children in.”

“Fetch them in by all means, Maude, but I won't be here to see them, sorry.” He pushed past her and headed for the staff toilet.

Maude called after him. “I'll be speaking to the hospice about this! You've been a disgrace, an absolute disgrace. I've only taken eighteen pounds, the worst yet!”

Max was relieved to get out of the cumbersome outfit, which he folded neatly and put on a nearby chair for Maude to find later. Then he slipped anonymously out of the store and back to the car. He glanced up at the roof and, despite the morning's disappointments, felt a greater affinity with the polystyrene character perched up there. More than anything, however, he realised he had never looked forward so much to Michele's Sunday lunch.

It was nearly a week later when he received a follow-up call from Helena at the hospice. She was embarrassed to say that there had been an official complaint about him from the store. The fact that he had walked out on the job had gone down badly, very badly indeed. Max apologised profusely.

Helena went on to ask whether he knew someone by the name of Ian St John, or something similar, it had been hard to decipher the signature. Apparently, the hospice had received a cheque for ten thousand pounds accompanied by a note saying *'for Santa'*. Max said he was sorry but, no, he didn't know anyone of that name, although, of course, it might have been a mistake, and perhaps the note should have read *'from Santa'*. Helena agreed that was more than likely. There was a PS, too, she added, it simply said *'Comet'*. Did that mean anything to him?

Max apologised, he really couldn't help, but why didn't she telephone that nice Mr Wellcome, apparently he was very knowledgeable about such things.

The Arrangement

THEY had only been at sea for a day and a half and the ship was still north of the Bay of Biscay. The weather out of Southampton had been okay, nothing to write home about, but then writing home was not uppermost in Alex's mind.

This was his first time on a big ship and he was glad not to be a passenger. At least being a guest musician meant there was something useful to do, some work to break up the monotony of the long days at sea, set times around which to plan other things. He felt sorry for the passengers, he really did.

Not that life was hectic for guest musicians. In the evenings they played in the Galaxy Bar for an hour before dinner. Then they were allocated a table in the restaurant - the same restaurant as the passengers - before playing again for dancing in the Ballroom from 8.30 til 1am.

Alex hadn't understood that 'guest' musicians were afforded Junior Officer status onboard, unlike the 'resident' musicians who were treated as crew. It had come as a pleasant surprise. His band, The Ambassadors, were only doing two cruises back-to-back, unlike the other 'musos' on

board, a round dozen of them, who, to all intents and purposes, lived their whole lives at sea. Another perk was that the Ambassadors got to be invited to the Captain's Cocktail party. As guests.

He wasn't sure how Juan and Carmel, the resident duo selected by the Cruise Director to play background music for the party, felt about it. Here were the Ambassadors, dressed in dicky bows and best DJ's, lording it amongst the passengers whilst the two latinosaurs toiled away in a corner, unnoticed, unappreciated. They might as well have been Musak. Pity, Pete thought. Carmel was quite gorgeous, untypically blonde in a strappy little dress, her tanned body moving in rhythm with the music she was playing on the electronic keyboard. Being a keyboard player himself, he noticed that she was playing the bass line on a pedal board, an unusual skill, whilst Juan sang and strummed jazz guitar. The movement of her shapely, bronzed left leg was hypnotic.

Beyond finding Carmel sexy, Pete didn't give much thought to the juxtaposition of their respective roles. He was too busy enjoying his second glass of champagne; the first, not quite empty, had been whisked away by a smiling Phillipino waiter, to be replaced seconds later by another. It was early evening, the sun was setting over the horizon, the sky had cleared and the views through the picture windows of the lounge were quite spectacular. Pete thought there was a distinct danger he might start to enjoy himself.

"Just look at that," said a voice at his shoulder. Pete turned to find his bass player, Jess, standing behind him looking across the room. Jess was two or three years younger than Pete, in his early twenties, good looking and laid back. Funny how the nature of musicians seemed to mirror the instruments they played. Bass players were generally taciturn, good-natured, relaxed, unexcitable. TrumAlexs were temperamental, prone to hissy fits and sulks - Johnny, the only married guy in the band, was a typical example - keyboard players and guitarists fell somewhere in between and drummers -

well, drummers. If there was going to be an animal in the band, you'd find him behind the kit. George, their drummer, was an ageing maniac whose many addictions included sex, alcohol and gambling. If he wasn't in the sack you'd find him in the bar or casino, depending upon whether he was winning or losing. What a bunch, Pete thought, reminding himself how lucky he was to be sharing a cabin with young Jess.

"What have you seen?" he asked, trying to make out what had caught the young bass player's attention.

"Look, the Captain," Jess replied.

Pete did as he was told. Captain Thatcher was a short stocky man in his mid-fifties with a mane of curly black hair. Not particularly good-looking, Pete observed, but with an undeniable aura. Give him a hump and he would have resembled Quasimodo. Put him in a uniform and there he stood, centre room, centre stage, majestic in white mess jacket, emblazoned with gold, undeniably the master of all he surveyed. Right now that comprised a gaggle of female passengers, jostling for his attention.

The Captain appeared to be favouring two women, both stunning, to the exclusion of the others. Some, content to have introduced themselves, drifted back to their partners, others hung around believing their turn to monopolise him would come. Tonight they were wrong. Although careful not to be too obvious, clearly the Captain was captivated by the striking pair.

"How old do you think she is?" It was George, late as usual, bow tie askew, who had sidled up, joining the voyeuristic pair.

"Which one?" Pete asked.

"Too young for you, you lecherous sod," answered Jess. "Sixteen, seventeen? I don't know. Dressed like that she could be twenty-five. Stunning, isn't she?"

"Prat," said George, "the other one. Look at her, that's what they call class, that is."

Pete studied the two women and began to see what the fuss was about. The younger of the two, her long auburn hair halfway to her waist, was a picture of youthful beauty. Although revealing only a modest extent of flesh, her short off the shoulder, figure-hugging dress left little to the imagination, no doubt the reason why Jess and George were finding it so easy to exercise theirs. Although Pete could not hear their conversation, he could tell from her graceful, almost kittenish, gestures that she was more than capable of holding her own amongst strangers, the Captain included.

The mother on the other hand (for Pete thought that must be who she was) was equally stunning in a different way. Her short, honey-coloured hair framed a smiling, heart-shaped face, her tall slim, tanned figure hugged by a mid length slivery dress. Probably in her late thirties, Pete thought, sophisticated obviously, and effortlessly confident in herself.

“Quite a pair, aren’t they?” commented another voice. It was Don, their leader, a clarinettist and saxophone player of middling ability but an elegant and witty MC. Just what the punters wanted. Pete liked Don, in fact, he owed him the gig. Without Don pushing him forward he wouldn’t have been offered the job. He knew he was the rookie of the band - all the others, even Jess, were seasoned cruisers by comparison - and he appreciated Don’s support and friendly guiding hand.

“Mother and daughter,” said George. “I’ll lay you evens.”

“I doubt it,” said Don. “It doesn’t look like there’s enough of an age difference.” He looked around. “Wonder if there’s a father about.”

“How old is the Mum, then?” said Jess. “In her thirties, I’d say, forty, max.”

Pete was beginning to read the Captain’s tactics. As their conversation developed he was focussing more on the older woman, whilst, at the same time, making sure the girl was not neglected. They were laughing now, the mother (if that’s what she was) throwing her head back, levelling it again,

lazily closing her eyes then fixing the Captain in that unmistakable gaze that only a beautiful woman, assured of the effect she is having, can pull off.

She *was* beautiful, thought Pete. No aficionado of older women, nevertheless, he was quick to recognise the quality of this particular specimen. Then, as he watched, as quickly as it had begun, so she extended a hand and withdrew, leaving the Captain looking expectantly after her. The girl followed, glancing back coquettishly at the Captain who had now been joined by a small group of eager young officers.

“Show’s over,” said Don. “Come on, we’re on in three minutes. Let’s go and tune up. With luck there will be time for a quick one before the punters drift in. Where’s John?”

“Said he’d see us onstage,” replied George flatly. He was sharing with the trumAlex. “He’s been feeling queasy since lunch. Says it’s the movement of the ship.”

“Bollocks,” Don sneered. “God help him when we cross the Bay. Sea’s been like a pond since we left Southampton. Anyway, that’s not his problem. Just because they serve six meals a day doesn’t mean you have to stuff your face at every opportunity. I don’t think that wife of his feeds him or maybe they’ve still got rationing in Dagenham. The greedy bugger eats like there’s no tomorrow. He’ll be okay.” Don turned and performed a mini-quickstep, extending an arm like a tourist guide. “Come on, chop, chop, to the ballroom, chaps, as Frank and Peggy would say, into line!”

Don turned on his heel, followed by George, eyes raised to the ceiling. Pete and Jess were about to join them when she appeared.

“I noticed you looking,” said the auburn-haired girl. “You’re in the band, aren’t you?”

At close sight the girl was seriously lovely, younger possibly than they had at first thought, but delicious nonetheless, with smooth olive coloured skin, huge brown eyes and an enticingly confident smile playing around her full,

lightly-glossed lips.

“Er, yes, the Ambassadors,” stumbled Jess, “we’re just off to play as a matter of fact. In the Ballroom, next deck up.”

“Yes, I know where the Ballroom is,” smiled the girl. “Can I come with you? It’s all over down here.”

Pete was taken aback by her frankness. “Yes, of course, you can,” he said, “but I’m sure there must be a lot of passengers who would like to meet you - I mean, shouldn’t - ?”

“I’d rather come with you,” the girl interrupted, “I’m probably the only female on the ship - my mother included - who prefers a tuxedo to a uniform. I don’t find uniforms sexy, they look fake to me. Besides, I love music. I was listening to you earlier, you’re very good. I suppose musicians can’t be fake, can they? You can either do it, or you can’t?” The rising inflection turned the statement into a question.

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Pete, flattered. “It’s like anything, you get out what you put in. Everyone says you’re lucky to be able to play but it’s really hard work - .“ He stopped in mid-sentence, afraid that he might be boring her.

“Go on, please,” she said. “I agree, I don’t think luck has very much to do with it. Talent, yes, luck no.”

The two musicians were non-plussed, yet flattered.

“Yes, well, thank you. We’d better get up there,” said Jess brightly. “By all means, you’re welcome to join us, if you’d like to.”

The three of them strolled to the lift, remained silent on the way up and emerged outside the entrance to the ‘ballroom’, another large room spanning the ship immediately above the lounge. Pete found it difficult not to feel responsible for the girl.

“Look,” he said, “we’ve got to go onstage, why don’t you find a chair somewhere and we’ll - “

“I’ll be alright, honestly, you don’t have to worry about me.” She was smiling again as she turned on her heel and made her way briskly to the back of the room. Lovely legs in nice high heels, Pete noticed. ‘No,’ he thought, ‘I don’t suppose we do have to worry.’

“We’ll see you in the break, then,” he called after her. She turned briefly and with a toss of auburn mane, was gone, a nymph lost amongst the melange of middle-aged and much older passengers. Pete glanced towards the entrance. Three young officers had followed from the deck below and were standing silhouetted in the door. He nudged Jess who took in the scene.

“I just hope she’s over sixteen,” he said shaking his head disbelievingly. “Otherwise I anticipate an illegal act occurring somewhere about this ship tonight.”

“Not involving us, I hope,” said Pete. “Don’t worry, I’m sure Mum will appear soon, I can’t imagine her leaving her exotic young progeny out of her sight for long.”

The two of them climbed on the stage. Jess switched on his amplifier and checked that his bass was still functioning. Don was unpacking his clarinet and sax whilst Johnny sat pale and unmoving, his trumpet lying impotently on his lap. Meanwhile George was tapping away adjusting his snare drum and high-hat. For once Pete didn’t have to worry about electricians since the Ballroom was equipped with a slightly ageing but nonetheless excellent half-grand Yamaha piano secured to the deck with sturdy metal straps. In an age of electric keyboards Pete relished the prospect of playing ‘steam’ piano.

“How did you manage that?” George whispered as Pete squeezed past him on the way to the Yamaha.

“What?” asked Pete.

“The bird, obviously! You’re old enough to be her uncle.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Pete responded. “Anyway, it was Jess she made a beeline for, not me.”

“Pull the other one,” said George. “Anyway, if there’s any left, remember your Uncle George, won’t you?”

“I shall treat that remark with the contempt it deserves,” Pete replied with as much irony as he could muster. “I’d rather introduce that lovely young creature to Charles Manson than to you.”

“La-di-da,” mimicked George.

Pete sat down and lifted the lid of the piano. The long row of black and white keys looked appetising.

“Give us an ‘A’,” asked Don.

Pete obliged, quietly, Don didn’t like the audience to be aware of the band tuning up. No more than necessary, anyway. Jess was fine-tuning his bass, too.

“Okay,” said Don. “Number thirteen, when you’re ready? Right - one, two, three, four.”

The little quintet swung into their routine starting with a lively Tijuana-brass number which, normally, showcased Johnny’s trumpet playing. Tonight was a different story. Johnny only managed half a chorus and Pete found himself taking over the melody line at short notice.

The floor quickly filled with passengers, some showing considerable skill and dancing rings around the shakers and shufflers. This was normal. As the cruise wore on there would be at least one ballroom dance competition and it looked as if some of the passengers had come solely with this in mind. In any event they were getting in as much practice as they could.

“No sign of Mrs Donan tonight,” Jess observed to Pete during the number. The ageing, over-painted American woman had made an exhibition of herself the night before, aided and abetted by a succession of hapless partners. Her husband, a quiet, insipid little man in his seventies,

was obviously used to her antics and seemed happy enough to sit it out. Towards the end of the evening she had started to flirt openly with Johnny at the front of the stage. Professionally, Johnny had no choice but to put on a brave face and appear amused by her advances. Pete looked around the room. True, there was no sign of the extrovert Mrs Donan .

“Probably overdid it last night,” he whispered back to Jess, “let’s face it, she’s no chicken.” He glanced over at Johnny who had resumed his lacklustre posture. He looked like death warmed up, Pete thought.

The floor was full so Don turned to Pete and Jess, pointing downwards with three fingers. Piano and bass obligingly modulated into E flat, knowing that Don was about to launch into one of his New Orleans specials, a showcase for some virtuoso clarinet playing. Tonight it was ‘Twelfth Street Rag’, with Don’s flowery fingering rousing the crowd into an early evening frenzy.

The real dancers abandoned the quickstep in favour of their oddly contrived ballroom jive, whilst others did their own thing. Not a hard audience to please, Pete thought, but you wouldn’t want to get it wrong. After all, you were stuck with them for a fortnight.

By the end of the lively number everyone was ready for something a little more sedate and Don smoothly introduced a request from the floor, Stevie Wonder’s ‘You Are the Sunshine of My Life’. Normally Johnny, with his pleasant crooner’s voice, would take the vocal, but, after Pete’s piano intro, in came Don with the tune on alto. Pete looked round. Johnny had gone. They were reduced to a quartet. He turned to Don and gestured towards the microphone. Don nodded, swung the mike over, and Pete sang the second chorus himself.

It was then that he saw her. She was leaning lightly against a column at the side of the room and was watching him intently, ankles prettily crossed, the same magical smile playing around her mouth. She seemed unaware of

the three young officers who had gathered close by her like moths to a lamp. Pete was flattered. More than flattered, thrilled.

The evening drew on and it was time for their first break. They had half an hour, which was normally spent at the bar. Don was ordering a round from Benigno, the Phillipino barman who, they had been told by one of the residents, was known as Gloria below decks. Still, tonight he was impeccable in male attire and making a good fist of serving a dozen customers at once. The four Ambassadors retired to a table out of the general run. The beer onboard was really good, cool and refreshing.

“What the hell is it with Johnny?” asked Don directing the question at George who was sharing a cabin with the trumAlex.

“He didn’t get a lot of kip last night,” George answered, “nor did I, come to that.”

“Why was that?” said Jess.

“He’ll tell you. Go and ask him, look, he’s over there.”

Pete turned. Sure enough there was the recalcitrant horn player, fast asleep in the corner. Don marched over and shook him by the shoulder.

“John, what’s going on? What’s up with you tonight?” The trumpet player was slow to come round. “Come on, you lazy sod, we’ve got a job to do, wake up!”

Johnny opened his eyes and looked around as though not sure where he was.

“Shit,” was all he could say, “I dropped off, sorry.”

“I’ll drop you off the side of the frigging ship if you don’t pull yourself together,” said Don sharply, “what on earth’s wrong with you?”

Johnny looked crestfallen. “I’m in big trouble, boss,” he sighed. “Sorry, it’s serious. George knows.”

George ambled over. “You’re disgusting Fairbourne, do you know that? I thought I was bad, you’re worse.”

“You’re a fine one to talk!” said Johnny showing signs of life, “if you hadn’t broken in, I wouldn’t be in trouble now!”

“I never broke in!” protested George, “What was I supposed to do? I was doing you a favour in the first place!”

“We had an arrangement! You took the law into your own hands!”

The temperature was rising and one or two other passengers were looking in their direction. Don clearly thought it time to intervene.

“Look, I have no idea what the hell you two are talking about, but if you go on behaving like this, we’ll all get chucked off at the next port! Now shut it, for Christ’s sake. Whatever it is can wait.”

George and Johnny looked disconsolate but Pete’s attention was elsewhere. There she was, gazing around the bar, trying to locate them. Pete stood up, meaning to call her by name and feeling foolish for not knowing it.

“Over here,” he mouthed, raising a hand to attract her attention. The girl spotted him immediately and made her way over. She stood, smiling as always, waiting to be introduced.

“I’m Charlie - Charlotte, actually - but everybody calls me Charlie. Now, I know Jess and Pete here, but - .“ Don stood up politely; despite her youth, it seemed the right thing to do

“Hi, there, I’m Don,” he said, keenly. “This is George, our drummer, and Johnny, who normally plays trumpet.” He couldn’t suppress the sarcasm in his voice. The others half stood, too, apart from Johnny who was having difficulty sitting up.

“Hello,” said Charlie, “may I join you?”

“Yes, of course, sit here,” said Don quickly vacating his seat, “I’ll get another chair.”

“This is nice,” she said. “I’m really enjoying your music.”

“Would you like a drink?” said Pete, knowing that if he didn’t get in fast,

one of the others would.

“Just a lemonade, please,” said Charlie. “I had two glasses of champagne with the guys in there. If I have any more I’ll be anybody’s!” She laughed lightly, apparently unaware of the effect her remark had had. But her presence was having an effect, causing them all to be on their best behaviour. Pete gestured to Benigno who minced over.

“A lemonade for the young lady, please.”

“Seven-Up’, okay?” the barman lisped.

“Fine, thank you, no ice,” said Charlie.

“Thanks, Gloria - I mean, Benigno,” said Pete.

The Phillipino turned on his heel, tut-tutting his way back to the bar.

“Gloria?” asked Charlie with a slight raising of an eyebrow.

“It’s a long story,” said Don hurriedly pulling up his chair and changing the subject. “Now, Charlie, to what do we owe the pleasure of your company?”

“I’m a fan,” said the girl simply, “ I love music.”

“Was that your Mum you were with earlier?” asked George.

“Yes,” said Charlie. “She’s very beautiful, isn’t she?” The directness of the question took them aback. “Everyone says so,” Charlie went on. “Sometimes I don’t know whether to be proud or jealous.” Again the winning smile, just to make sure the remark wasn’t taken too seriously.

“I don’t think you need to be jealous of anyone,” Pete blundered.

“That’s sweet of you,” said Charlie.

There was a beat.

“Is your father with you?” asked Don.

“No, I don’t have a father, well, not anymore. My parents were divorced when I was a little girl but I saw him quite often. He died almost exactly four years ago.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Pete, the others assenting in unison. “So, you and

your mother are travelling together?”

“Yes, we travelled a lot when my father was alive and since then Mum and I have been all over the world together. She’s never re-married, you see, I don’t think she ever really got over my father. She was distraught when he died.”

“How sad,” said Jess. “I can’t imagine why any man would want to leave you two.” It was a naïve thing to say, but well-meant. Don glanced at his watch and cleared his throat.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse us, Miss, er, Charlotte. Got to get these guys back to work.”

“Don’t mind me,” said Charlie. “I’ll see you all later.”

Pete hesitated. He wanted to go on talking to her. Eventually he said: “I think it’s great that you like music,” then followed the others.

Their second set went much the same as the first with Don throwing in a generous helping of sixties hits and a medley of rock n’roll towards the end. George was enough of a pro to put the confrontation with Johnny out of his mind, grinding out ‘You Ain’t Nothing But a Hounddog’ and ‘Blue Suede Shoes’ in his gravelly smoker’s voice. Johnny did the bare minimum with little energy or enthusiasm.

It was just before midnight when Charlie departed with a slight wave of her hand and that trademark smile. Pete was relieved to note she was leaving on her own.

Don concluded with the usual formalities, bid the passengers goodnight and the band retreated to the bar for a nightcap. The usually taciturn Don was angrier than Pete had seen him. He turned on George the minute they all had drinks in their hands.

“So what the hell’s going on, George, what was all that about earlier? And where’s Fairbourne, now?”

“I think they’ve arrested him,” replied George. There was a stunned

silence.

Don looked bewildered. He turned to Jess and Pete. “Okay, you two, I need a word with George. Privately. You stay here, right?” He got up. “George, my cabin, five minutes.” Don made off briskly in the general direction of his quarters. As bandleader he enjoyed the luxury of a cabin to himself.

“Okay, boss,” replied George in mock Jamaican. “Cheers, you two - I tell you, life at sea can be a real gas sometimes.” He polished off his brandy in one gulp and ambled off after Don.

“Arrested?” said Pete. “I didn’t know you could be arrested on a ship.”

“A ship’s captain can do pretty much whatever he wants,” replied Jess, the experienced sailor. “The question is what is Johnny supposed to have done to deserve it.”

* * *

Another day and night went by and the question remained unanswered. Still there was no sign of Johnny on the bandstand. Don was not his normal self and refused to discuss the subject.

The explanation finally came the following morning from an unexpected source. The skies were grey and there was a distinct breeze blowing up. Breakfast was being served in the restaurant. That was when Pete and Jess noticed the pallid figure of Mr Donan eating alone. Having finished their regular fry-up, they had no choice but to pass the old man on the way out. For the sake of good PR Pete stopped at his table.

“Good morning,” he ventured, “seems to be clouding over a bit today.”

Donan looked up at them, irritated at the interruption. “You’re in that blasted band, aren’t you?” he asked, wiping some crumbs off his mouth with the back of his hand. Pete couldn’t help noticing there were egg stains on his white shirt.

“Yes, I’m Pete and this is Jess. The Ambassadors, you know”

“Oh, I know who you are, well enough,” the old man grumbled with some venom. “Bloody dancing. I knew it would end in tears. Told her so! Stupid cow. Well, it’s done now. I shall divorce her as soon as we’re back home, of course, which will be a bloody sight sooner than we expected, I might add!”

“Sorry,” said Jess, “I don’t know - .” But the old man was ranting now.

“Stupid, stupid woman! Making eyes like Mata Hari. Oh, I’ve seen it all before, but she’s never stayed out before. Always came back to me. Pissed, perhaps, worked up, even, but she’s always come back.” The anger was changing to grief and Pete and Jess shuffled with embarrassment. “What did he want with her? She’s old enough to be his mother!” Donan looked up at the two of them. “It’s not your fault, I know, but you might have a word with him. Tell him what he’s done. I hope he hasn’t got a wife. If he has, I feel sorry for her.”

Shocked by what they had just heard, Pete and Jess expressed their sympathy and left him to his marmalade.

“What did he mean by ‘when you see him?’” said Pete. It’s as though John has disappeared along with Mrs Donan.”

“Well, they can’t have run off together, not unless they chartered a launch or a helicopter,” Jess said. “Anyway, he can’t be that desperate. Can he?”

“I’m going to talk to George,” said Pete striding off, “he said ‘arrested’, remember?”

First thing in the morning was not George’s best time and, judging by how long they had to knock before he answered, the drummer had been looking forward to a lie-in. He was not best pleased.

“Who the hell is it?” he grumbled, finally opening the cabin door, his hand shielding his eyes from the sliver of bright light. “Oh, it’s you two. Leave it, can’t you? I’m still trying to catch up. God, I’m knackered.” He

stretched and yawned. "Alright, come in if you must - but it better be important." He stepped aside and they entered his sanctum. Pete shut the door. A heavy, musky smell pervaded the small space. The lower bunk was in disarray, the top one neatly made up.

"Where's Johnny?" asked Pete.

"Ask Don," said George wearily, "I've told him everything, well, nearly everything."

"We've just been talking to Mr Donan," said Jess.

"So? What did that old fool have to say?"

"He said he's going to divorce his wife because of Johnny."

"Silly old sod. Yeah, well. Okay, you seem to know the half of it, I suppose I might as well tell you the rest. Find a pew."

Once they were sitting comfortably, George began.

"You see, Johnny and I, we've had an arrangement for years."

"What kind of arrangement?" asked Pete.

"Shut and listen and you'll find out." George lit up a 'cigarette'. That accounted for the musky smell, thought Pete.

"When you've been doing the ships for as long as Johnny and me you learn that it's nothing like real life," George went on. "I tell you, there are people on this ship who haven't been home for half of their lives. Okay, they'll get off from time to time, visit friends, even stay with their Mum and Dad, but these are people who haven't paid a bill, taken their kids to school, not done anything we'd consider normal for most of their lives. It's the same with relationships. Imagine what it's like going out with someone on a ship - 'boxing-off' they call it - knowing that if it breaks up the other person will be doing it right under your nose with someone else and there's nothing you can do about it! Right under your nose!"

"Spare us the lecture, George," said Jess, "we might not have you're vast experience but we're not stupid."

“You have no idea.” George paused to re-light his weed. “Anyway, it’s not the same. Things happen on a ship that wouldn’t happen on dry land. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

“The arrangement?” prompted Pete.

“Yes. Simple enough. In a nutshell, we always share, Johnny and me, always have done. So, here’s the deal. If he pulls, I don’t use the cabin until he’s finished and vice versa.” He noticed their surprised expressions. “Oh, dearie me!” he went on, “what are you, shocked or something? You try perform satisfactorily when there’s someone listening to your every move in the other bunk. You need some privacy.”

“So, where do you sleep?” asked Jess.

“Usually on deck, or in one of the lounges. No problem. Anyway, if your mate takes a bird back to the cabin, she’s generally out by two or three in the morning, so you still get a reasonable night’s kip.” The younger men looked incredulous. “Listen, it’s worked fine over the years, right? Until the other night.”

“What happened? Not Mrs Donan, surely?”

“Not that I knew, no. He didn’t want to tell me to start with. In the end I assumed it was that young girl, Charlie.”

Pete felt the anger well up inside. “I don’t believe you! She would never do - .”

“Listen,” said George sternly, “don’t get your hackles up. There’s a long way to go, yet. Anyway, I thought if he’d managed to pull a gorgeous young chick like that, the least I could do was keep out of his way. So, I agreed. I went upstairs and found myself a deckchair. Dozed off okay, but then it started to get chilly. It was nearly half past two. I thought the coast would be clear so I went back to the cabin. That’s when the trouble started.”

“What happened?” Pete asked.

“He wouldn’t open the door. I knocked but all I could hear was giggling.

So I called out to him. ‘Who’s that?’ he said. ‘It’s me,’ I said, ‘I’ve been out on deck for over two hours, I’m freezing cold and I need me kip.’ More giggling. ‘Piss off,’ he says, ‘come back in an hour’. Now, I must say I didn’t like his tone of voice. Still, I thought, another hour ain’t the end of the world and, who knows, the position might be the other way round another time. So, I made myself scarce again.”

“Who did he have in there with him, then?” asked Jess.

“I thought it was the young bird, didn’t I? Anyway, another hour goes by and I go down to the cabin again. Same thing. More giggling, then I hear this voice, certainly no-one young, it says: ‘Oh, Johnny darling, send him away, please, we haven’t finished the champagne.’ Then he shouts: ‘Piss off, George. Can’t you see I’m busy.’ That really gets my goat, I can tell you. And we start shouting to and fro through the cabin door. Soon other passengers start coming out and before we know where we are one of them has called the Sergeant-at-Arms.”

“Sergeant-at-arms?” said Pete, “who’s that?”

“He’s like the ship’s copper,” George explained. “Anyway this geezer in uniform turns up and starts shouting through at them to open up. There’s quite a crowd gathered now. Finally, Johnny calls out: ‘Piss off the lot of you. Go stuff yourselves, mind your own business!’ I can tell the old SAA is none too pleased and the next thing he does is grab a fire axe off the wall and smash the lock of the door. It flies open and there is Johnny in the bottom bunk with the old crone, Mrs Donan sitting on top of him, both stark naked with glasses of champagne in their hands. I’ve never seen anything so disgusting in my life.”

Pete heaved a sigh of relief.

“Poor Johnny,” said Jess.

“Poor Johnny? Poor Johnny? Until then he deserved everything he got. What happened next was - ,“ he paused as if considering his next word, “ -

regrettable.”

“Regrettable?” said Pete and Jess in unison.

“The Sergeant-at-Arms hauls them both out of the cabin, clutching sheets and towels round them, and tells them he’s taking them up to the bridge. That was the last I saw of them, being dragged along the corridor shouting and screaming at three o’clock in the morning.”

“Bloody hell,” said Jess, “what happened on the bridge?”

“I wasn’t there. All I know is what Johnny told me afterwards. Apparently the Captain was on duty. They work in shifts. He gave them a real dressing down, threw the book at them. Especially her. He accused her of unruly behaviour, disturbing other passengers, bringing the ship’s good name into disrepute, you name it, she’d done it. She protested about being a paying passenger who had travelled with the line many times before, all that crap, made no difference. He told her, amongst other things, that he’d make sure she never travelled with the company again.”

“What about Johnny,” said Pete.

“Much the same. They’re both confined to special quarters for the rest of the leg and getting off at the next port of call. Apparently they have to find their own way home.”

“Can he do that?” asked Jess.

“Yup, he certainly can,” said George.

“So that’s what old man Donan meant when he said they were going home sooner than expected. But, then why is it Johnny has been working?”

“He put in a special plea. Said he didn’t want to let the band down. Captain allowed it on the basis that he was ‘working the rest of his passage’. Old naval tradition. But he’s got a couple of young officers keeping an eye on him from the floor in case he tries anything. Still, you won’t see him around the rest of the time.”

“What’s Don going to do? Where is he going to pick up a new horn

player?”

“Don’s furious, as you can imagine, feels really let down,” said George. “He’s ‘phoned the office back home. They’re hoping to fly someone out to meet us at Livorno.”

“What a prat,” said Pete, “why get involved with a passenger at all? He’d have been better off with one of the show dancers or a stewardess.”

“Never could resist if it was presented on a plate, old John. That’s what the old girl did you see, flattered him into submission - plus she turned up with two bottles of Dom Perignon. She seduced him, he had no chance.”

“Prat,” said Pete.

“Well, now you know,” said George.

“I wish we didn’t,” Pete replied.

* * *

They were due in Portugal in two days time. Life went on although Johnny’s predicament had cast a shadow and their camaraderie had dissipated. The job had become a job and no more.

Charlie must have sensed the change, too, and her visits to see them had become less frequent, then stopped altogether. She would appear early in the evening, listen for most of the first set, occasionally taking to the floor with a young officer or another passenger (which Pete discovered made him angry) and then disappear. There was no sign of her mother.

Strolling around deck during the day Pete was conscious that he was looking for her, wishing she were round the next corner, relaxing by the pool or having a snack at one of the open air bars. But, mysteriously, like Cinderella, she only seemed to appear at the ball. Pete was missing her. Badly.

Heading due south, the ship was now crossing the Bay of Biscay. There was a worsening swell and she began to corkscrew, pitching and rolling simultaneously, enough to send most of the passengers - and quite a few

crew - scurrying to the solitude of their cabins. The upper decks were deserted.

Though by no means immune to the motion of the ship, Pete was not seasick nor did he relish staying in the cabin where Jess was being violently ill. He chose a well-upholstered sofa centrally positioned at one end of the lounge in an attempt to minimise the effect of the rolling and pitching. Reading was out of the question so he sat with a cup of coffee (served by an ashen-faced stewardess) gazing out at the fierce sea and the heaving horizon. As the waves peaked he could not help marvelling at their scale and grandeur.

As if reading his mind, the ship's internal intercom crackled to life. It was Captain Thatcher.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. For those of you who appreciate the sea in its full majesty, there are magnificent views to both port and starboard.” He sounded hearty as if relishing the stormy conditions. “We are currently in a south-westerly, blowing force ten. Sorry about any discomfort but I have had to withdraw the stabilisers for the time being. But, don't worry, I'm strapped in on the bridge and the old girl was built to withstand worse than this. The forecast is for fairer weather further south, so we should have seen it off by early morning. In the meantime, if any of you need relief, you'll find the ship's doctor on duty in the hospital on Deck Four. He tells me he has some highly effective potions and pills. I'll speak to you again later.”

It wasn't only the sea that was in turmoil, so was Pete's mind. He had become obsessed with Charlie. Hardly a moment went by when he wasn't thinking about her. He knew he had to do something, but what? He needed to find out where she was.

Gulping down the last of the coffee he made his way to the Purser's office on Deck Three, a hazardous journey with the decks heaving beneath

his feet. Still, he was pleased to find one of the assistant Pursers behind the desk, neatly attired in her distinctive white uniform and hat.

“You’re brave,” she said in a unmistakably South African accent, “what can I do for you?”

“I’m hoping you can tell me the number of somebody’s cabin,” Pete ventured.

“Yes, that shouldn’t be a problem,” said the girl. “Let me see. What is the passenger’s name?” She already had the printed manifest in front of her.

“Charlie, er, Charlotte,” Pete replied.

The girl glanced up from her list. “I’ll need a surname.”

“I - I don’t have it,” said Pete disconsolately. “I could describe her, though.”

“I’m sorry,” said the girl pushing the document to one side. “There are seven hundred passengers on this ship, you can’t expect me to know them all by sight.”

“No, of course not.” He ploughed on regardless. “She’s about sixteen with long auburn hair. Very pretty. Stunning, actually. She’s with her mother. She’s beautiful, too. A gorgeous mother and daughter travelling together - surely, that’s a help, isn’t it? Two females with the same surname?” Pete knew he was on a sticky wicket. The girl screwed up her nose and stared him in the eye.

“You’re not asking for much, are you?” she said. “Do I take it you are smitten by this young person?”

Pete could think of nothing to say.

“Do I take that as a ‘yees’, then?” she intoned in perfect Afrikaans.

“Yes,” said Pete.

The girl thought for a moment. “I know who you mean,” she said thoughtfully. “They’re a very striking couple, I was on duty when they came

aboard.” She glanced at the manifest. “Mrs and Miss Sebastian, they are in Suite Forty-Four on A Deck.”

“Thanks, that’s terrific,” said Pete, already making a beeline for the lift.

“I wouldn’t bother,” the girl called after him. “they won’t be there.”

Pete stopped in his tracks. “Why not?” he said, turning to face her.

She hesitated, looked embarrassed. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that, it was just something I heard,” she said eventually. “Truthfully, I don’t really know. They may be there.” She smiled at him encouragingly. “Go on, give it a try, you can always leave a note.”

A note, thought Pete, yes that might do the trick. “Thanks. Can I borrow a piece of a paper and a pen?”

“You really don’t ask for much, do you?” The girl passed him a pad and a pen. “Hey, you don’t need to bring that back. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” said Pete, and then again for good measure, “thanks a lot.”

He knew that A Deck was at the top of the ship where the most expensive cabins were located and, as he emerged from the lift, he was aware of the wider corridor, thicker carpet, an altogether quieter, more exclusive atmosphere. Suite Forty-Four was situated about halfway along. He knocked on the door. As the South African woman had anticipated there was no reply. He waited for a few seconds then looked at the blank piece of paper in his hand and started to scribble. He slipped the note under the door.

The sea was in furious mood for the rest of the day and most of that night. Apart from dinner itself, which few passengers could face, the Captain had cancelled all evening activities. Along with everyone else Pete had decided to turn in early and, lying sleeplessly in his heaving bunk, was grateful that Jess had settled into some kind of disturbed slumber above him. He glanced at the luminous dial of his watch. It was coming up to eleven o’clock.

He thought he heard someone knocking softly on his door.

“Who’s there?” he whispered, anxious not to disturb Jess. He heard the knocking again. He staggered to the door and opened it. It was Charlie, although not as he knew her. Standing in the corridor in a dressing gown, hair loosely tumbling about her shoulders and framing a tear-stained face devoid of make-up, this was a different, younger Charlie who looked well and truly lost .

“I got your note,” she said huskily, “can I come in, please?”

Pete moved aside, glancing up at the top bunk. Charlie followed his eyeline.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she whispered, “I didn’t think there would be anyone else - “

“Don’t worry, it’s only Jess. He’s been ill all day and he’s fast asleep. Come in, here, sit down. What’s the matter?”

The girl perched herself on the edge of the bed, shoulders hunched, face to the floor. “I’m sorry,” she said, “I needed to be with someone and your note - .” She took a deep breath. “Well,” she managed a half smile, “here I am. I don’t suppose you would put your arms round me?” Pete sat beside her and placed an arm around her shoulders. She leant her head against him, then turned her face towards him, parted her lips and closed her eyes.

Pete had never experienced a moment like it before. His heart was beating at twice its normal rate as he leant down and placed his lips tentatively on hers. Head swimming, he felt her lips part as her tongue began to explore his. It was so intensely tender and, yes, erotic that he felt suspended in space and time, not wanting the sensation to end, yet knowing it would.

The kiss ran its course and she rested her head on his shoulder again. “Thank you,” she said.

Pete stroked her hair gently knowing that beneath the affection lay some

great sadness.

“Charlotte - Charlie - does your mother know you are here?”

“No,” came the reply.

“Won’t she be worrying about you?”

“I doubt it.”

“Charlie,” he hesitated, “I hope you don’t you mind me asking, but no-one has seen your mother since that first night at the champagne reception. Where is she?”

Charlie sighed. “She’s with the Captain,” she said.

“And she’s left you on your own?” Pete asked, amazed.

“Well, not exactly,” the girl replied. “It’s hard to be on your own amongst seven hundred passengers. “Don’t worry, it isn’t the first time. I see her during the day. The captain lets us use his sundeck. It’s beautiful, private, just beneath the bridge. But, in the evenings and, of course, at night, she prefers me to make myself scarce. Mostly it’s okay, but sometimes, like tonight, I get lonely and a little sad.” She turned to face him and managed to force a half smile. “You don’t need to be concerned. I’m used to it.”

“But why?” Pete began, “what possible reason could she have for behaving like - “ She placed a finger lightly on his lips.

“Ssh,” she said, “it doesn’t matter. The sea is rough and tonight would have been my father’s birthday. I’d rather not be alone, that’s all.”

“Then stay,” said Pete. He looked up at Jess’s sleeping form above him and could tell from the heavy breathing that Jess was out like a light. “That is unless you are worried about Jess being here, too.”

“I’m not worried,” Charlie said. “after all, nothing is going to happen, is it?” she asked, adding a little less certainly: “We can just cuddle, can’t we?”

“Yes, of course,” said Pete, “whatever you want, whatever you need.”

“Thank you, you’re nice.” She looked up at him again. “May I tell you something? Two things, actually.”

“Yes, of course, anything you would like me to know.”

She lay down on the bunk and pulled the covers over her. “Come here, then,” she said, “and I’ll tell you. The first thing is that my father was a pianist. You may have heard of him, Vincent Sebastian?”

The penny dropped immediately. Vincent Sebastian had been a famous concert pianist and when he’d died the papers had been full of it. Although not a classical player himself, Pete knew the name well, had even listened to his records.

“He loved jazz,” Charlie went on. “When he wasn’t preparing for a performance, he listened to it all the time. He had a huge admiration for jazz players. He loved their technical skill, their musicality, the ability to improvise, to ‘compose spontaneously’ as he put it.”

“He was world famous,” said Pete, “I’m sorry, I had no idea.” He lay down beside her, their bodies pressed together in the narrow bunk. He was aware of her every contour. Clumsily he put his arm around her and she snuggled up contentedly against him, her hair in his face. “You mentioned two things you wanted to tell me,” he said, “what was the other?”

“Oh, yes. The other thing you should know is that I’m only fourteen.” She yawned and he felt her body relax, preparing for sleep.

He was neither concerned, nor ashamed, content merely to be able to provide some comfort for this wounded young soul, lost at sea. His questions would have to wait. He would have to wait. He gently held her to him and lightly kissed the top of her head.

“See you in the morning,” he said and could tell from the change in her breathing pattern that she was already half asleep.

“Mmmm,” came the muffled reply.

But, when he woke up with the early morning sunshine bathing the cabin in light, she had gone. And so had Jess.

* * *

He was leaning against the rail looking out to sea. A different kind of music was coming from the loudspeakers positioned everywhere on the giant liner. It wasn't even the real Britney, just some cheaply compiled cover version, probably thrown together in a warehouse in Essex.

He turned to look at Charlie, standing beside him, auburn hair fluffed up by the gentle breeze, thinking again how beautiful she looked in her simple, azure evening gown. Soon it would be time to go into dinner. He saw her brow furrow and put his arm around her shoulders. She turned and looked at him intently, tears welling in her eyes. He brushed them away gently.

"It wasn't her fault, she loved you very much, remember?" These were words meant to comfort her, help answer questions that would be with her for the rest of her life. "She did her best, you know that, she wanted so much for you. So did your father."

They'd had this conversation many times. Charlie gazed again at the horizon with its blazing sunset, the sky a riot of purples, mauves, oranges and reds. She spoke quietly, dwelling on every word.

"She never stopped loving him, you know, even after he died. They both got through life the only way they knew how. My father, the sublime artist with no financial sense, my mother, the great beauty, using it to make ends meet - what else could she do? I think I knew that, even then."

She turned to face him again. "But you're wrong, I wasn't thinking about them, I was thinking about us. The night we first slept together. I must be one of the few woman in the world who can use that expression in its literal sense!"

They laughed at the recollection: the childlike tenderness of their first union, his crazy fear that she had gone off with Jess when she was simply fetching some things. And Jess's kindness, waking in the early hours of the morning to find them together and, out of compassion, going off to sleep in the spare bunk with George in order to leave them alone. All this he had

discovered later.

“You waited for me,” she said, “I never thought you would, but you did.”

“There wasn’t anyone else after you,” Pete replied brushing his fingers against her lips, “and you only made me wait five years!”

“That was cruel,” Charlie said wistfully, “but I was very young.” She looked up at the massive superstructure of the new superliner towering above them. “Do you know how many cruises we’ve been on since then?”

“Quite a few,” Pete replied. “It’s become a habit.”

The night was balmy; they were scheduled to spend a week in New York before flying on to Los Angeles where a wonderful reception awaited them. They were happy.

“Do you ever miss the playing?” Charlie asked.

“No, not at all,” Pete answered without hesitation. “I was never going to be as good as your father and if I hadn’t moved on I’d never have earned enough to pay for these trips!” He looked at his watch. “Come on, time to go in or we’ll be late for dinner.”

They made their way along the labyrinth of corridors towards the huge restaurant and headed for the top table, stopping briefly to compliment the band on the way. The Captain, a tall, distinguished-looking man in his fifties, sideburns peppered with silver, was already seated with his other guests who stopped in mid-conversation pending the introductions. He stood up with a welcoming smile, taking in Charlie’s beauty with an appreciative glance.

“Good evening, Sir Alex, Lady Charlotte, may I introduce you to Mr and Mrs Quentin, also from England, Mr Lieber from San Diego, Miss Campbell and Mr Mourino from New York and I’m sure you’ll recognise Mr Grant and Miss Lopez who, I believe, will be going on to LA like yourselves. Please do sit here, Lady Charlotte.” He gestured to the chair beside him and summoned the wine waiter. “Now, we were all so pleased

to read about your nomination, Sir Alex. Please, tell us all about it.”

Alex smiled. “Thanks for the compliment, Captain, but I recommend that you ask my wife about her father, it’s an altogether more interesting story, I can assure you.”

As always Charlie held their attention with easy grace, recalling her father’s triumphs and ordeals, their tumultuous family life as the three of them travelled the world following his hectic schedule, feted wherever they went. She said little about what had happened after he had died so suddenly, unexpectedly, leaving her glamorous mother ill-prepared for life as the single parent of a teenage daughter. Instead, she chose to change the subject.

“Enough about me,” she concluded, “did you know that Alex started life as a piano player and a very good one, too? You played on a cruise ship once, didn’t you darling?” Her mischievous smile was not lost on Pete.

“More than once,” he confirmed, “and I cherish the memories. I owe a great deal to my experiences at sea.”

“Are you saying that you developed your interest in the arts whilst at sea?” asked the Captain.

“Not exactly,” Pete answered, “although it may have had something to do with it. No, I was referring to something far more important.”

Charlie was rummaging in her evening bag. She found what she was looking for and held up a neatly folded piece of paper. Alex knew exactly what it was. He had no idea she had kept it.

“May I read it out?” Charlie asked.

Pete laughed. “Why not, if you’d like to, I’m not sure anyone will be interested.” But the night was theirs and Charlie knew it.

“It’s something Alex wrote to me, “ said Charley, “It says: *You are the sunshine of my life, that’s why I’ll always be around. Love Pete. 34 A-deck.*” She laughed as she returned the note safely to her bag. “Pretty

romantic, don't you think?"

The joke was on him and, as the table laughed with her, Pete said:
"Come on, give me a break - it *was* thirty years ago!"

The Auction

IF it hadn't been for early retirement, coupled with some enforced recuperation following a hip operation, Freddy wouldn't even have been thinking about personalised number plates.

As it was, he had plenty of time to fill and not very much to fill it with. Although mobile in theory - the surgeon, Mr Grossmith, had told him to walk around as much as possible - even shuffling across the room to switch on the television was a struggle and he was finding it impossible to get out. His one attempt had ended ingloriously when he'd been forced to enlist the assistance of Mrs Callaghan downstairs to support him as he climbed the steps. He couldn't help reflecting how much easier all this would have been if Doreen had still been around. When their marriage had broken down all those years ago, the last thing either of them had envisaged was being alone in their old age or needing a helping hand due to physical infirmity.

Funny. The one thing Freddy had never been short of was company, male or female. Now, with no job and no social life he felt stuck, out of touch. So he was reading the newspapers in rather more detail than before. Including the pages containing lists of personalised number plates.

Freddy's surname was Cassate on account of both his parents being Italian. He had been christened Alfredo but had encouraged everyone to call him Freddy from as early as he could remember. His mother and father, Aldo and Gianetta, had settled in the East End in the thirties, his father working in the docks whilst Gianetta operated the mobile ice cream van they had purchased with all their savings just after the war. Freddy had been embarrassed by his surname and decided to abbreviate it to Cass, his excuse being that no-one knew how to spell Cassate and it was less trouble all round to shorten it. But that wasn't the real reason. As a schoolboy he preferred not to be regarded by his cockney contemporaries as the son of immigrants and, after the war, people weren't sure about foreigners of any description, especially Italians. Although it was undetectable to Aldo and Gianetta, their son had grown up with a Bethnal Green dialect indistinguishable from the real thing. Freddy knew that only his name and parentage gave him away. Which was one of two reasons he chose to leave the capital as a young man and head North. The other reason being that his father got drunk sometimes and had violent rows with his mother.

Like many young men trying to escape the past and start anew, Freddy quickly learnt that humour was a great asset. Settling in Sheffield, it wasn't long before he had found his role in life. He could make people laugh. And so it was that Freddy Cass, the bright young comic, with his dark, swarthy good looks, became a popular stand-up comedian. He was often mistaken for Jewish, an error he seldom bothered to correct, preferring to use it to his advantage by assuming the mannerisms and fast-paced delivery of the Jewish comedians of the time.

Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Lenny Bruce, Graucho Marx - they all became his heroes and Freddy would grab every opportunity to see them at work, on radio, film or television. He once even saw Milton Berle live at the Palladium once, soaking up every nuance of his performance, learning the

great man's technique as if it was his own. Fascinated by the way this tiny race had produced so many great comics, he would often hold forth after a show, expounding his theories on the subject.

Feeling different, feeling alienated, feeling persecuted, feeling that the only way you can deal with the world is to laugh - because if you don't laugh you're going to cry and never stop crying - that's probably why the Jews developed such a great sense of humor. The people who had the greatest reason to weep, had learned more than anyone else how to laugh.

Freddy could relate to this and needed to look no further for his inspiration. Consequently, he spent the next thirty years of his life in denial of his origins. Although never achieving star status, he had made a good living on the club circuit, even the occasional TV appearance, and, with the proceeds, had managed to provide for Doreen and bring up a son. That was before she had up and left.

With hindsight Freddy could see why, could even sympathise with her. It turned out that while he had been travelling all over the country from venue to venue, bedsit to bedsit, believing it all to be for his wife and little boy, Doreen had been feeling lonely and frustrated stuck at home. As the demands of his career caused him to spend more time away, so she ceased to trust him and became convinced that he was philandering with a girlfriend in every town; that his long absences from home were through choice rather than necessity. In the end communications broke down completely, the boy grew up, lost interest and wandered away. And so did she. Plus, there was the small matter of Reg, the insurance agent...

Even now, all these years later, it hurt Freddy to think about Reg. So he didn't go there, he didn't 'do' Reg.

The separation, followed by the divorce, had knocked all the stuffing out of Freddy and with the stuffing went the confidence. He found he couldn't face audiences anymore; life had ceased to amuse him and, if it wasn't funny

to him, he could no longer make it funny for others. At the age of fifty he took a job as steward at a golf club near his home, where his looks and personality and, probably more importantly, his readiness to work long unsocial hours, had provided him with a niche. As golf club stewards go, Freddy became quite famous, a talking point amongst members and their guests from other clubs who often discussed him in couched terms over a gin and tonic, dwelling particularly on his 'former' career on stage and screen. The tips and bonuses were generous and Freddy had settled into a perfectly pleasant and agreeable way of life.

Women had never featured after Doreen, although he'd had many offers. Why he never took them up he didn't quite know, although he invariably dealt with the situation by saying he was a 'one-woman kind of guy'. Always the gentleman, Freddy was careful not to deflate the ego of his suitors. On one occasion, in order to deter a particularly amorous middle-aged widow, he'd lied and said he was still married. But he knew the truth. He'd simply been unlucky in love and picked a wife who hadn't understood him. The lesson? Once bitten, twice shy.

He had never considered retirement, always assuming the job at the club would be there for as long as he wanted. True, his hip had been getting worse, although it hadn't crossed his mind that anyone would notice until the new secretary had summoned him to his office one day and asked him to sit down. Freddy said he would prefer to stand, knowing that once he had settled into the low, button-backed leather armchair, he would never get up. The conversation had been brief, unexpected and to the point.

"Well, Freddy," the secretary had started, looking at him over his new frameless spectacles, "I have some good news for you."

Freddy's ears perked up; any news was unusual in the club, good news particularly. The secretary went on.

"You know, Freddy, you are held in great affection here. You've been

part of the furniture and fittings, so to speak, for, I don't know, how many years? Twenty? We all like you, and, well, the members - on my advice I might add - have decided to get together and buy you a new hip." Freddy's jaw dropped. "The operation, spare parts as required and accommodation, private, of course, all on the house with our best wishes for a long and happy retirement. You've done us proud, Freddy, and it's no more than you deserve." He got up and proffered his hand, before going on in lowered tones: "Frankly, I'm surprised they haven't done something for you before. With our thanks, Freddy, with our heartfelt thanks."

Freddy took the hand and muttered: "No, no, I should thank you, that's all very kind." He cleared his throat, knowing that it would be disrespectful not to prolong the conversation. "I hadn't thought about an operation, actually, it hadn't occurred to me."

"Now's the time, old chap," the secretary interrupted, "how old are you? He shuffled some papers self-consciously on his desk. "Seventy, good God, I wouldn't have put you a day past fifty-five, not a grey hair in the head, eh? How do you do it, wish I knew - perhaps you'll tell me one day, eh?" He chuckled to himself and passed a hand through his own mop of blonde hair only slightly flecked with grey. "Don't worry about the surgery, couldn't be in better hands. Grossmith will do it himself. Top man. Oh, and of course he knows you. So, he'll get you in quickly, bit of jiggery-pokery no doubt. Knows how to by-pass a few queues, cut through the system, does our Harold." He shuffled and re-shuffled the file. "Well, that's it. Well done, Cass, it's absolutely no more than you deserve." He opened a draw in his desk and put the file away. Done and dusted.

Something must have snapped in Freddy's mind. "It's Cassate," he said. "Cassate, not Cass, that's an abbreviation. My real name is Cassate. Italian. My parents were from Naples."

The secretary had presumed Freddy was half way out of the door and his

mind had moved on to other things. This latest piece of information came as an irritating surprise. He looked up sharply.

“Cassate? But we’ve always known you as Cass, haven’t we? Italian? I’d always thought you were - “

“ - Jewish, I know. Cass was my stage name, it just carried on, you know. But actually I’m Italian. I’m going there when I have the chance. Trace my roots. Go back, you know, try to recapture it, all those lost years pretending I was - ‘

“Excellent, Freddy. That’s marvellous, just what retirement is for. I’m sure you’ll make a great success of it. Good luck, old chap.” He glanced at his watch. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I really must - “

“Retirement?” said Freddy. “Yes, of course. So, I’ll have a word with Mr Grossmith, then?”

“Absolutely, Grossmith is your man. Toodley pop, old chap.”

* * *

He hadn’t waited long. Harold Grossmith - who played off twenty-one and had turned out to be more proficient with a scalpel than a Big Bertha - had got him into a south London hospital within the fortnight, explaining how fortunate it was that Freddy was suitable for an ‘off-the-peg’ titanium hip joint rather than needing the more expensive ‘tailor-made’ variety. Freddy wondered if Grossmith had bought the joint in the pro shop and began to see disturbing similarities between surgery and golf. A week later he was back at his flat.

Freddy knew that the shock of his dismissal - for that was how he saw it - had shaken his perspectives, altered his priorities. He still had no idea where the string of words he had unleashed on the secretary had come from, but he was certain he had meant every one of them. All his life he had denied his origins, frittered away his heritage and failed the ultimate test;

to be true to himself. That had to be put right, while there was still time.

Now, looking through the paper, using an old magnifying glass to study the endless list of numbers for sale, it jumped off the page and hit him in the face. There it was, an omen in black and white, as if fate was confirming his resolve:

CA5 5ATE

He put the paper and magnifying glass down, hardly daring to believe what he had just seen. He looked again. It was still there, winking at him, his name, his number plate - guide price £644, to be auctioned on a date to be announced.

Freddy knew he had to have it. There was no question. The advertisement had been placed by the DVLA in Swansea and there was a telephone number at the bottom of the page. He reached for his mobile (which he had remembered to place on the table beside him) and dialled. The voice was friendly and efficient. The next auction was to be held at Shigwood Hall, near Oxford, in three weeks time. It ran for three days. Was he interested in a particular number? Freddy replied that he would be bidding for one number and one number only, CA5 5ATE. The voice on the other end asked him to hold for a moment and then informed him that the number in question would be going under the hammer at 10.30am on the Tuesday, the first day of the three day auction. Was he aware there was a reserve price of £644? Freddy said he was and carefully noted the date and time. He thanked the lady and put the 'phone down, flushed with childish excitement. £644 was a lot of money but he knew he would go higher if he had to. Maybe even as far as £1,000, but certainly no more. Three weeks was perfect, his hip would be improved by then and, subject to Harold Grossmith's say so, he would have no trouble driving to Oxford, less than two hours away. He could hardly wait.

The three weeks went slowly and he must have checked subsequent DVLA advertisements at least a dozen times to make sure his number was still there. It was. The hip was improving nicely and he was experiencing very little pain, far less, in fact, than before the surgery. The problem was re-training the muscles so that he could get about normally. But he was doing okay.

By the time the day arrived he was able to descend the stairs to the ground floor without assistance and walk the few steps to his garage. He opened the up-and-over, unlocked the old Rover, and checked his watch. Seven am - perhaps a little on the early side, but better safe than sorry. He would never forgive himself if he was late and missed his number. Making sure for the umpteenth time that he had remembered his wallet and credit cards, Freddy manoeuvred himself gently into the driving seat and started the engine. No problems so far. He was on his way.

The journey was uneventful and he allowed his mind to wander back to his childhood and his days in the east end. Trying to recall detail more than sixty years ago was not easy, especially when he had deliberately blocked out so much for so long. His nature had always been to live in the present and he wondered whether this had anything to do with his unhappy and disturbed childhood. Compared to people he knew at the club, many of them younger than him, who constantly looked back, regaling anyone within earshot with anecdotes and panegyrics from the past, he had always had his feet planted firmly in the present. People talked about their schooldays as being 'the happiest days of their life'. That had never made any sense to Freddy. He had no memories of his own schooldays and had always thought it an admission of failure to say that your life had gone down hill afterwards. No, he could recall his best days very clearly: they had been with Doreen, early on in their marriage when they were both still in love,

then the birth of their child, with his career moving nicely onwards and upwards. He remembered the laughter and applause still ringing in his ears, the excited 'phone calls to Doreen describing how a show had gone, the congratulations and accolades, the promises of more work, maybe even television. He recalled his delight when Doreen said she was proud of him, how she missed him, how they both missed him and - when would he be home?

He could see now that it had all been an illusion, it must have been. Doreen had gone and, to all intents and purposes, so had the boy. Just as he himself had escaped to Sheffield, so his son had flown the nest to Australia. A Christmas card and a 'phone call on his birthday was all that was left. Even though with hindsight Freddy could see where he had gone wrong, he still couldn't fathom how he might have done things differently. Surely Doreen should have understood? Freddy concluded yet again that he must have chosen the wrong woman, just as he had done a hundred times before.

There he was again, dwelling on all too familiar territory, crying over spilt milk. It was apparent that the pain of his marital failure had obliterated earlier memories of his childhood, his upbringing in Bethnal Green, his parents; memories which, inexplicably, were now becoming more insistent. Because his childhood had been unhappy he had used it as an excuse, a reason for leaving home and creating what to all and intents and purposes had been a false identity. He was a fake. A fake.

Freddy became aware that he was beginning to tremble and perspire profusely. He signalled left and stopped on the hard shoulder. He needed to recover his composure before driving on. Sitting back in the seat he started to breath slowly and deeply, an old trick he had used when standing in the wings, stomach churning, terrified of making an entrance. If only Doreen had understood what he'd been through every time he gave a

performance, every comic's fear of 'getting the bird', the anxiety, the pain, the endless learning and rehearsing of the material, the wild fluctuations of emotion between success and failure, if only...

Stop it, stop it! What was the point? He had become like a record stuck in a groove. How tempting for the mind to take the easy route, to repeatedly turn down a familiar alley, even one with a dead end, when a different turning might get you to where you really wanted to go. Where had he been all those years? Yes, he was a fake.

Let's go there now, he thought, let's see where that road leads.

He was Italian, the only son of first generation immigrant parents. Where had they come from? Naples, yes. Where was Naples? North or south? He had no idea. He thought back to when he was young. The Cassates had not been the only Italian immigrants in Bethnal Green. There were other families, large families, with lots of kids. He remembered the girls, jet-black hair tumbling about their olive-skinned shoulders, fiery, tempestuous, unpredictable. The boys, arrogant, strutting their stuff, smarter and better dressed than the cockney boys, better spoken, too. He had never got on with any of them, nor they with him, and had always felt the odd one out. Where was the rest of his family? Surely there must have been relatives, aunts, uncles, nephews, cousins? Italians had big families, so why not his? It was terribly late in the day, but he knew he had to find out.

The deep breathing had done the trick. He had calmed down enough to continue his journey and as he carefully steered the car back on to the road his mind turned to the more pressing matter; the number plate which had become the key to unlocking the mysteries of his past.

Freddy thought he must be getting old.

* * *

He arrived at Shigwood Hall in good spirits nearly two hours early. Parking the Rover as close to the main entrance as he could, Freddy made his way

slowly to the reception of the old Edwardian house. From there he was directed to Conference Block Four, a 50's-style purpose-built wing boded on to the side of the main buildings. The young receptionist had explained that the auction wasn't due to start until 10am, still there was coffee in Block Four if he intended waiting or, alternatively, full English breakfast was being served in the hotel dining room. Declining the latter, Freddy made his way to the business centre.

The large room was empty apart from two technicians who were working on the bank of computers set up on a long table where, Freddy presumed, the auctioneer would be sitting. The rest of the room was filled with rows of chairs arranged theatre-style to accommodate the bidders. It was a big space and, being relatively short of stature, Freddy knew he would need a good seat in order to get a clear view of the proceedings. Just as well he was early. There was another table at the back of the room bearing two large urns and piles of cups and saucers. He poured himself a black coffee and embarked upon the important task of deciding where to sit.

He didn't want to be too close to the front where he might appear over conspicuous, nor did he want to get stuck in the middle of a row. He settled for an aisle seat halfway back and as near to the centre of the room as possible where he could stretch his leg if it felt stiff. A cardboard sign indicated that he had chosen Row 9. He looked at his watch. There was still an hour to wait.

"You alright there, guv'nor?"

The voice startled him. He turned to see that one of the IT men had taken a coffee break coffee and was standing beside him.

"Bit early, aren't you, we're still setting up?" the man went on. "The auction doesn't start for the best part of an hour."

"I know," said Freddy, "left a bit too much time to get here. You never know with the roads these days, do you?"

“Come far, have you?” enquired he engineer.

“No, just from Surrey,” Freddy replied.

“Better out than in!” said the man. He was being friendly and Freddy appreciated that. “You can forget London, my friend. Bloody congestion charge! They didn’t think of people like me when they came up with that one, did they? Tradesmen don’t stand a chance.” He sat down in front of Freddy. “It’s just another way to collect tax, isn’t it? Killed my business it has, that’s why I work out here nowadays. They call it a congestion charge but have you noticed how suddenly it’s changed from being ‘congestion’ to being ‘environmental’? Here, explain to me how an electric car - which doesn’t have to pay the £8 charge - causes less congestion than one that uses petrol?”

“That’s a good one,” said Freddy. He was used to conversations like this at the golf club where everyone had their pet hobby-horse. “What I always say is: the only thing you can rely on is that nothing stays the same.”

The man paused for a second then burst out laughing.

“Very good, very good! You ought to be a comic, you ought! Do you know that? You could be a comedian!”

Freddy was in familiar territory. “Funny you should say that, actually - .“

“What?” said the man as Freddy dried up in mid-sentence.

“Nothing,” said Freddy. “It was all a long time ago.”

“Right then,” said the man. He looked at his mate who was still hard at it. “Better get back. Enjoy the auction. Good talking to you.”

Freddy watched him go back to work. He noticed how skilfully the two technicians went about their business as screens flashed to life, loudspeakers crackled, microphones were tested, lights went on and off. The top table was becoming a mass of technology. Others had appeared now, a girl who started to put little pamphlets on all the chairs and a young man arranging papers for the auctioneers. Another woman was putting out glasses and jugs

of water. Freddy got up stiffly and re-filled his coffee cup. There was a discarded 'Daily Mail' lying beside the urns. He looked around to see if it belonged to anyone but no one seemed to notice. He took it and went back to his seat.

As he wiled away the time contentedly, the room was gradually filling. Strange, he thought, how in almost any surroundings people seemed to know each other. Already small groups were forming, chatting away happily. It was amazing how seldom you saw people on their own. Maybe they knew each other through business. These were the professionals, people who traded in number plates as if they were commodities, which, it occurred to him for the first time, they probably were. But not his number plate. Not CA55TE. He was not going to allow anyone to trade that. It was as good as his already, as if made to order. Still he had a niggling doubt; what if there were other bidders against him? How high would they go? As the time approached he became more apprehensive.

"Have you got one?" The girl with the pamphlets startled Freddy out of his reverie.

"What? Got what, sorry?"

"The catalogue," the girl replied, "it lists all the lots we are auctioning today and their reserve prices."

"I'm only interested in one number plate," Freddy explained, "so I don't think I need one."

"Have one anyway," the girl replied, "it's on the house. You deserve it all the time you've been waiting."

"Thank you," replied Freddy gratefully, taking the little book. People were really very kind.

The room was almost full now and three or four officials had gathered on the platform including a man in a suit and tie who Freddy assumed was the auctioneer. Not long now, he thought.

He was relieved to see the chair immediately in front of him remained empty. As long as it remained so he had an excellent view of the proceedings and would not have to crane his neck at all.

The auctioneer took his position centre stage flanked by helpers on either side. Freddy counted six in all. It had gradually dawned on him that this was a major event, presumably with a great deal of money at stake. He glanced at the brochure. There must be a hundred or more numbers listed, he thought, how long is this going to take?

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen.” It was the auctioneer speaking into the microphone, his voice amplified so that he could be heard in every corner of the room. “We shall be starting in a few minutes and there are just one or two things I need to tell you before we get going.”

The voice droned on. Terms. Conditions. Telephone bidding. Bidding over the Internet. E-mails. Freddy wasn't interested. He was there, in person, ready and willing to go into battle with anyone who challenged his right to own and display his surname on his car. Although he hoped there wouldn't be anyone. He really didn't want to go above £750 if he could help it.

All of a sudden it started. The big screens sprang to life and Lot One was under the hammer. **B11XOM**. As soon as it came up there was a ripple of laughter around the room. At first Freddy couldn't see the joke, but then got it. The first bid came in at an astonishing £1,000, which was quickly raised to £1,500. He watched the auctioneer intently, regarding this as a rehearsal for later on. The man in the suit and tie was juggling bids from the floor, asking his colleagues to keep him abreast of bids coming in by telephone, e-mail and internet. It was up to £2,000 now and there was a slight hiatus. This is where the professionals earn their spurs, thought Freddy. Then, after a brief flurry of raised hands and a final check by the auctioneer with his colleagues left and right, it was sold. The hammer came

down on 'buxom' for £2,250. Freddy felt himself relax back into his seat. He was exhausted and hadn't even bid yet.

Up came another number on the screen. This time it was P2 and the reserve price was £100,000. Freddy was astonished and found himself surrounded by a forest of raised hands. Within seconds the bids were up a further £25,000 and within another minute the hammer had come down at £135,500. A number of dealers got up and left the room. Freddy guessed they had come for just that one lot.

He checked the clock. Those two numbers had taken about twelve minutes to auction. Less than twenty minutes to go. Other numbers came and went, as did the bidders. In fact, Freddy's expectation that the audience would remain in their seats as if they were in a theatre couldn't have been further from the truth. It was like Piccadilly Circus with all the comings and goings, people constantly moving about. This was big bustling business, quite unlike anything he could ever have anticipated. Freddy was grateful that in this crowded environment the chair in front of him had still not been taken.

"Lot five," said the auctioneer, "A nice number, if not remarkable, CA55ATE, reserve price is £644. Do I have an opening bid?"

Freddy was about to raise his hand when, suddenly, his view was blocked. A large, dark-haired man had plonked himself in the seat in front. Freddy leant forward and to the side and raised his right arm as high as he could.

"Any bids?" repeated the auctioneer. Freddy realised he couldn't be seen. Then the unthinkable happened: the large man who had just taken the seat in front raised his hand.

"Gentleman in the eighth row, yes sir, do I have £650?"

The large man waved in acknowledgement.

"£650 I'm bid," said the auctioneer, "is there any other interest?"

Freddy stood up and raised his hand. "Yes," he shouted, "£700!"

"Ah, yes sir, the gentleman behind, I'm sorry, you don't need to stand,

now I know where you are I can keep my eye on you. Very well, any advance on £700? It's with you, sir, do I have £750?"

The large man raised his hand again. Freddy was sweating now. The sooner this was over the better.

"One thousand pounds!" he shouted, on his feet again.

"One thousand, I am bid," repeated the auctioneer. "Now, sir, the gentleman in front, any advance on £1,000?"

The room had gone very quiet, as if sensing that these two men were engaged in some unexplained private feud. The large man raised his arm.

"Is that £1,250?" ventured the auctioneer. The large man nodded. The auctioneer looked at Freddy, still on his feet. Freddy felt the room begin to sway as his heart pumped nine to the dozen.

"Fifteen hundred!" he cried. "I'll go to fifteen hundred, not a penny more!"

The room fell silent. The auctioneer waited patiently, staring at the large man who made no movement. After what seemed an age, he half raised his arm and then, as if thinking better of it, allowed it to fall back by his side.

"All done?" asked the auctioneer. "Very well, for fifteen hundred pounds, to the gentlemen in the sports jacket." He pointed the hammer briefly at Freddy then brought it lightly down on the table. "Gone. Well done, sir."

Freddy was exhausted and drenched in perspiration. He had overspent his budget by some margin but felt a huge sense of achievement nonetheless. He had his precious number plate, 'personalised' to spell out his family name. CA55ATE - Cassate. Talk about an adrenalin rush! He hadn't felt so elated for years, not even at the peak of his stage career. He sat back in his seat, warmed by an inner glow, his heartbeat slowly returning to normal. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"How will you be paying, sir?" It was the same girl who had given him

the catalogue.

“Pay? Oh, yes,” said Freddy. “will you take a credit card?”

“Certainly,” said the girl. She tapped some figures into her calculator. “That’s £1,842.50,” she said, “including the assignment fee of £80 and VAT.”

Freddy handed over his credit card without protest. He should have listened to the terms and conditions. He entered his PIN number into the girl’s portable machine and waited for the process to complete. The money was in his account, no problem. The machine whirred and the girl returned his card.

“Congratulations, sir,” she said, “you really wanted that number, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Freddy replied, “I did. Thank you so much.”

“You can collect your papers from the front desk,” she said, “if you haven’t done this before, you’ll find a leaflet explaining how to execute the transfer and other useful tips. There’s no hurry, whenever you’re ready. Good luck.” She was gone and on to the next successful bidder whilst all the while the auction continued in full swing.

‘I need a drink,’ Freddy thought, rising shakily from the chair and making his way to the urns. That was when he noticed the large, dark-haired man. Freddy thought he looked drawn and deflated. He poured himself a coffee. The large man didn’t seem to be going anywhere and, rather to his surprise, Freddy felt sorry for him. He poured a second cup and went over.

“Here, I thought you might like this.”

“That’s kind of you,” the large man said taking the cup.

“I’m sorry,” Freddy went on, “but I suppose one of us had to lose.”

The large man smiled. He had a nice open face, Freddy thought, a kind face. He prided himself on his ability to sum people up quickly, a lesson he had learnt early on in his career. It was how he was able to gauge an

audience.

“You certainly wanted that number,” the large man said. “Tell me, what was so special about it?”

“It’s my family name,” said Freddy proudly, “Cassate. That’s why I had to have it. My parents were Italian, from Naples, you know.”

The large man looked him up and down with renewed interest. “It’s my family name, too,” he said.

They stared at each other, amazed that someone else had shared the same idea.

“What’s your first name?” the large man went on.

“Fred - ,” he caught himself just in time. This was something else he had to change. “Alfredo,” he went on, “Alfredo Cassate.” How good that sounded, after all those years. ‘Afredo Cassate’, he rolled his tongue around the vowels and consonants. Why on earth had he ever preferred Freddy Cass?

The large man extended a hand. “Giuseppe,” he said, “Guiseppe Cassate.” He said it with a real Italian accent. “Pleased to meet you, Alfredo.”

Freddy took the hand and shook it warmly. “I’m pleased to meet you, Giuseppe. Very pleased indeed. Tell me,” he hesitated, Italy was a big place. “I don’t suppose your parents come from Naples, did they?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.” Guissepe looked pleasantly surprised. “I went back there once when I was a child to meet the relatives. They were very hospitable. But I was born and grew up in South London, Streatham. There were lots of us there. More Cassates than Patels, we used to say.”

The two men laughed.

“You were fortunate,” said Freddy. “I grew up in Bethnal Green, just the three of us, my parents and me. There were other Italians around but none had the same name. Could we possibly be related?”

“Bethnal Green,” said Giuseppe, scratching his head. “My mother used to talk about a cousin who worked in the docks. We never knew him. Lived with a girl he’d brought over from Italy before the war. They weren’t married but there was a kid, a boy I think, about my age or a bit older.” He swallowed the last of his coffee. “My family wouldn’t have anything to do with them; all devout Catholics, you see. A pity, really. It couldn’t have been easy in those days. Rumour had it they were killed in the blitz.” He regarded Freddy intently. “That’s all I know, does it make any sense to you?”

“It might,” said Freddy. He was choking back tears and turned away on the pretext of disposing of his empty cup, swallowed hard and asked: “Listen, I was lucky to get the number plate, the least I can do is buy you a drink. How about it?”

“I’d be proud to drink with you, Alfredo,” said Giuseppe warmly. “Come on, and I’ll tell you a little more about my side of the family.”

The two men left Conference Block Four and made their way to the bar in the main house. It was early evening before he got back to his flat.

* * *

Alfredo didn’t bother to transfer the number to the Rover. Instead he had a local dealer make him up a plate which he’d mounted on the wall above his fireplace so that it was there for all the family to see when they came round. It was a great success as an ice-breaker and Alfredo was particularly pleased to see that Aldo, Giuseppe’s eldest, had been impressed. Besides, the Rover simply wasn’t good enough. He had in mind to have another browse through the newspapers to see if he could find a nice second-hand Alfa Romeo.

But that would have to wait until they all got back from Naples.

The Presentation

ALEX was successful, even if he said so himself. He was a successful advertising man. A wizard, a magician - that's how he liked his clients to think of him. And as for his agency, the company he had started with his cousin Victor only seven years ago, well, he had no doubt it could solve problems other agencies couldn't reach. Alex even thought in slogans. It was his nature. He loved it.

Alex McNulty was one of those chosen few born to his profession. Ever since he could remember he had been fascinated by advertisements. His parents, guardedly proud of his subsequent achievements and celebrity, would often tell friends and dinner guests that as a young child he'd watch television just waiting for the commercials to come on. He would become animated, fascinated by the little miniature dramas as they unfolded in fifteen or thirty seconds, only to get bored and fidgety again as he waited for the next commercial break. The family could only watch BBC after he had gone to bed. No ads, no family viewing - or else little Alex would make life a misery.

Now, as he stood in the brushed aluminium and glass reception area of his state-of-the-art Soho offices, he again surveyed the trophies and awards his agency had won glintingly displayed in cabinets recessed into the walls. He couldn't imagine a more fitting recognition of his genius, nor a more pertinent promise of what was in store for new clients when they chose McNulty, McNulty and Scott to handle their campaign. The few that didn't only had themselves to blame, he thought. He hated losing a pitch to a competing agency and his fury became directed not only towards them but also the client. He was the modern equivalent of a witch doctor sticking pins into an effigy, rejoicing in any setbacks that might subsequently befall the enemy. The consolation was that it seldom happened. In fact, for the last three years MM&S had topped the 'Campaign' league table for new business won. They weren't the biggest agency in town but they were certainly one of the most talked about and, as Alex frequently reminded his team, clients seldom wanted the biggest but always wanted the best.

"So, how's Evangeline today?" he asked the receptionist. He was pleased with this girl who he had personally selected eighteen months earlier to go with his newly designed foyer. Quite apart from looking like a photographic model, Evangeline knew how to blend in and complement her surroundings. She was the perfect finishing touch, Alex thought, the icing on the gingerbread, the fairy on the cake, the - well, okay, enough's enough. Today she was wearing a silver and grey outfit that revealed her shoulders and arms (probably her legs, too, but they were wasted under the desk. 'Should be more glass', Alex thought.) He leant casually against a brushed metal column. It was important for him never to look busy. There was nothing attractive about an important man constantly rushing from pillar to post. He left that kind of thing to his department heads and account executives. As CEO and Chairman of the company, Alex knew exactly what he had to do. Firstly, employ the hardest working and most talented people

in town and pay them more than they would get anywhere else. That way he could make otherwise impossible demands on their time and get the work of two people for the price of one and a half. Secondly, he and only he had to control precisely the image that MM&C enjoyed in the marketplace. Thirdly, he had to bring in and remain on top of the big ones - he was perfectly happy for his fellow directors to introduce new business, indeed, he encouraged them to do so, but the big fish had to be his. He had seen too many highly paid employees leave their jobs and set up on their own, poaching key clients from their former agency with promises of cheaper service and greater commitment. He had spent far too much valuable time in the past fighting court cases against former colleagues to rely on contracts and agreements not to compete.

Alex knew something else, too. It was only after the second or third year of running an account, by which time the client felt dependent, that he could start taking serious liberties with the invoicing. Play your cards right and the super-profits would come. But you had to hang on to the business to get there. If Alex had any misgivings about his agency's performance it was that they lost almost as many old clients as they got new ones. But that was inevitable and fortunately there weren't any league tables for losing accounts. Lastly, he had to make it all look easy. 'Cool' could have been invented for Alex McNulty. Okay, he hadn't created the word but he was 'cool's' greatest living ambassador.

Evangeline examined Alex from beneath her long lashes. "I'm doing fine, Mr McNulty, just fine, thank you." He marvelled again at how she managed to retain that exotic Afro-Caribbean undertone in her perfectly modulated Sloane delivery. She was quite extraordinary and they both knew precisely what they wanted from each other. Her role at the agency was crucial. The other receptionist, Joanna, a sassy Notting Hill girl, was equal to Evangeline in almost every way, but no match for her. Evangeline

had an elusive quality about her. That was why she got paid nearly double Joanna's salary and why Alex always wanted her on parade when there was some serious new business in the offing. Today was such a day and Joanna had been banished to the boardroom kitchen whilst Evangeline attended to the front desk. Just the way Alex liked it.

Evangeline got up and dusted a hair off Alex's lapel. "Our guests are expected at eleven, are they not?" she asked, "That's in thirty five minutes. The flowers will here in ten and I'm having fresh coffee brought out just before they are due. Is there anything else?"

"No. You know the routine better than anyone, Angel. You're the safest pair of hands I've ever had."

The girl smiled. She approved of the nickname which no-one else was allowed to use. "I presume we will be keeping them waiting for the usual ten minutes?" It was more of an answer than a question.

"Mm. Maybe a little less, this time," Alex replied, "it is a five million pound account, after all."

Evangeline smiled again. Alex wondered how a woman could be so captivating without being the least bit threatening. He was so lucky to have found her, not so long ago, working as a waitress in a city restaurant, looking stunning in little shorts and a tank top, her bleached hair braided and her delicate features accented by the lack of light. It was obvious to both of them she was far too good to be there. A week later she was installed at the agency. She needed no training, no introduction. By lunchtime she knew the names of everyone on the staff and their job titles; by teatime everyone knew her, even feared her a little. Just like Alex had been born to run an advertising agency so Evangeline was born to be Queen of their stunning reception area.

"Excellent," said Alex, "then I'll leave them in your wonderfully safe hands. Knock 'em dead, Angel. The full works, eh?"

“What else?” she said with barely a flutter of the eyelids.

Alex opened the smoked glass doors leading to the inner offices and made his way through the Research and Marketing department to a glass walled office at the rear of the building. He tapped tokenly on the door and went straight in. A pleasant looking red-haired man of about thirty looked up from a pile of computer print-outs on his desk.

“Morning AM,” he said, buttoning up his cuffs and reaching for a jacket hanging on a coat rack. “Just on my way,”

“Good, but there’s no rush, Rich. Got all the documents ready?”

“Done. In the boardroom waiting to be put out, eight copies. Powerpoint all present and correct, too.”

“Good. It’s important this one, no slip-ups, understood?”

“Understood. There’s some good work here, AM. The team has worked hard. We probably know more about their market than they do.”

“What makes you think they know anything about their market at all?” replied his boss drily, “You’ve got more respect for clients than I have!”

“We shall see,” answered the red-haired researcher.

“Indeed, indeed,” agreed his boss. “Sock it to ‘em, Rich. You’re on first so keep it lively, eh?”

Alex carried on down the corridor where a private lift served the upper floors from a back entrance. He took a keycard from his top pocket and slipped it into the electronic control pad. Only two people possessed keys to this elevator. The door slid open at his bidding and he touched the sensor for the fourth floor.

He stepped out of the lift directly into a large open plan room with glass-fronted offices along one wall. There were twenty or thirty desks arranged in separate stations, each equipped with a large flat-screened Apple Mac, their operators gazing at them intently. The person he was seeking was in a large office equipped with three TV monitors, three sofas and a small

boardroom style table. A large, long-haired man rose to greet him.

“Morning Philip,” said Alex warmly. Phil was his favourite guy, the agency’s celebrated Creative Director who, since the early days, had been responsible for devising (and selling) some of the agency’s best campaigns. A copywriter by training, certainly no artist, Phil was immensely likeable and had the knack of not only coming up with seemingly outrageous and off-the-wall ideas, but also motivating others around him to knock them into a shape where they worked. Contrary to industry folklore, Phil was a home-loving man with a devoted wife and three kids whom he adored. He had never had a spliff or snorted a line in his life. Alex loved him for his reliability as much as his creative genius, an unusual combination, which brought him a fabulous salary as well as a percentage of the agency’s year-end profits. Phil was as close to being indispensable as was possible at MM&S and, Alex thought for the thousandth time, how amazing it was that he didn’t seem to realise it.

“Big day, boss,” said Phil amiably. “They’re going to love the campaign, it looks great. Time for a quick look?”

“No need,” joked Alex. “I trust you, or didn’t you know?”

“Thanks, I’m sure,” replied the big man. “Any tricks of the trade I should know about?”

“Tricks? I can’t believe you said that! Why would we need tricks? They’ll be blown away by the quality of the work.” He glanced at his Lange and Sohne watch. “Okay, you’ll need to be up there in six minutes.”

“Right,” said Phil. “They’ll love it, believe me.”

Alex had one more call to make. This time he didn’t bother with the lift but sprinted up the single flight to the next floor. Here the layout was different: a plush carpeted corridor with solid oak doors down both sides. He stopped at the first door and knocked, not bothering to wait for a reply before entering. Tony Rodriguez, his Senior Account Director, had a foot

on the edge of his desk and was polishing his shoe. A tall, elegant man in his late thirties, with a shock of wavy black hair and smartly dressed in a dark striped suit, Rodriguez looked every inch the client's best friend and, indeed, spent much of his time out of the agency entertaining at major sporting and social events. He flashed an alarmingly white smile at his CEO who put an arm around his broad shoulders.

"Tony, you'll do the intros and the warm-up. Keep it sharp, efficient and to the point. Then introduce Rich. Keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn't overstay his welcome and get Phil on as soon as you can, he's confident the creative will sing for its supper and if Phil thinks it's good, it probably is. Okay? Any thoughts?"

"Yeah, just one, Pete. If we get this one I'd like to handle it - not just oversee it, actually run the account. I miss it, you know. I didn't come into this business to be a manager or a pimp, which is all I seem to do nowadays."

"Victim of your own success, my lad, you should be so sorry!"

"Pete, seriously, it's important - "

"We'll see, Tony, okay? Let's get the bloody account first, eh? Be up there in two, okay?"

"I won't let you down, you know that," said Tony disconsolately, slipping on his jacket and straightening his tie. "Here, we can go up together."

Pete stopped him. "No, I'll see you in there. One or two things I have to do first. Don't be surprised if I'm not there for the start. Make them welcome and, if necessary, go ahead without me."

Tony frowned. "But won't they be expecting - "

"You're in charge, alright?"

"Okay, alright. See you later then."

Alex had one more flight of stairs to contend with and he was on the top floor which housed two executive office suites, complete with bedrooms,

showers and a small kitchen, and the huge boardroom, equipped with every state-of-the-art presentation aid imaginable. He locked the door behind him and went through a door at the end of the room. Entering a small, darkly decorated anti room, he looked out through a large window onto the boardroom beyond. Rich was already there, placing copies of his research and marketing reports in front of every place. Joanna was polishing tumblers and putting finishing touches to the table. Ray, the boardroom technician, was checking his projection equipment linked to a small Mac laptop set at the far end of the table where Phil would be sitting. Six-foot wide images of the campaign flashed up on the screen.

Alex lifted a jacket and trousers off a hook behind the door and took them back to his office.

* * *

Jim Prebble had stopped counting the number of presentations he had sat through during his long career in sales and marketing. He had been headhunted by the Auriel Cinema Group plc as their Marketing Director twelve years earlier since when he had seen the film business go through two complete business cycles.

When he'd first arrived the company was hugely successful; attendances were good, there was a surfeit of popular films being made and customers were spending unprecedented amounts of money in the foyer. Without realising it, Jim had made the cardinal error of joining a company at the top of its game: things could only get worse and they did. Three years later everything was down, audiences, turnover and profits. Worst of all, the share price had slumped to an all-time low. Jim couldn't escape the firing line and, for he first time in his career, found himself with his back to the wall. His salvation was successfully persuading his board to spend substantially on above-the-line advertising, something the group had never done before. Desperate, and with their fingers crossed, the board had given

him the go-ahead. It was Jim's last chance saloon and he knew he had to find a brilliant agency to make it work.

More by luck than judgement he hit on JWT (in the days before Martin Sorrell) thanks to a casual meeting with Bruce, a talented young Group Account Director who happened to be a university friend of his son's. Bruce and the JWT team came up with a series of superb generic campaigns, which not only put Auriel back on the map in terms of public perception, but also attracted a younger age group to their cinemas in large numbers. Encouraged by this initial success Jim went on to recruit Wally Olins to re-design the group's corporate identity and, a year later, to conceive and oversee a complete refurbishment programme throughout the group's four hundred plus cinemas. Business peaked again and Jim's stock was flying high.

If he could have retired then he would have done. Unfortunately, an acrimonious divorce followed by some bad investments had knocked a hole in his finances and Jim had little choice but to carry on. Now in his late fifties, another job would not come easily, certainly not with the package of benefits he enjoyed at Auriel. He found himself with the unenviable task of having to refresh his company and his thinking all over again. The multiplex revolution, which had happened at just the right time to save his bacon before, was rapidly running out of steam, good films were harder to come by and, worst of all, the home entertainment business was hurting trade badly. The buggers just wouldn't go out anymore. Jim was in a fix and neither Bruce nor JWT could come up with anything that might remotely save the day. The old team was looking like a decidedly spent force.

Hence he had put the business out to a competitive pitch, seen twelve or more agencies for initial briefings and got it down to a shortlist of three plus, of course, JWT. For the last six weeks Jim and his team had spent many hours refining the briefs for the four remaining contenders who were now

expected to come up with their final, carefully considered proposals.

There was, of course, another element to all this that he preferred to keep to himself. Just as an ad agency is permitted to take credit in times of triumph, so it becomes the sacrificial lamb when things go downhill. The appointment of a new agency was an essential move not only commercially but politically and Jim was wily enough to see that. For the sake of appearances he would include JWT in the new round of presentations but he knew he would not, could not, under any circumstances allow them to retain the account.

MM&S had made the shortlist and were the last agency to present their ideas. Jim wondered if this was an advantage or not. True they had no-one to follow them, to eclipse their efforts. On the other hand, Jim and his team had already sat through three arduous presentations in the last three days and were feeling pretty jaded. Still, he had drawn the order fairly and squarely out of a hat so no-one could complain. The account was worth nearly five million pounds and the whole industry was awaiting the outcome with bated breath.

So far his dealings with MM&S had impressed him. Jim rather liked the cut of their jib. Their previous meeting had been at the Auriel headquarters and the team had seemed intelligent, hard-working and keen to grasp the nettle. Jim had made sure they'd been well-treated, made to feel at home and there was no question that Alex, the boss, was both impressive, charming and obviously keen to deliver. So, at the end of an exhausting process, Jim was rather looking forward to today.

He was not so sure about Maddie and young Roger. Maddie, the career advertising manager who he'd headhunted from a major food manufacturer five years earlier, had only ever worked with Bruce at JWT and had become very attached to them. She had made it clear she didn't want to move and would do everything she could to preserve the status quo. Of course, Jim

had assured her that JWT would have every chance of retaining the business - that was why he was including them in the process. But Maddie was long enough in the tooth to know how these things were done and had somehow managed to retain sufficient integrity not to like it. Poor Maddie. She had given her life to the business and, in the end, didn't seem to have been dealt a great hand.

Roger, the thirty-two-year old Marketing Manager was a different proposition altogether. Jim knew precisely where he stood. Roger was stuck on the client side of the industry when he made no secret of the fact he really wanted to be with an agency. No easy transition to make in your thirties; different cultures, different pay. The only way Roger might pull it off was to come to a 'silent' arrangement with one of the short-listed agencies. He would endeavour to sway the decision-making process and, in the event of 'his' agency winning, Roger would be offered a job with them, say, within eighteen months. Thanks to an eavesdropped telephone conversation and a stray e-mail, Jim knew what Roger was up to but didn't know with which agency. Still, that would become clear soon enough. He didn't care. Roger was eminently replaceable and having him at the new agency might actually be very helpful. He might even decide to accelerate the process himself. Whichever agency won.

The taxi pulled up outside the MM&S offices. He let Maddie and Roger get out first before paying the fare. They stood there looking at the exterior of the elegant building set in a pleasant square. Clearly the outfit had done well, he thought, rents around here weren't cheap. Good restaurants and lots of them within a few steps, too, yes, all things being equal, he could imagine himself dealing with these people.

"I've never liked Soho," said Maddie as if she had been reading his mind, "seamy, squalid area of London, if you ask me. I'd be frightened to get in a cab late at night around here."

Jim wondered if she was right. Advertising was an after hours game. Maybe he *would* be putting his staff at risk asking them to visit here. He looked around the square. The signage of some major international companies stared back at him.

“Nonsense,” he said, “look around you, do you think these companies would be here if you were right? Come on, Maddie, Soho hasn’t been like that for years!”

“Great area, if you ask me,” chipped in Roger, “count me in for some of this.”

“Let’s wait and see what they come up with,” said Jim. “We’ve seen some good stuff this week, they’ll have to go like a train to beat it. That’s what will decide it, not the location. Come on.”

Through two sets of glass doors and they were in the MM&S reception area. Jim noticed that the clock on the wall said five minutes past eleven. Perfect timing.

The gorgeous creature behind the modernist reception desk rose to greet them.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Evangeline and it is my pleasure to welcome you to McNulty, McNulty and Scott. May I take your coats?”

The visitors handed them their outer garments, which were speedily stored behind a sliding glass panel.

“Now, please make yourselves comfortable and I will let Mr McNulty know you have arrived.”

Jim and his two colleagues sank into low padded chairs whilst Evangeline telephoned upstairs. “Yes, Margaret, please tell Mr McNulty that Ms Symonds, Mr Prebble and Mr Kennedy are with me in reception. Thank you.” She turned to her guests, who were impressed that she had mastered their names, and smiled. “Mr McNulty welcomes you and asks if you be

kind enough to wait for a few minutes. May I get you a drink? I can offer you a selection of infusions or, if you prefer, I have chilled champagne ready to open.”

The guests looked at each other, uncertain and already a little wrong-footed.

“Maddie?” said Jim.

“Oh, er, a cup of Earl Grey would be nice - just a splash of milk, please.”

“Of course. Mr Prebble?”

Evangeline was now only inches away from him and Jim was pre-occupied more by her disturbingly musky scent than the question. He couldn't help looking to see if she was wearing a wedding ring. “Oh, er, thank you, yes, Earl Grey would be perfect.”

“Same here,” added Roger who seemed equally entranced by the nearest thing he had ever seen to Naomi Campbell.

“One minute, please,” said Evangeline sashaying towards a small anti-room.

Jim raised his eyebrows at Roger who was busily combing his hair. Maddie saw that Jim was adjusting his tie and brushing some stubborn dandruff from his shoulders.

“Why is it that some women have this effect on men?” she muttered.

“Work it out for yourself, Maddie,” Jim replied. He looked around him, his attention captured by the awards cabinets. “Nice isn't it?”

“Not as impressive as JWT,” Maddie responded quickly.

“Different,” observed Roger, “I prefer it. Less formal, not so intimidating. More up to date.”

Evangeline returned carrying an elegant contemporary silver tray on which she had arranged a stunning Villeroy & Boch tea set. She placed the tray carefully on the low table in front of them and poured the tea adding milk and sugar as required. Jim could not but help appreciate the cool

formality and exquisite taste of the ceremony. The whole experience was quite intoxicating. Even Maddie seemed to be succumbing to Evangeline's charms. The girl was fascinatingly beautiful, there was no question about that, and yet not sexual, not in any overt way that he could see. How clever, he thought, that they should choose a woman who would please both male and female clients without being a threat to either.

Jim sipped his tea appreciatively and began to relax, the scent of bergamot relaxing his senses, easing his apprehension. He looked at the wall clock. It was nearly fifteen minutes past the hour. He was about to ask whether the presentation team were ready for them when Angel's telephone emitted a quiet almost imperceptible hum. She picked up the wireless handset and gently replaced it.

"Mr Prebble, may I ask you to take the lift to the fourth floor where you will be met by one of our senior directors."

"Thank you," said Jim sipping the last of his tea and getting to his feet. The lift door slid open silently. "The tea was excellent."

"Miss Symonds, Mr Prebble, Mr Kennedy it has been my pleasure. I do hope you enjoy the presentation. Mr McNulty has asked me to arrange a car to take you back to your offices, I hope that will be convenient. I look forward to seeing you later."

The lift sped them quickly and silently to the fourth floor. Stepping out into the wide, carpeted corridor, they became aware of a solitary figure in uniform sitting outside a pair of panelled doors reading a copy of the Sun. As they took in this totally unexpected picture, a mobile telephone rang. The man took it from his pocket and answered.

"Hello. Yes, dear. No, I'm not busy. What, your Mum? Oh, really? Did she? I see. Well, well."

Jim found this rather irritating. Here they were, important potential clients attending a final presentation and they were being ignored whilst this,

this - idiot - spoke to his wife on the 'phone.

"Excuse me!" said Jim, but all the man did was wave his hand admonishingly, as if Jim was at fault for interrupting his conversation. Jim was exasperated and offended.

"Listen," he said forcefully, "we are visiting this agency for a presentation, the least you - " He got no further. Putting a hand over the 'phone, the man looked up.

"Can't you see I'm on the telephone?" he said crossly, "it's rude to interrupt, didn't you know? Just wait, will you." He put the 'phone back to his ear. "Sorry, love, there's a rude person here, interrupting. Now, what were you saying?"

As the man continued, Jim turned to Maddie. "I don't believe this, it's disgraceful. How can these people run a business like this? They don't deserve any customers. Unbelievable!"

Meanwhile the man's conversation was drawing to a close. "Right then, I'll be back in half an hour. See you, then. 'Bye, love you." He switched off the mobile deliberately and slowly, putting it back carefully in his pocket before even raising his eyes. He looked the three of them up and down. "So, what exactly can I do for you?"

Jim was almost jumping up and down with annoyance. "We are here for the presentation," he said angrily. "I've already told you that, you moron!"

The man appeared to be not in the least phased by the insult. "What you people never seem to realise," he said condescendingly, "is that other people have lives, too. Now, instead of taking it out on me, why don't you just go in and see if they're ready." He returned to reading the Sun.

"They bloody well better be ready!" said Jim.

Jim didn't quite know what to do, so, with a dismissive "tch!", he walked past the man and opened the double doors. "Come on," he said to the other two, "I think a few harsh words to our hosts might be in order."

Jim led his short procession into a small lobby. Joanna, looking smart and sexy in a short skirt and high heels, blonde hair loose and tumbling around her shoulders, was there to meet them.

“Do come straight through, please.” She opened a further pair of glass doors and ushered them in to a large oval shaped room containing a magnificent leather boardroom table around which were seated six people who all rose as their three guests hovered with Jo by the door. The smartest of them walked towards them, hand outstretched, a welcoming smile gracing his handsome features.

“Good morning,” he said, “I’m Tony Rodriguez, May I introduce you to the team?”

“Yes,” said Jim icily, “unless you intend to introduce me to that berk outside, I think I might hit him.”

Tony looked puzzled. “I’m sorry,” said Tony, “someone outside? You mean Joanna?”

“No, no,” said Jim, “not her, the idiot reading the Sun, the concierge or butler, or whatever he was supposed to be. He kept us waiting while he chatted on his mobile to his wife, girlfriend - I don’t know - it was very offensive, I can tell you. We nearly turned around and walked out.”

“I’m sorry,” said Tony, “but we don’t employ a concierge.” He looked around at his colleagues. “Does anyone know anything about this?” There was a shaking of heads around the table. “I’m sorry, I really am.” He turned to Joanna. “Jo, perhaps when you have taken orders for tea or drinks you could look into Mr Prebble’s complaint. In the meantime, Maddie, er, Roger - I’m sorry, I should have asked, are you okay with Christian names, it makes things far less formal, that’s if you don’t mind?”

Jim was aware that this was current protocol, although he had never quite got used to it, and realised that there was no possibility of standing on ceremony. Anyway, Roger took the matter into his own hands.

“Of course that’s okay,” he said taking Tony’s hand.

Soon everyone had greeted each other, chairs around the table were selected for the visitors, and everyone settled down. Jo went off with the coffee orders and Tony took the initiative. Jim was still bristling

“Well, we have done a lot of work since we last met, much of it building on the initial briefing. If I may I would like to ask our Head of Research, Richard, to give you a little background. Richard?”

Richard leant forward and opened a folder in front of him. He shuffled a mouse around and the screen at the end of the room sprung to life. A big ‘Auriel Cinemas’ logo appeared.

“Cutting to the chase, lady and gentlemen, we were puzzled as to why attendances were so badly down at Auriel outlets whereas your competitors seem to have weathered the storm far better.” A chart came up on the screen full of large oval and elliptical shapes representing market shares and demographics. “If I might refer to this chart which we have constructed from a combination of our own researched data combined with published industry information, you will see that, whilst Auriel was doing well in the first two quarters of last year, business began to fall away dramatically in the last quarter, a trend that has continued into this year. You will also observe that the competition, although suffering from the overall downward trend in the market, has shown a more consistent pattern. In short, Auriel is doing something wrong, the question is ‘what?’”

Jim was in no mood for this kind of argument. “We know we are doing something wrong,” he said caustically, “that’s why we are here. As I explained at some length at the briefing, it is clear that the message we have been getting across with our advertising has become tired and ineffective. I repeat, that’s why we are here.”

“Of course,” said Richard agreeably, “a fresh above the line message is a good idea, but, in our considered view, it’s not enough.”

Roger and Maddie both began to say something but Richard pressed on.

“Please, hear me out. We’ve spent a lot of time on this. We know that going to the cinema is no longer a casual outing, a cheap excursion in search of good entertainment not available elsewhere.”

“You’re right, we know that,” Roger interrupted. “We are well aware that people regard a visit to the cinema as an event nowadays, it’s the whole experience that counts, not just the film.”

“Exactly,” Richard went on, ‘the whole experience. Now, JWT picked this up very well in last year’s campaign - ,“ Large images of the JWT press ads appeared on the screen, “ - followed by a variation of the same theme this year.”

“Wait a minute,” said Maddie, “are you saying our existing advertising is good?”

“Frankly, yes,” Richard replied. “There’s not a lot wrong with it. What *is* wrong - and our research bears this out - is that the experience itself fails to live up to the promise of the ads.” Another chart appeared. “Look at this,” Richard went on, “customer satisfaction levels. See how patchy it is across the outlets. Some branches do okay, others really badly.”

“Nonsense,” said Jim, “the films are the same, so are the cinemas. We spent over fifteen million re-vamping all our multiplexes to make sure they are all exactly the same.”

Richard went back to his chart. “Look, the statistics don’t lie.” He flashed up another slide. “Here is the same research for your two major competitors. Look at the difference, a flatter pattern, totally different.”

Richard paused for a moment to allow the significance of what he had said to sink in. When he considered the timing to be most effective, he went on: “So, we knew that if we were to make a real contribution to your business, which is why you are here, we had to (a) find out what was causing this variation and (b) what could be done about it. “

Jim was getting edgy. “Alright, so what do you think is the cause of this ‘difference’?”

“Well, it clearly emerged that the problem is worse in some outlets than others. In fact, if you look at this slide, you’ll see another pattern coming through.” Another chart came up. “Notice that there appears to be a downturn in September and October and mostly in the large outlets, principally those in the major conurbations. There aren’t too many of them, but they represent a large percentage of your overall business.”

“I’m not sure I buy any of this,” said Jim, “but, carry on, let’s see where you are going.” He sat back in his chair. Being criticised like this was not something he enjoyed.

“Very well,” said Richard. “Now then - ,” He was interrupted by a cough from Tony.

“Thank you, Richard.” Tony leant forward and pressed his palms together in a gesture intended to convey sincerity and consideration. “I’d like to ask Philip, our creative director, to take over the story, if I may. Philip.”

Richard passed the mouse over to Philip disguising his disappointment. He thought things had been going pretty well.

Philip knew that he had to lighten things a touch. “Okay, then,” he said using the mouse to bypass a whole bunch of charts and statistics. “All of this research is in your folders so, please, study it at your leisure. Now, I’ve always thought a picture is worth a thousand words - although I hardly need to tell you that, do I?” There was a smile from Jim and Roger, who, like everyone else, could not help but warm to the big man. “Something is spoiling your customers’ enjoyment of your films so, rather than rely on our own deductions, I’m afraid we took a bit of a liberty. By this time I was as intrigued as Richard and his team as to where the problem lay and, on the basis that if you want to get to the root of a problem you start at ground level

and start digging, we sent some camera crews into your outlets.”

“You did what?” exclaimed Jim, “I don’t remember you asking my consent!”

“Sorry,” said Phil, “we didn’t ask permission for two reasons, firstly we didn’t think you’d give it and, secondly, we didn’t know what we were looking for. We took a chance, but it was worth it. Look.”

The screen now showed what looked very much like CCTV footage. A camera had obviously been placed in the foyer of an Auriel cinema and was showing a young couple approaching a male member of staff behind the ticket desk. The man was speaking on a mobile ‘phone. The conversation was clearly audible.

“Hello. Yes, dear. No, I’m not busy. What, your Mum? Oh, really? Did she? I see. Well, well.”

“Excuse me,” said the customer but the man behind the counter took no notice.

“Listen,” said the customer more forcefully, “we have to pick up our tickets, the programme starts in five minutes, the least you could - “ He got no further. Putting a hand over the mobile, the man looked up.

“Can’t you see I’m on my mobile?” he said crossly, “it’s rude to interrupt, didn’t you know? Just wait, will you.” He put the ‘phone back to his ear. “Sorry, love, there’s a rude person here, interrupting. Now, what were you saying?”

A shiver ran down Jim’s spine and he glanced at Maddie and Roger to see if they were sharing his discomfort. They obviously were. He turned his attention back to the screen.

The young couple at the ticket desk looked at each other disbelievingly. Meanwhile the man’s conversation was at last drawing to a close. “Right then, I’ll be back in half an hour. See you, then. ‘Bye, love you.” He switched off the mobile deliberately and slowly, putting it back carefully in

his pocket before even raising his eyes. He looked the two of them up and down. “Now what can I do for you?”

The young couple were clearly upset. The girl said: “May we have our tickets, please, only the film starts in a minute. You’re not being very helpful.”

The man appeared to be not in the least upset by the remark. “What you people never seem to realise,” he said condescendingly, “is that other people have lives, too. Now, instead of taking it out on me, why don’t you just go to the next counter, I’m busy.”

The young couple looked towards the next desk where there was a sizable queue. Silently, they joined the end of it.

The screen flickered and the picture on the screen reverted to the ‘Auriel Cinemas’ default slide. There was a stony silence in the boardroom.

“Would anyone like some more coffee?” said Philip, “this might be a good time for a break?”

* * *

Alex was watching all this through the one-way mirror. He had concluded after their first meeting that he did not like Jim Prebble. The man was vain, self-important and had been lucky to end up in his present sinecure of a job. Roger was a career prat with no talent, more ambition than ability and would almost certainly not be at Auriel in twelve months time. So far, so good. Alex was used to not liking clients. It didn’t matter whether you liked them or not, he told his subordinates, so long as you understand them. Then you could work with them, get them to do what you wanted, rather than letting them call the shots. Not that many of them did. The sort of clients that usually came to MM&S, companies like Auriel who were in serious difficulties without knowing why, were generally quite incapable of doing anything on their own. Mainly obsessed with holding down their jobs, most of their energy was sapped by internal battles and political manoeuvring,

with little left to apply their minds to the practical requirements of the jobs they were employed to do. This was rich territory for someone like Alex who could exploit these insecurities, prop up flagging egos and make himself indispensable in the process. To Alex, however, this was not the end but a means. Alex was driven by one thing and one thing only: to create great advertising and to do so he needed clients. It was an arrangement where both sides won.

The woman was a different matter. He couldn't quite fathom her. It was not often he met someone who was doing their job with integrity and skill. In her early forties, Maddie was not attractive physically, nor did she appear to be too concerned about it. With her dark-brown hair scragged back into a loose bun and wearing little make-up, this was not a woman who made any great effort to improve upon Nature. A good sign, Alex thought. To succeed in life an unattractive woman had to rely on ability and clearly Maddie was no fool. She said little, but what she did say was worth hearing. On the face of it Maddie had nothing going for her but Alex knew (because he had taken the trouble to find out) that she was highly respected in the industry. Good, he thought. The time may come when a little investment in Ms Maddie Symonds might deliver some unexpected dividends. She was important and his plan would not work unless he won her over.

Of course, Alex knew precisely what the problem was at Auriel. It hadn't taken very much time to find out. But it was a difficult one to crack. Ironically, there was only one person who could do that, namely Jim Prebble, himself. Alex's job was to help him succeed.

* * *

Philip had very nearly finished presenting the creative work. It had gone well, he thought. Based around the theme: "*Watch It Round at Ours*", the campaign was unashamedly aimed at the younger end of the market, focussing on the friendliness of Auriel's staff. The ads were fronted up by

well-known celebrities, who all endorsed what a friendly, happy experience it was to have a night out at your local Auriel cinema. As well as the press ads, there was a lavish TV campaign, each commercial featuring zany music and dance, building up to a lavish showbiz finale - one of Philip's specialities. It was good stuff and Phil knew it. He sat down to a ripple of applause from around the table.

Tony Rodriguez summed up. "There it is," he said, "what you have seen is the result of a great deal of work over the last three weeks. We believe the campaign you have seen today will achieve and surpass the objectives you set us. Namely, to restore the Auriel brand as undisputed market leader in the sector and, perhaps more importantly in the short term, generate new, profitable turnover quickly in order to reverse the decline in sales over the last eighteen months. In short, lady and gentlemen, we believe we have demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that MM&S is the right agency for Auriel - and I don't need to say it would be great to work with you. Now, before we break for lunch, do you have any questions?"

"Yes, I do," said Jim. "Where is Alex McNulty, I assumed he would be present?"

"My understanding is that Alex will be joining us for lunch," replied Tony - ." he looked at his watch, "which will be in about eight minutes time. Would anyone care for a drink?"

"One moment," said Maddie, "I have a question."

"Of course," said Tony.

"The basic tenet of your presentation seems to rely on the fact that we have friendly and helpful staff."

"Yes," said Tony.

"And yet you went to great lengths in the early part of the presentation to bring it home to us vividly that, in many instances, we don't. Are you

suggesting we advertise what you perceive to be a weakness as a strength?”

Tony looked to Philip for assistance. “That’s right,” said Philip confidently. “It’s a common enough technique. We use it all the time. Motor cars are a good example. When we see the prototype of a new car it invariably has something wrong with it, maybe some aspect of the body design which researches badly or, perhaps, a new shape disguising the fact that the engine design is twenty years old. In these cases we look to turn weakness into strength. The ugly boot becomes a trendy design feature, the old-fashioned engine becomes a piece of ‘classic’, well-proven engineering. It’s what we do. Now, in your case, for some reason better known to yourselves, you employ low calibre staff. We’re not claiming that we can do anything about that, but what we *can* do is state the opposite as often and as forcibly as we can. Eventually, the public will come to believe the message even though it may not be true.”

Maddie looked angry. “That’s awful,” she said, “and totally morally reprehensible! I would not wish to be party to such a travesty.”

There was an uneasy silence in the room. The double doors opened quietly and an immaculately dressed figure appeared and stood just inside the room. All eyes turned towards Alex.

“And nor would I,” he said. “Now, some lunch, I think. Please, follow me.”

* * *

Lunch was set up in Boardroom Two, a smaller but equally elegant room further down the corridor. Jo had laid out an exquisite buffet of small yet tantalisingly appetising items that could be easily eaten whilst enabling those present to carry on talking. The assembly had broken down into smaller groups. Roger was talking to Tony, Maddie to Richard and Jim had made his way over to Alex and Philip. Alex could see that Jim was not happy.

“Well, Mr McNulty,” said Jim, “I can’t say I’ve enjoyed the day very

much so far. You have a strange way of going about your business if I may say so.”

“We have a job to do, Mr Prebble,” replied Alex levelly. “Part of it is to make our clients feel comfortable, the rest is to make a difference to their turnover and profitability. We ‘go about that in the most effective way we can.”

“Which includes being offensive to your visitors, does it?” Jim was on his high horse now.

“No offence intended, Jim, none at all. The fact is Auriel have been taking on large numbers of cheap, unsuitable staff and then failing to train them properly. I don’t for a moment suggest that situation is down to you personally, however, it is having a dramatic effect on your side of the business. Quite simply, until your recruitment and training policy is addressed, you are wasting our time.”

Maddie must have overheard some of this and wandered over to join them.

The frankness of Alex’s response clearly caught Jim on the wrong foot. “But, why am I expected to take your word for it that we have a staff problem of such magnitude? Why shouldn’t falling attendances be due to a host of other factors?”

Alex looked Jim squarely in the eye. “Mr Prebble, you may not like what I am about to say but I will say it anyway. You’re right, Auriel has a number of problems and we can’t tackle all of them at once. We know from our research - and if you don’t believe it after everything you’ve seen today, I’m sorry - that your customers don’t enjoy going to your cinemas. It’s a ‘people’ thing and no amount of money spent on new interior design and refurbishment - or advertising - will put it right. The probability is that your staff aren’t functioning well because they don’t like working for you in the first place. Philip and his team have come up with an outstanding campaign

but, until something is done about the experience your customers get when they go to your cinemas for a night out, then all it will do is disappoint a large number of people who will see the ads and end up feeling let down.”

“So, what are you saying?” Maddie interjected.

“I’m saying that when Auriel has sorted out its staff problems and improved its product, then come back to us and we’ll be delighted to be appointed as your agency.”

“Are you saying you don’t *want* our account?” Jim was outraged.

“No, I was very careful not to say that,” replied Alex calmly. “What I’m saying is we don’t want it now. Get your house in order and then come back and see us again. We’ll still be here.”

“I see,” said Maddie cautiously. “that is an unusual approach, Mr McNulty.”

“I’m sorry,” said Alex. “These arrangements have to be mutually agreeable. I believe what I have suggested is for the best.”

Jim was at a loss for words. Eventually he said: “Roger, Maddie, we need to talk.” He turned to Alex. “I’ll speak to you in the morning. Good day.”

As the three clients left the room Alex called after them. “I look forward to it. I can order you a car or, if you prefer, you should be able to pick up a cab more or less immediately in the Square.”

With no more than a brief look back Jim said: “Don’t bother, we’ll pick up a cab.” He turned on his heel and left the room as imperiously as he could manage.

Alex turned to Jo. “Jo, ring down to Angel and tell her that our friends will be leaving the building in about - ,” he looked at his watch, “ - three minutes and taking a cab. Okay, everyone, the show’s over, let’s get back to work, shall we? We have clients who deserve us.”

* * *

Jim Prebble had seldom felt humiliated - apart from by his ex-wife, that is, who even Jim would confess in his private moments had made a pretty good fist of it. But, in business, certainly not. Even in his darkest hours, Jim had always held his head high, assumed the high ground. Remained in control. But not today. That stuck-up, arrogant, conceited bastard McNulty had swept the ground from beneath his feet. Jim had a way of dealing with agency presentations, honed to a fine art after years of practice. This was to manipulate the agency into a position of slavish awe, deriding their efforts in the face of his vast experience, playing the 'buyer's' card to the full, making them writhe and squeal, ensuring that each put-down was followed by just enough encouragement to make them feel all might not be lost and then, graciously, at the eleventh hour, to deign to grant them the business knowing that they had him and only him to thank and, that to keep their hard-won prize, they would have to bow and scrape to his every whim. This was Jim's power base, his empire; it was what made the rest of his dismal job worthwhile. Then, of course, there were the perks. He had once calculated that the tax-free 'benefits in kind' which resulted from the agency's generosity - the overseas photo shoots, the corporate hospitality, the gifts - added up to a tidy sum, effectively enhancing his salary by a further twenty to twenty five per cent. Today, at the hands of one man, the hateful Jim McNulty, all this had been demolished - and in front of his junior colleagues, too.

As they stepped onto the pavement outside the MM&S offices, a taxi appeared around the corner. Jim hailed it and the three of them got inside. Jim barked an instruction to the driver and they were on their way.

"Well," said Maddie cheerfully, "that was all rather impressive, wasn't it?"

Jim couldn't believe his ears.

"Impressive? What was impressive about it? They were bloody rude,

that's all! I can't remember ever being spoken to like that by a poxy agency. I tell you, they'll get our business over my dead body!"

Maddie seemed to take all this in her stride. "So, Jim, you feel personally insulted? That's a pity. I must tell you I wasn't optimistic about today. But, they changed my mind in there. Their research was spot on, the creative work excellent and - far from being insulting - Alex McNulty's remarks at the end were honest and, frankly, inspiring. He's right about the quality of our staff, you know that. It's not your fault, Jim, that's down to Gerry and his obsession with cutting costs. What McNulty said was true. If we don't get our house in order, then no amount of brilliant advertising will put things right. He doesn't want to take our money on such a cynical basis. He's thrown down the gauntlet, Jim, the question is are we brave enough to pick it up."

Jim wondered whether he had ever heard Maddie speak for so long all at once. He turned to Roger. "What do you think?" he asked.

"Arrogant, patronising and, possibly, over the top," the young man replied, "but, probably a pretty accurate assessment of where we are. Problem is how do we make the changes at our end that he's insisting on? How do we take on Gerry and persuade him to stop taking on cheap labour?"

"I can't believe you two," said Jim finally. "We employ an advertising agency to do as we tell them, not the other way round. Okay, putting our, er, 'pride' to one side, what do you suggest we do?"

Jim was wrong-footed again. Much to his surprise Maddie and Roger seemed to want to go with these people. Truthfully, he couldn't care less, but he was still bruised by the experience. His pride was hurt, certainly, but McNulty had also destroyed the order of things as Jim had always perceived it to be. Was it possible that this was a brave new world? There was no doubt that the MM&S presentation was by far the most impressive of the

three short-listed agencies but the wretched Alex McNulty had spoiled everything with his noble intervention at the eleventh hour. Why had he done that? Jim had never known an agency turn down a big account for purely altruistic reasons. What was the man playing at?

Maddie interrupted his reverie. “Well, firstly, do you think you can you get to grips with the staff problem? Will Gerry listen? If not, according to McNulty, we’re wasting our time.”

Roger joined in the act. “The presentation wasn’t perfect,” he said. “There are some things that need changing.”

“Such as?” prompted Jim.

For the next few minutes the three of them went through their concerns. For once, they were all agreed. The taxi was approaching the Auriel head office.

“Alright,” Jim said. “I’ll tell you what we’ll do. When we get in, we’ll list the changes we’ve discussed but we won’t tell McNulty and the team what they are. We’ll say there were elements in the presentation that need improving and offer them the chance to re-present in a couple of days. At the same time I’ll talk to Gerry. Okay, agreed?”

The other two nodded. It seemed fair enough. If MM&S were as clever as they thought then the second presentation would be better than the first. It was a test. Pass it and the account was theirs.

‘Fat chance,’ thought Jim.

* * *

Alex walked into Philip’s office brandishing a print out of Jim’s e-mail.

“They’ve asked us to re-present, Phil,” he said. “I think we should.”

“The big man blinked. “Alright, if you say so, boss, but there wasn’t a lot wrong with the work. What do they want altered?”

“They’re not telling us,” Alex replied, “look at this.”

The creative man read the e-mail. “It’s like taking a bloody eleven-plus,” he said. “There are things we’ve got wrong, but they’re not going to tell us what they are! What is this, a game?”

“Don’t worry,” said Alex, “Get the team together in an hour and we’ll go over the whole thing with a fine toothcomb. We’ll get there, don’t worry.”

* * *

Two days later they were all back in the boardroom. It was an exact replica of the first presentation. Everyone sat in the same places, except that this time Alex had assumed his position at the head of the table.

“Well,” said Alex amiably, “here we are again, Maddie, Roger, Jim - welcome back to MM&S. Now, we’ve been doing some thinking since you were last here and thank you for the opportunity to re-present. However, before I begin, I must ask whether you have made any progress with the matter of staff recruitment and training?”

“Mr McNulty, really, I am surprised you have opened up the meeting on this point. However, I can tell you that I have had extensive discussions with my colleague, Gerry Johanssen, our Head of Resources, and, after a tetchy start, he has agreed to a review of our staffing situation. Needless to say, he has to await approval from the board but he has gone so far as to assure me that, based on what I told him of your research, he is reasonably confident that he will get approval for the changes you have suggested. Now, may I suggest we address your revised presentation?”

Alex looked at Maddie. “Maddie, may I ask you, are you happy to proceed on that basis?”

“Yes, Mr McNulty, I am. Jim has involved me in the discussions with our HR people and I am reasonably confident that changes will come

about.”

“Good, thank you. It is important we have an understanding, I think.”

Jim was getting impatient. “Now, Alex, can we see your revisions, please?”

“Of course,” said Alex, “but I would like to say something first. We are not used to being tested in this way. We are not children and we are used to working with clients, not against them. However, we must presume that you have your reasons for going about matters in the way you have. Therefore, we have a condition of our own.”

“Oh, really - ,” began Jim.

“Hear him out, Jim, if you don’t mind,” Maddie interjected. “What is your condition, Mr McNulty?”

“It is very simple,” said Alex. He reached down beside his chair and produced a piece of white card and an envelope. “A little showbiz won’t do any harm now, will it?”

“Showbiz?” said Roger.

“That’s the business we’re in, isn’t it?” replied Alex. “Now, it’s very simple. You know what changes you are looking for - and we don’t, right?” Maddie and Roger nodded their assent. “What I would like you to do is to write down on this card the elements of our previous presentation you would like to see improved and anything else that concerns you. I will then put this card in this envelope, seal it and leave it over there on the side table until the end of our presentation. Then, we will open it and, if we have anticipated and answered your requirements accurately, you will award us the account. Is that fair?”

“I really must say, Mr McNulty this is all - ,” spluttered Jim.

“That seems very fair to me, Jim, what do you think Roger?” said Maddie.

“Fine,” replied the younger man, “I’m all for a quick decision, we need

to get going. Time is of the essence.”

Jim looked at his two colleagues. “Very well,” he said, “we will proceed on that basis. But no fudging, alright? We either get the campaign we want or we don’t, no half measures, do you understand?”

“Fine,” said Alex. He pushed the piece of card and the envelope across the table. “Now, please. Gentlemen, some privacy for our friends, we’ll turn our backs.”

Jim passed the magic marker to Maddie who started to scribble away. A minute or two later the card was in the envelope. Alex called Jo over and asked her to place it out of reach on the elegant side table.

“Very well. Philip, over to you.”

The big man flicked at the mouse and once again the screen lit up.

“I won’t bore you with the entire presentation. Instead I will concentrate on the elements which occurred to us as possibly needing rather more consideration.” He fast-forwarded the images until he came to the part where the celebrities endorsed the Auriel experience.

“On reflection,” said Philip, “there were a couple of elements in the commercial we felt could be improved. For example, although we like the theme of the ads, the choice of one or two of the celebrities may not exactly fit your profile. Looking at the ads again we weren’t happy about that. So, we have replaced them with younger, fresher faces.” He moved the images round on the screen to show the newly chosen celebrities. “Now, the music. Although from a purely creative perspective we love the thirties music, nevertheless it could be argued that it doesn’t fit your demographic. So we tried to find a way to get the same welcoming, family atmosphere idea across in a more contemporary way.” He ran the ad again with the sound up. All the original atmosphere was there except this time everything was set to a more insistent upbeat salsa score. Coupled with the new younger celebrities the effect was stunningly contemporary. “So, those are our two major

changes creatively.“ He turned to Tony Rodriguez, the Account Director. “Tony, over to you.”

“Jim, Maddie, Roger, I want to stress how important this account is to the whole team here,” beamed Tony who was looking particularly pleased with himself. “It is also very important to me, to the extent that I have managed to persuade Alex to let me handle the account myself on a day-to-day basis. If we’re going to embark upon this great adventure together, I want to be with you every step of the way. Believe me, you are not going to get stuck with a junior.”

Tony sat down. There was silence around the table. Alex looked up at his guests. “So,” he said, “we have sat your little examination, how have we done? Jo, the envelope, please.”

Jo picked up the envelope and handed it back to Maddie.

“Please, Maddie, at the risk of being theatrical, would you do us the honour of holding up that card for us all to see?”

Maddie tore open the envelope and removed the card. She held it up. There, written neatly in black magic marker were three numbered points:

- 1 *Need younger, fresher celebrities*
- 2 *More up-to-date music. 30’s music doesn’t fit image*
- 3 *Tony Rodriguez to personally handle the account.*

There was an audible intake of breath around the table followed by an outbreak of spontaneous applause. There was no doubting the genuine delight of the agency team. Tony and Philip were shaking hands, Richard looked admiringly at Alex, even Jo seemed genuinely thrilled. Maddie was beaming, got up from her chair and offered her hand to Alex.

“Congratulations, Alex,” she said warmly. “I really must compliment you on a brilliant presentation and if we needed proof that client and agency

were thinking along the same lines, you certainly provided it today. I really look forward to working with you.”

“Thank you, Maddie,” said Alex, ‘that goes for me, too. It has been a pleasure, I assure you.”

Jim was exhausted. “Very well, then,” he managed, “you win. Literally. The business is yours. Well done, everyone.”

“Good,” said Tony. “Then, if I may, could we arrange an appointment for tomorrow morning? We need to get a few formalities out of the way, contracts, for example, and then we can get going.”

“9am?” said Jim.

“Fine,” said Tony, “now, how about some lunch and a modest celebration? Alex will you join us?”

“If you’ll excuse me,” said Alex, “I’ll take a raincheck.” He turned to Maddie. “It’s my kid’s sports day and I promised I’d be there. So important to keep some sort of balance between work and family, don’t you think?”

Maddie positively glowed. “You’re a good man, Mr McNulty, and thank you for everything. It’s been an education, it really has. I look forward to working with you.”

* * *

Alex left the boardroom and walked along the softly carpeted corridor towards his suite but then carried on past it. He stopped outside a door, identical to his own, knocked lightly and let himself in.

Sitting on a sofa watching football on a giant plasma screen was a smaller, older man, with thinning grey hair and spectacles. Alex flopped down beside him, sinking into to the soft leather.

“So, tell me, how did it go?” said Victor.

“We got it,” said Alex.

“Good, good,” Victor replied. “We’re a good team, aren’t we?”

“A great team,” said Alex. “How about a drink, I’ve got nothing to do for the rest of the day.”

“Scotch, alright?” asked Victor getting up.

“Yup, perfect,” said his cousin.

Victor went over to a teak cocktail cabinet and poured the drinks.

“There was something I meant to mention earlier,” said Victor getting some ice out of the fridge.

“What’s that?” said Alex.

Victor handed him the drink and sat down beside him.

“Well, she’s done us wonderful service over the years,” said Victor, “but we’re going to have to think about replacing the old girl.”

“Do you think so?” Alex sipped the soft warm liquid, swirling it around his tongue and savouring the taste before swallowing. “That’s a shame, she’s done us proud. They don’t make ‘em like that anymore. What’s the problem?”

“What you’ve just said,” Victor replied, “it’s only a matter of time before someone notices she’s out of date. The new models look quite different.”

“You’re probably right,” said Alex. “what are we in for, do you think, thirty grand?”

“And the rest,” said Victor, “but worth every penny. Unless we get one second hand.”

Alex thought for a moment spinning the ice and amber liquid around in his glass.

“No,” he said eventually, “you’re right, it’s worth it. Anyway, we’ve just won a five million pound account - the least we can do is buy you a new bloody taxi! Cheers.”

“Cheers,” said Victor.

A Cat Called Pepper

THE first time the old man saw the little animal was when he looked out of the bedroom window early one evening and spotted a tiny bundle of brown fur scurrying around the corner of the house. Of course, his sight wasn't too good and the whole thing only lasted a second, so he couldn't be sure what kind of animal it might be. Besides, there were two cats already living in the house and it could have one of them. But, he didn't think so. However, in case he was mistaken and it turned out to be a squirrel or a rat, he did not mention it to his daughter when she brought him his supper. But he determined to keep an eye open.

When he saw the little creature again the next day, this time assisted by the bright morning sunlight as well as his own anticipation, he was certain it was a small cat and not one he had seen before. This time, confident in his powers of observation, he had no hesitation in reporting the sighting. Sally was surprised. Stray cats were not a frequent occurrence, especially as the house lay well back from the road and was surrounded by heath land. But any scepticism was quickly dispelled when, later that day, she discovered a

small, short-legged tabby cat of indeterminate age fast asleep on top of a pile of washing in the utility room.

With two cats already in the family, the cat flap was in constant use and it seemed that the little stray had encountered no difficulty in gaining entry - or exit, as she quickly found out; for, as soon as she approached the little animal, he leapt into the air and clattered out the way he'd come in. 'Maybe that's the last we'll see of him,' Sally thought. But she was wrong.

As the days went by the little chap - his gender obvious for all to see, much to the amusement of the children who had never come across an un-neutered male cat before - made daily appearances, even to the extent of sharing the other cat's food. Not that Pawsley and Basil seemed to mind. Like all domestic pets they were over fed and under exercised and quickly resigned themselves to parting with a share of their rations rather than expending unnecessary energy chasing him off. In fact, they seemed to enjoy his company. After all, the circumstances of his arrival must have been as just intriguing to them as to the rest of the family. Pepper had made up his mind to adopt them, and was giving them little choice but to reciprocate.

With the other cats already named after herbs, the name 'Pepper' sprang to mind. So, Pepper it was. There were now three cats in the household, the only noticeable difference being that Pepper was terrified of human contact. Any attempt to stroke or pet him, let alone pick him up, was met with instant flight, although not once did he scratch or bite despite the obvious panic in his eyes. In fact, the family learned to respect Pepper's wishes, avoided touching him, and were rewarded with an endearing and grateful new friend.

Not long after his arrival, Pepper was in his usual spot within striking distance of the cat flap, when Jim passed through with a large plastic sack full of rubbish. Pepper fled and wasn't seen for the rest of the day. Jim

wondered why, until it happened again a day or so later, this time when one of the girls was unwrapping a dress from 'Next'.

"It's the plastic bags," Sally remarked, "the poor little fellow is frightened of plastic bags." And so the theory emerged: that someone had dumped a kitten on the heath, leaving it to suffocate in a plastic bag

"Just imagine," Sally said, "what it would have been like for him. He must have scratched and torn himself out, wandered around for who knows how long and then discovered us."

"Paradise found," Jim chuckled, "a nice big house, some friendly cats already in residence and more warmth and food than he could have dared hope for!"

"Well, good luck to him," said Sally, "everyone deserves a lucky break, even an abandoned cat."

As summer turned into autumn and the air became chilly, the old man died having never met his little protégé. Pepper had been too frightened to be taken to his room and the old man was too frail to make the journey to the other end of the house. His granddaughters had kept him in touch with Pepper's progress with daily bulletins and reports and not a day had passed when he didn't eagerly await the latest news. His imagination, vivid until the end, had filled in the rest.

Soon, Christmas was upon them. Amidst the sadness, Jenny, the youngest of the three girls, raised the matter of a suitable present. Although she loved Pepper, she explained, he wasn't like a proper cat to be cuddled and nuzzled, petted and even, occasionally, taken to bed. And, anyway, she wanted a cat of her own. Please.

Jim knew of a friend in the village who was looking for a home for a kitten and so it was that, on Christmas Eve, Rosie arrived. Jenny was thrilled. It was hard to imagine a cat less like Pepper. Not only was Rosie female, she was unmistakably an aristocrat amongst cats. She took to her new home on

her terms, which no-one, human or feline, even thought to question. She was quite irresistible and, as the months went by, it became obvious that Rosie was growing into a great beauty with long, fine silver grey fur and a haughty, dismissive manner.

Her effect on the other cats was dramatic. Pawsley and Basil cow-towed to her every whim, whilst Pepper...well, Pepper was smitten. It was love at first sight. Needless to say, he received no encouragement: he was quite simply not of a calibre socially or physically to even catch Rosie's eye. Besides, she was in the equivalent of her teens and was spending increasing periods of time away from home.

Seeing the obvious danger, Sally and Jim considered taking Rosie to the vet but couldn't quite bring themselves to do it.

"It doesn't feel right," mused Sally. "She's so self-contained, so independent, that even though we are providing the roof over her head, she doesn't belong to us."

Jim thought hard about it. "Or anyone else, for that matter. Rosie is a law unto herself. It's true; we don't have the right to interfere."

Meanwhile Pepper was spending as much time as he could with Rosie. On the occasions she deigned to be at home, he would follow her around, keeping her company, making way for her at mealtimes and generally looking out for her every need. When she was away, he waited for her to come back. Many were the nights when Sally or Jim would lock up, switch off the lights and go to bed knowing that Pepper was engaged in his vigil, sitting outside the back door waiting patiently for Rosie to return.

It was Sally who first noticed that Rosie was pregnant although she was probably no more than a year old herself. Pepper became increasingly attentive as the weeks went by and by the time the births were imminent, never left her side. Eventually, Rosie decided on a suitable place and, late one winter's night, settled down in the warmth of the airing cupboard, tight

against the hot water tank, Pepper snuggled up beside her. It was a touching sight and Sally reached down to stroke him, forgetting for a moment that this might disturb the scene. To her great surprise he remained still and, hardly believing her ears, Sally heard a faint rumbling sound she had never heard before. Pepper was purring.

“I do hope those kittens are his,” she said to Jim as she got into bed, “he’ll be heartbroken if they’re not.”

The following morning Sally’s question was answered. There, nestling against Rosie’s immaculate tummy, were five tiny grey kittens and a tabby one, all with short legs. Pepper positively beamed as he helped Rosie lick them clean.

For two days Rosie and Pepper worked together, sharing the task of bringing up their young family. Then things changed. Rosie’s unsettled nature re-asserted itself and, on the third night, she disappeared. Pepper stayed with the kittens until she came home late the following morning having been who knows where. Only then did he permit himself a brief trip into the garden.

As time passed the pattern became set. Rosie was to be an absentee mother and Pepper a stay-at-home dad. Rosie would appear from time to time but showed only cursory interest in her family. However, although her visits became less frequent and of shorter duration, Pepper lost none of his fondness for her, ever keen to show her the progress the clever kittens were making under his tutelage.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” remarked Sally as she warmed some more milk for the kittens, “it’s as if Pepper knows exactly what to do.”

And so it seemed. Pepper was making an excellent job of fatherhood and was relaxed and happy in the task. So happy, in fact, that, deprived of Rosie to pet and fawn over, Jenny began to adopt him as her ‘special’ cat. And as Pepper learned the meaning of trust from his kittens, so he was able to

bestow the same trust in Jenny. Gone was the fear in his eyes, the frantic attempts at escape. Instead, he allowed himself to be stroked, cuddled and carried. Jenny had her pet at last.

Ten weeks went by and the kittens had grown into young cats. By now they were perfectly capable of playing on their own, often outside, whilst Pepper sat nearby watching them with pride, only intervening with a light cuff of the paw when they got into a fight or wandered beyond bounds.

Sally and Jim were troubled. With three cats of their own to look after, plus the nomadic Rosie, good homes for the new kittens had already been located and the prospective owners had expected to collect them by now. The girls had pressed to keep the little tabby but knew in their hearts he had to go, too. It was a heartbreaking decision and it was left to Sally to make the telephone calls.

The following day a neighbour arrived to take two of the long-haired silver kittens away. Sally knew she was a cat lover with children of her own and would take good care of them. As usual Pepper was in attendance - although whether or not he knew what was going on was questionable. Sally suspected that, on past performance, he probably did so she made sure he was fully involved in their departure. As their new owner drove happily away, Pepper stood alongside Sally at the front door watching them go. The following day the same thing happened and by the end of the week the little tabby, Pepper's look-alike, now christened Pepperoni, had gone, too.

The dynamics in the household changed again. Rosie's visits were now so rare as to be insulting and, finally, she disappeared for good. Pepper gradually withdrew back into himself and reverted to his fearful ways. His sorties beyond the boundaries of the garden were few and far between and, to their knowledge, he never showed any interest in another female. It was as though the events of the last six months had been erased from his memory.

Another year was to go by before Jenny noticed that something was wrong. Although the halcyon days of her relationship with Pepper were over, he still permitted her to stroke him sometimes and that was when she noticed a swelling under his stomach. Alarmed, Sally and Jenny took him to the vet who did some tests. Throughout all this the little cat put up no resistance, submitting to the experience bravely and knowingly.

The news was not good, the vet said. He would be alright for a month or so, but as the illness progressed he would suffer increasing pain and would lose his appetite. Then, perhaps, it would be wise to make another appointment. There was nothing more that could be done.

The family watched as the little cat gradually deteriorated. Sadness descended over the household and even Pawsley and Basil became melancholy. Not once did Pepper complain nor indicate that he was in any distress, but, as the vet predicted, he soon lost his taste for food and grew thin and weak. Walking became precarious and he was reduced to lying down for hours on end.

Sally knew what had to be done and, over dinner one evening, explained to the girls that it would be a kindness to put him out of his misery. Tearfully, the girls agreed and it was decided that an appointment would be made for the following day. Jenny would go, too.

Again, Pepper allowed himself to be taken on the short journey without protest and as Sally carried him into the vet's room he rested affectionately in her arms. The vet agreed to administer the injection with Sally still holding him and, as the needle was inserted into his side, Sally heard the uncommon rumbling again. Pepper was purring again, content in the knowledge that his job was done.

* * *

“What do you think we can learn from Pepper’s story?” Jenny asked her children as she came to the end. They’d heard it a dozen times but still wanted to hear it.

“That animals have feelings?” suggested the little boy.

“That every life has a purpose?” said his older sister.

Jenny thought back to her own childhood and wondered what it was about Pepper that had made such an impression. It was a long time ago and much water had passed under the bridge. She couldn’t be sure if her recollection had become distorted; whether something quite run-of-the-mill had blossomed into family folklore. She reminded herself that Pepper’s short life had coincided with her grandfather’s death, when the family was already in a state of heightened emotion and unusually prone to sentimentality. But, if her own childish memories were unreliable, the same could not be said about her mother’s. Sally still remembered every detail as if it were yesterday.

As she tucked them in, she knew her children would draw their own lessons from what to them would only ever be a fairy tale. But fairy tales were important, she thought. She kissed them goodnight, wished them sweet dreams and closed the bedroom door quietly.

“They wanted to hear all about Pepper again,” she told her mother. There was still some sunlight filtering into the room.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Sally answered. “Hardly a day goes by without me thinking about him.”

Sally reflected on this before asking: “Why is that, Mum, after all these years? I mean, he was only a cat.”

“You know, I never saw it like that,” said Sally tiredly, looking out at the garden. “We used to talk about it. You’ve forgotten.”

“What, Mum?” Jenny asked.

“That we can all be inspired by a noble spirit, even if for a brief moment

in time it happens to be residing in the body of a cat.” Jenny noticed her mother’s eyes moistening. “Does that sound silly?”

“No, Mum, it doesn’t sound silly,” Jenny answered, kissing her forehead. “But, life can be so unfair, can’t it?”

The older woman lay back against the pillows. “You know, your grandfather wasn’t afraid and neither am I.” She smiled contentedly. “Now, be a darling and fetch my supper and don’t worry about me. I love lying here looking out of the window.”

The Joker

THE party was in full swing. As houses in Camden went, the Wright's was fairly modest; one of those smallish, terraced brick-built Edwardian 'three-up three-downs' that seemed to sprout like mushrooms all over the country at the peak of the Empire. Now, bedecked in white and cream with grey internal surfaces and fabrics teamed with inexpensive Conran and Ikea furnishings, it had been given a new lease of life by its upwardly mobile young owners.

Ostensibly the party was for the two Wright offspring, Claire and Nancy, one and two respectively, born a year and a day apart and destined to share birthday parties for the rest of their lives. Jean, their Mum, had laid on a typical kid's do earlier in the day and it had been husband John's idea to invite the parents round in the evening. Not all of them had accepted, of course. Eight couples had turned up, plus, needless to say, a sprinkling of single mums and the odd, solitary bloke. Some they didn't even know. Others had managed to arrange baby sitters, or simply brought their children with them and settled them upstairs in cots and corners for the

duration. No guesses for working out the principal topic of conversation amongst the girls. The men, as always, had other ideas, seeking out easy subjects designed to break the ice and establish their maleness at the same time. Football being a good example.

It was six-thirty and Jean was busy serving white wine and canapés, wondering whether she shouldn't have laid on something more substantial. She was worried her guests might treat her carefully selected titbits as a starter and then leave early to go for a curry. It was obvious that some of the men were still in their suits, straight from the office.

She made her way across to John who was embroiled in conversation with Matt, their next door neighbour, a regular visitor who enjoyed watching rugby on the Wright's 52" Plasma TV and drinking Mexican beer with John.

She tugged at his sleeve. "Can I have a quick word?" she said.

"Excuse me for a moment," said John, "duty calls."

Jean took him to one side. "I'm worried there isn't enough food," she whispered, "they'll all go unless I feed them enough, what do you think?"

"I don't think it matters." John wanted to get back to his conversation. "If some of them want to go, that's okay. Those who want to stay will stay."

"You're a fat lot of help. Look, why don't you ring the Chinese, get some take away delivered? They'll like that."

"Too messy," John replied, "look, this carpet's really taking a bashing, I told you cream was a bad idea. Kentucky Fried Chicken would be better."

"I'm not serving that!" said Jean fiercely.

"Well, then, why not just leave it?" John continued philosophically. "What will be, will be." He turned on his heel and went back to talk to Matt about England's chances in the World Cup. Jean was fretting. The only thing to do was to magic up some food from somewhere. The freezer, of course! Pizzas, pies, sausage rolls - there must be something there. She

rushed to the kitchen and bumped into Matt's wife, Kate.

"You're in a hurry," said Kate holding her paper plate and wine aloft. All this did, Jean thought, was accentuate her large breasts, already on generous display. She squeezed past them. Embarrassing.

"Just going to heat up something more substantial," she said merrily, aware that she was flustered and pink. "Some of those men look as if they haven't eaten anything since breakfast."

"Very kind, I'm sure," said Kate sidling up to one of the dads to ask whether he was hungry.

There was a small group of guests in the kitchen, where John had left the wine. They wouldn't want any food, Jean thought, as long as they had something to drink. She needed to get to the back door.

"Excuse me," she said to a good-looking man in his late twenties.

"Don't think we've met," he said. "I'm Chris, - er, Charley's father?"

"Oh yes, Charley, of course," Jean replied. She couldn't quite place Charlie but that didn't surprise her; there were so many kids. "He's asleep upstairs isn't he? Is your wife here?"

"No, she couldn't come. She's at college on Fridays. But she's cool about me coming with Charlie, really."

"Have you been up to check he's alright?"

"Yup, just a couple of minutes ago. Fast asleep. Sounds like Thomas the Tank Engine. What is it that two year-olds have up their noses, they all seem to suffer from total nasal blockage?" He smiled at her and she smiled back.

"It must be boys, then," she replied, "my girls are fine."

"Ah, but then girls cry more, don't they? More sleepless nights? Or so I've been told."

"I couldn't say," Jean said, "but I'm not complaining." She was aware that she was on the verge of flirting with him and he was blocking her way to

the back door. "Can I just get by, do you think, I need to get to the shed - the freezer, sorry."

"I'm sorry, here let me come with you, I'll give you a hand." He leant down and opened the door. "After you."

"Really, you don't need to, I'm just hoping I've got some pizzas or something I can heat up quickly - ." But he was already beside her, standing by the shed door. She opened it and they went in. "It's a bit of a mess, sorry," she mumbled, surveying the jumble in front of them.

The freezer was easy to access although she still had to remove some wellingtons and a pile of newspapers and magazines from the lid. "It's only an old chest freezer," she explained apologetically, "my mother was going to throw it away. But it's been very good." She opened the lid and peered in. "Now, let's see what's in here." She started to rummage around. The freezer was only half full, so it didn't take long to find what she wanted. She pulled out a box of pizzas encrusted with ice. Another one quickly followed.

"Here, let me take that, you'll freeze your fingers off," he said taking the boxes. "God, you've got enough here to feed an army."

They went back into the kitchen. Chris was hovering and it was beginning to make her feel uneasy. "Thanks for your help," she said turning her back on him and heading towards the microwave. Thaw them out for a few minutes, she thought, then pop them into a high oven. Fifteen, twenty minutes, max. She set the micro and the oven and turned back to face the room. Chris was still there.

"I spent ten minutes inside a freezer once," he said.

Jean stopped dead in her tracks. "You did *what?*" she said incredulously.

"It was for a bet. Someone offered me £100 to lie in a freezer for ten minutes. I won ."

“Then you must have been mad,” Jean responded horrified. “You could have frozen to death!”

“No,” said Chris, chuckling, “not me, I’ve got inner tubes!”

“Inner tubes?” She shook her head in disbelief. “You *are* mad.”

“I’ll show you, if you like,” said Chris.

“What, for a hundred pounds?” Jean asked.

“No, I’ll do it for nothing, just for the entertainment value. It’ll be alright, you’ll see.”

“Don’t you dare!” said Jean, “and keep away from that freezer, do you hear? Now, out of my way, I’ve got hungry men to feed.”

“If you prefer, I could drink a bottle of Tabasco,” said Chris.

“Stop it, will you?” Jean was beginning to get cross, “I’ve got things to do - listen, go and take your testosterone out on someone else.”

She turned her back on him just as the familiar ‘ping’ from the micro told her the pizzas were ready to transfer to the oven. Task accomplished, she made her way back to John in the front room.

“You’re looking flustered,” he said breaking into his conversation with Paul, another neighbour.

“Just that we seem to have some funny guests.” She paused wondering whether or not to go any further with this. “There’s a chap in the kitchen who does domestic dares for money.”

“Dares, what, who?” said John looking around.

“What’s a ‘domestic dare’?” asked Paul, attempting to stay in the conversation.

“Look, it’s not important,” said Jean realising that her remark had aroused more interest than she would have wished. “It’s a guy called Chris, his son Charley’s asleep upstairs. He was telling me he’s done one or two unusual party tricks in the past. It doesn’t matter, he probably wasn’t being serious.”

“What sort of party tricks,” Paul persisted, “magic, that sort of thing?”

“Not really,” said Jean. “Look, it’s not important.” She turned to John and said brightly: “Darling, will you give me a hand in the kitchen, I’ve got some pizzas in the oven and we need plates and cutlery out. Maybe people’s drinks need re-filling?”

John looked around him. “Okay, but generally I think they’re helping themselves. When will the food be ready?”

“About ten minutes,” Jean answered.

“Alright, so there’s no rush. Tell us more, what sort of ‘party tricks?’”

“Oh, just, silly things,” she paused, “like he said he once lay in a freezer for ten minutes for a hundred pounds.”

“Ten minutes? That’s a hell of a long time. Wouldn’t have thought that was a very good idea. Still, good luck to him.” John turned to Paul. “We could have a whip round - if we all put in it would be less than a tenner each, what do you think?”

“I’m in,” said Paul putting a ten pound note in a nearby empty vase. “I’m sure the other chaps will be up for it. Let’s go and ask him, what was his name, Chris?”

“No!” Jean shouted. “No-one’s going to commit suicide in my house! Now, please, leave it. I wish I hadn’t mentioned it.”

“Come on, darling, the guy knows what he’s doing - he’s done it before, he told you so, probably makes a living at it!”

There was a mild guffaw as one or two of the other men sussed out what was going on and dropped their tenners on top of Paul’s.

“What was that I heard about a freezer and some kind of bet?” said Matt joining the group. “I’m in,” he rummaged in his back pocket, “a tenner, did someone say?” Soon the bowl was brimming.

“No,” exclaimed Jean, “this is ridiculous! I can’t believe you’re doing this!” She turned to Kate. “Tell them, please, not to even think about it.”

“It’s a bit of fun,” said Matt. “We’ve all done things like that. You girls don’t know half of what we get up to. I remember on tour we had people jumping out of first floor windows for a fiver - and playing the next day. I remember...”

“I don’t want to know what Rugby players get up to!” said Jean putting her hands over her ears. “Now, I’m going to get the pizzas out of the oven and I would be most grateful if you’d all just leave it.”

“She who must be obeyed,” said John with sarcasm. The other men nodded sympathetically. Jean turned angrily to John.

“Listen, what you idiots get up to when we girls aren’t around is your business. But, in case you’d forgotten, this is my house, too, and I have no intention of turning it into a gambling den where people risk their lives! Now, please, do me a favour, grow up, will you?”

She turned on her heel and made her way back to the kitchen where other guests were still mingling around the kitchen table, doubling as the bar. Chris was where she had left him chatting happily to one of the other dads, Simon.

“Hi, Jean,” said Simon. “Must say we have some interesting neighbours. I hadn’t met Chris before, fascinating guy, has he told you about his exploits? Amazing! Must say I wouldn’t want to gulp down a bottle of Tabasco. Have you got any by the way?”

“If I had I wouldn’t tell you,” said Jean, making no attempt to conceal her exasperation.

“Here, I’ve found some, it was on the top shelf,” came a voice from the other side of the kitchen.

Jean saw that it was Cindy, the baby-sitter, a single girl from further down the road. “Cindy, what are you doing?” she said, pushing past the others and snatching the little orange bottle back. “Why are you going through my cupboards?”

“Sorry, I’m sure,” Cindy replied sulkily, “it’s just that I remembered where you kept your herbs and spices.”

Chris was watching all this with a half-amused smile on his lips. “Look,” he said, “I really didn’t mean to cause a fuss, please, I don’t want people falling out over something I’ve said. I’m sorry, Jean, I really am.”

“Well, it’s too late now,” Jean replied frostily, “the damage is done. Really, you ought to think twice before bragging about your stupid antics at other people’s parties.”

“I wasn’t bragging!” Chris replied indignantly. “If I hadn’t seen your chest freezer, the subject would never have arisen!”

“You couldn’t wait to tell me about - “ She stopped in mid-sentence. “Oh, what’s the point? Look, there are people here - and my husband is one of them - who can’t wait to have a flutter on whether or not you can stay in a freezer for ten minutes or - or freeze to death, presumably! If you’re really sorry then promise me that you won’t do it, not for all the money in China. Promise me, right?”

Chris hesitated, then smiled. “Done, I promise I won’t get in a freezer, not tonight, anyway. There. Happy now?”

“Thank you. Good. Well, let’s hope that’s the end of it, then.” She turned back to the oven. “Now, time to check whether the pizzas are ready.”

The party quietened down as the pizzas were gobbled up. Jean noticed with some satisfaction that nearly everyone had stayed after all. Her theory had been vindicated, she thought, as she moved amongst them refilling wineglasses. Kate sidled up to her.

“Pity you took such a firm line with our joker,” she said accusingly. “He’s rather attractive. I’d have liked to have seen him up to his tricks. Who is he by the way?”

“Charley’s dad,” Jean answered, “he’s two and asleep upstairs.”

“Em,” Kate replied with a glint in her eye. “Pity all the nice ones are married.” She turned on her heel and was soon perched on the nearest male’s knee. Jean carried on circulating, glancing at the bowl stuffed with ten-pound notes on the sideboard as she passed by.

It was a good hour later, as the party began to wind down and the guests began to leave, that things took a new twist. Paul was the first to say something.

“What happened to my tenner?” he asked Jean. “I presume you took the notes and put them somewhere safe when you called the bet off?”

“No,” Jean replied, “they were still in the vase last time I saw them. I’ll ask John.”

“I’ve not shifted them,” John told her. “I noticed they weren’t there half an hour ago and assumed you’d put them in a draw or something. Shit, there must have been a hundred quid in there.”

“Where’s wonderman?” asked Matt.

Jean had a quick look round. Chris was nowhere to be seen.

“Funny,” she said to the others, “I’m sure I would have seen him leaving with Charley.”

“Oh well,” said Paul, “it could have been worse. Cheeky bugger. Still, it’s only a tenner each.”

* * *

Chris drove away happily. He always tried to leave discreetly well before the end. That way, it gave him a head start should anyone put two and two together. Not that they usually bothered; ten quid wasn’t much to lose these days, but it soon added up.

They nearly always fell for it, he thought. True, he had stayed in a freezer for a couple of minutes once, but that was nearly two years ago.

Never again. He might have died - far easier to take the money without taking the risk.

He was particularly pleased with 'Charley'. Just a figment of his imagination, of course, but the women seemed to have fallen for it. Why should a single father be considered more trustworthy than a single man, he wondered?

He turned to the woman by his side.

"How did you get on," he asked.

"Some nice jewellery," she replied. "and some cash, could be worth another thousand or so. Had a good look around when I went to see if 'Charley' was alright. The rest of them were so tied up with your party tricks I had the upstairs to myself."

"Great, bloody well done," said Chris. "They won't even find anything else missing til the morning. They never do. Now we need to get you some more babysitting jobs a few miles from here."

"Already done," replied the woman. "There's a little boy in Islington who's got a friend who's five next Monday, the party starts at six."