

Foreword

A while after I retired – and much more at a loose end than I ever imagined I would be - I decided to do something more useful than play chess online and feed a constantly hungry and whiney cat - and something more socially useful than my career in insurance administration had been – so I volunteered as a hospital visitor. Having suffered from a serious bout of depression in my youth, I felt drawn to offer my services and cheerful face to the mental health wing of the County Hospital. That is where I got to know – but only gradually - Jack McDonald. He was a complicated case – silent for days on end, contemplating the wall, as if “watching” there the scenes which undoubtedly troubled him – and other times talkative, effusive even. He was, I suppose, a classic example of bipolar disorder; in that he was creative (as you will soon see) - but the factor which did not quite fit the diagnosis was his ghostly companion *Him* with whom, he insisted, he conversed at length and who was invisible and inaudible to everyone but himself. Sometimes, about to rap his door, I could hear him arguing with *Him*, so waited until he fell silent.

Whenever he was in the mood to speak to me he told me that *He* had gone for a walk, for a drink, to report to his boss....and so he was relieved to chat with someone (me) from the “real world”. This was a tacit admission that *He* was an illusion but I never had the courage to point this out to him. He told me how much of a liar and a rascal he had been his whole life long, but never went into detail even though I gently suggested that this might be therapeutic.

When the pain in his head got too bad he would rummage through his cardboard box and put on one of his classical CDs. This collection he promised would be mine when *He* decided that it was time for him “to go over”. He mentioned that he wrote poetry and “other stuff” but was never inclined to show me any. A sad case.

Anyway, one day I arrived to find a police officer standing bored outside his door. Mr McDonald, he confided, had been found dead with his wrists slashed. Interviewed by a detective, I was shown the note which mentioned me by name.

Jonathan - I'm out of Purgatory on this side and it's my time to go Over at last. Help yourself to my music. Cheers!

Unable to explain this to the police, I could only refer to his Invisible Friend whom Jack, I was later informed, had never mentioned to his nurses or psychiatrist. I felt very privileged and very sad.

It was deemed a clear-cut case of suicide and the next day I saw porters emptying his room. I asked where his stuff would be going and was told *to the dump* – for he had no known relative. I had been his only visitor – others had got quickly fed up with his obstinate silences - so I went to see an administrator and offered to donate fifty quid for the scanner appeal in exchange for Jack's cardboard box. Having seen the farewell note, she agreed.

When I got home and emptied it I was surprised to find a crumpled exercise book at the bottom which was entitled *The Confessions of a Salesman*. The content was amusing and shocking. When I had finished reading I crossed out the word *Confessions* as the title reminded me of those absurd British soft porn films from the nineteen seventies. *Death of a Salesman* had already been done, and I was going to leave it as *The Salesman* – and then, I had a brainwave

JACK OF HEARTS

I'm Jack. Jack McDonald. My close friends call me Don. I'm thirty-four and, though I say it myself, a very successful salesman. I work for a furniture chain which is neither down-market, nor up-market, but nicely placed in the middle; middle-market. With my basic and commission I earn a high wage for what I do. I'm not telling you how much, but let's just say that the average B professional's eyes might pop with envy to see my payslip. I drive a top of the range Audi and take great pleasure in doing so. I deserve my high standard of living because I'm good at what I do; deceiving people. I know all the tricks of the trade and have devised many, many more beside; one day I might even write a definitive book. Of course I am the doyen of the local branch, which is to be found on a large mall on the edge of a very central Midland city beginning with L, and of Roman origin.

Our apprentices do not need to go on a scabby training course. I gather them round for half-an-hour before we open at nine and divulge a few more ruses.

I might say, "Right then. Listen up. What we sell here is pretty shit" - (they always laugh in amazement) - "But nearly as shit as that outfit around the corner." (I love it when there are really pretty ones amongst them - thin, leggy blondes or dusky, sultry Asian girls - (I make sure we reject any on the chubby side with the excuse that they are not sales-hungry enough) - and love it when they gape and hang on my every word. Making women laugh and mesmerising them with the old charm has always been a successful ploy of mine. It's like selling *yourself*, isn't it? Well, behind locked doors, I've closed many a very pleasant deal in that respect, but I'll give you chapter and verse on that a bit later on. Where was I? Ah yes.

"Our stuff is dearer than theirs but not that much better. We buy it from Poland and China for a bit more than they pay. We offer no five year free credit deals - load of bollocks that is of course; the credit is loaded in with the price, which makes you realise just *how* cheap their stuff really is! So how come we manage to shift ours when they are almost next door?"

They look at each other and then at me, all bewilderment, and shrug.

"Snobbery. Good old fashioned snobbery. That's what does it. As soon as the punters walk in - and never forget that we get exactly the same ones in here as they do next door - as soon as they walk in, look at two things; one, their age; two their clothes. Are they posh or are they chavvy? Look for earrings, trashy jewellery.....baseball caps - a dead giveaway! Remember that they have come in here to convince themselves - we are at the end of the mall and the last port of call - that the sofa they've seen at XYZ's is a bloody good buy. Wait until they sit down on one of ours and that's when you make your move. Never before - otherwise they'll feel harassed and go. Wait until they've made themselves comfortable. The wife - or, as is more the case these days - the female partner will be saying to Jason

"Jace, this is more comfy than XYZ's!" - (because, of course, being a bit more full of foam than XYZ's shit, it is firmer to sit on - at least for the first few weeks, until it starts to sag.) And Jace will start to sigh. He wants to get off back for the footy or see his mates down the boozier. Now, she's the one who sits and reclines on it because Jace goes out a lot and if she says it's comfier, then all Jace's moaning that next door there's a similar suite £100-150 cheaper - with nothing to pay until Halley's comet comes around again - will fall on deaf ears. So butter her up - make her think how wise she is. Stuck onto the credit card and the never-never - (never lose sight of the fact that credit card psychology is behind the nation's economic boom!) - the extra

seems less daunting, especially if the missus is setting her heart on our sofa. If Jason carries on moaning then it is time for you to make your move.

“Yes it’s dearer, Sir,” you concede to Jason “But look what you get for a *little* extra money – and for only pennies per week over the lifetime of the furniture!”

What the missus thinks is always the clincher. She’s emancipated these days and her boots are bigger than Jace’s! So keep working on her. And smile at the kids; be especially nice to them even if they are wrecking the place. (Sometimes there will be a mini-tribe of them varying in colour from mushroom to chocolate brown like our swatches!) Even if you’re seething with rage at their vulgar manners just keep thinking of the magic word: commission! Oh, and if someone really massive comes in - (If? What am I saying? I mean when!) - what’s the best way of protecting the goods? Anybody? No? Right, listen up. Too many lard-arses on the same cushion won’t do it much good and will show what trash it is. Most people - you watch them - sit on the right hand cushion. Consequently Mr RHS takes a lot of stick. Kids and fatsos are your sworn enemies. If somebody really huge walks in, then start shifting the swatches onto the right hand side to encourage them to park on the left. Every so often we swap them around anyway. (You know, it’s so ironic that obesity is linked to the cheapness of the leather. Do you know why? No? It’s McDonald’s! (No, not me - the burger outfit!) So many old cows are being consumed that there’s a glut of leather. It’s virtually being given away. That is a nice little anecdote to tell Mr Posh. He’ll feel even smugger to know he’ll be getting his bargain due to the digestive excesses of his social inferiors.)

Now I come to Mr Posh and Mr Clever-Dick. Mr Posh is easy. Tell him quietly - and look around to make sure that no chavvy is eavesdropping - that XYZ’s customers fit a certain social profile - that anyone who is really intent on buying cheap rather than buying quality will be happy at XYZ’s. Ten minutes later he’ll have signed up, feeling rather pleased to be in his superior skin and most impressed with your perceptive appreciation of his worth. It’s all to do with vanity! When Mr Clever-Dick comes in, you’ll soon know. He’ll be regurgitating some technical bollocks about springs, foam and frames he heard at XYZ’s. He might ask if our sofas have memory silicon enhancement - don’t look so worried Sunita!” - (the drop-dead gorgeous one with the breasts) - “There’s no such bloody thing! As soon as he starts - the women never do - what do you blind him with?”

(Now Sunita and the rest look really worried because - the thickos - their knowledge of English idiom is so poor and they take so literally my idea of putting Mr Clever-Dick’s eyes out!)

“No? You don’t know? Honestly? You blind him with SCIENCE!”

At this point it’s hand-out time. Everyone gets a booklet to learn off-by-heart and to practise on one another, on the cat, in front of a mirror, etc. Key words are highlighted but there is one, the most important which I have not included and I leave him till last.

“The missing word is four letters long, starts with a B and ends in T. Anyone? No? (For God’s sake eat a decent breakfast before you come in to liven you up!) The word is B-E-S-T - repeat after me! It’s always the best leather, the best frame, the best wood, the best foam, the best fire-resistance. Tell it all to Mr Clever-Dick as smartly as you can - act surprised at his interest, take him to one side and confide in him that only a very few people want to know the technical side. Go through the spiel quickly. He won’t dare interrupt. Why?.....Yes, Sunita? Correct! Well done my precious, you - will - go - far! Mr CD would hate anybody to think he is slow. He’s flattered that you have given him, obviously under the impression that he has an IQ of a hundred-and-seventy, such a rapid tour d’horizon.You didn’t do French at school,

Mark? No? It means the low-down...No, the last thing Mr CD wants you to think about him is that he's slow on the uptake, so he'll keep nodding and won't interrupt. He'll thank you for blinding him with science and for spilling the beans on XYZ's shortcomings."

And so I shoo them off to get ready for the customers. During the first day I spend some time with all of them but longest with Sunita. Of course she is flattered and a few wise-cracks about the customers out of their earshot have her giggling away. What an aphrodisiac humour is for a woman. Why I cannot say.

Of course Sunita knew I fancied her. And she was smart enough to play along. Women should make the most of their main assets, as I do of mine. She will go far indeed and no-one to whom she is really dear, need know. Why tell the truth and hurt people's feelings?

Had she shown any trace of reluctance or indecision I would have desisted. What do you take me for??? Here was an Asian girl thoroughly westernised and I swear if you had her and a white girl from the city standing behind a screen talking, you would have no idea which was which. And she was nearly twenty and old enough to know her own mind. I take a pride in myself; there's not an inch of fat on me and I work out. And once a week or so I'm down at the sun-studio to top up the tan; I pay a fortune to my hairdresser. All in all, I cut a dashing figure, being tall and slim, and look much younger than my thirty-four years. When younger women find out how old I really am I see a question light up in their eyes. Youthful looks *and* experience are irresistible. I am not lacking in the trouser department and I control myself well. (Try this whenever you pee: keep stopping and drawing it back. It will work wonders on your premature ejaculation, believe you me!) I think the fair sex have an instinctive sense for detecting who is well blessed and who is not. Does the well-endowed man give off some sort of signal? Anyway, I never get any complaints, not from my gorgeous wife, nor from those of whom, I swear, she has no inkling. They are good practice and help make me into the terrific lover she esteems so highly.

So when I ask Sunita to pop into my office as we're closing even before I've turned the key she is already getting her kit off. And she is so lovely I am almost crying. I love beautiful women. In my drawer I keep my condoms and she can hardly wait for me to peel one back over my very interested prize possession. She kneels on either side of me and I spin us round slowly on my office chair with my foot while she helps herself eagerly to a very respectable orgasm, which I partly suppress with my mouth in case the cleaning lady - for whom, out of the kindness of my heart I once did a similar favour - hears her.

Keeping the staff happy and well motivated is an essential part of my job description. How I do it is left up to me.

If my mother could see me now, God bless and keep her safe, she would be disappointed that I have underachieved. She insisted I go to university. Even as a teenager I was Jack the Lad and did not exactly work my socks off. My English teacher, Miss Terry, had found out my nickname and was pleased to tease me with a version of her own. In her class I became Jack of Hearts.

Ah, Miss Terry, Miss Georgina Terry - whose name reminded me of "gorgeous" because, with her copper hair, creamy complexion, girlish freckles, narrow green eyes, slender fingers, legs and body, she was the gorgeous darling of the school - how

I loved her! There was a shocking rumour that she had left her husband for an older man. We argued about her age, putting it at anything between twenty-eight and forty. So, it was quite amazing when she took an interest in a fifteen year old boy. *Me*. It began with the teasing and gradually moved on to looking. I would often glance up to find her staring at me. Finally, one lesson - last of the day, not long before the summer holiday - she shouted me back from the stairs, saying that she wanted to go over something in my Julius Caesar essay. As she pointed at several of my scrawled lines, her long, slender finger, her soft Irish accent, her fragrance and her gentle breathing as she listened to my stuttering replies, began to make me feel peculiar. I told her I felt a little faint and she said with a smile – glancing quickly at the trouser-bulge I was trying to conceal, and clearing her throat - that I had gone very red and that she would open a window because it was so hot.

She climbed onto a desk, ensuring that I could see all the way up her miniskirt to her suspender belt. I began to sweat and found it hard to breathe. My heart was thumping as she crouched to climb down, not caring to keep secret any of her lovely private self.

Her stock cupboard door was open. She went inside, ostensibly to look up at the shelves. She beckoned me in and said she had something to show me. Could I reach up for it?

She locked the door and slipped down her skirt. What she had to show me I had never seen before – at least a proper, grown-up one, and I couldn't believe how odd and ugly it was – in contrast to the beautiful, now honest, unguarded face of Miss Terry.

As soon as she pulled down my pants her mouth fell open as wide as her other. In class, I had only ever heard Miss Terry's soft voice of praise and sharp voice of reprimand, and now it was my privilege to prompt her to make such wonderful strange music. For me, that is the point of sex – to make lovely women gurn and sing at the tops of their voices for as long as possible.....Anyway, between gasps, as she bounced in my lap, flailing around with fists, elbows and knees, scattering text books from the lower shelves, she told me she would kill me if I dared breathe a word of this to anyone.

Afterwards, she said she hoped I had liked her leaving present as much as she had liked hers. On the way home, dizzy and numb, I realized she meant she was leaving for good and I cried, hating and envying her older man in equal measure. I would never see her again.

“How many hearts are you going to break, Jack?” had been her final words.

I was clever enough to get three As at A-Level but ended up with ABC instead. Never mind. I had applied to Worcester College, Oxford and did get an interview. The night before I met a lovely girl in her first year and she smuggled me into her room. She made sure I did not get a wink of sleep until about five and I did not exactly impress when it was my turn to be grilled in front of a blazing log fire on a threadbare carpet by two queer dons later that morning.

One of them had a huge wart on his nose and there was about a yard of tartan sock between his shoes and his turn-ups. In spite of my best efforts I could not stop imagining what my sarcastic brother would have made of him. I knew after yet another stupid silence and snigger disguised as a cough that my Oxford prospects had been extinguished.

Later, as I returned home on the train it occurred to me that perhaps they were not really interested in my answers to their questions about the anti-Semite TS Eliot; was

the real test my reaction to that absurd little man swinging his red and green leg under my nose?

So instead of the rarefied air of Oxford I was destined to breathe in the grittier ether of Liverpool. All was going well until I fell in with a drunken clique of mad Classicists. I was astute enough to keep my head far enough above the water-line to scrape a third class honours degree in my chosen subject, English. At the time I did not know it, but I had gradually acquired a much more valuable skill than textual analysis: - Plausibility. In order to explain the lateness of my essays and my frequent non-attendance at lectures I developed an inventiveness, which in combination with my native charm, led to the absolute achievement of my objective: to have a bloody whale of a time with the minimum inconvenience of work. The prospect of leaving Liverpool was so depressing to me that I decided to enrol for a teacher training course.

An affair with the head girl of a prestigious Grammar School in Rutland brought my unpromising teaching career to an abrupt halt. The scandal was contained but I had no choice but to resign. Without references I was sunk. So what could I do with a third class English degree? I had already met my lovely future concubine, Amelia. I told her that I had simply fallen out of love with teaching. For a few months she supported us both on her bank clerk wage. I went for several interviews at her behest with banks and building societies but inwardly the thought of counting other people's money for ever so dismayed me that my half-heartedness must have been obvious to those on the other side of the table. There were a few stopgap jobs until - my lucky break - I applied for and got a job as a salesman in a small, high-quality furniture store in a quiet street just off the city centre. Here I quickly found myself in my element. I am never bored and long periods of inactivity when customers were few and far between suited my indolent streak just fine - especially as I got on so well with Karen Quigley, an attractive divorcee of a certain age who did the accounts. On slacker weekdays, we did unofficial quality control work on the sofas in the back room. She was old enough to be my mother but she was a treat and a formative experience, for she it was who gave me the advice on how to delay, providing plenty of well-sprung practice. Mr Warrilow, the kindly owner whose heart failure was now keeping him more often at home, had offered me a small basic salary but a very generous commission deal. Within a few weeks so much stuff was being shifted that I was earning, for those days, astronomic amounts. Customers recommended us to family and friends and business got better and better. I began to spot their weaknesses and saw immediately how to tailor my patter to each. I persuaded old Warrilow to allow a two month delay in settling balances and this was enough to sway the less well-heeled waverers to sign on the old dotted line. I grew in confidence and before long Warrilow had agreed to my suggestion that we sell off some of the older lines cheaply, and I drew his attention to those more fashionable suites in his catalogues which Amelia (she has such good taste in other areas besides men) found particularly attractive. He overcame his natural conservatism and we ordered a few. And guess what! They sold. Or rather I helped them to sell themselves.

A couple of years passed. When foundations for the new mall by the motorway were being laid I told him that the future was there. His showrooms were cramped and he had to agree.

The new store was an immediate hit and more staff had to be taken on. After a few months we attracted the attention of one of the big boys, a new chain with gimmicky

offers, backed by a massive advertising campaign. Warrilow told me how much they had offered him - over four million - for his prime location and I could not in good faith advise him to turn it down. But he resisted temptation and I remember him snorting at the rubbish which they sold; he could not bear the thought of selling out to such a cowboy outfit. We called the staff together and between us we reassured everyone that the future was secure. They cheered us to the rafters. XYZ were told to get lost.

But poor old Warrilow's future was not secure. His wife woke up one morning to find him ice-cold beside her. Her resolve to carry on the business was not so steely as his and within weeks she had accepted the improved offer of UVW (deadly rivals of XYZ) and she soon decamped to France with her lover of long standing. What treachery. But old Warrilow had probably not suspected, so what was the harm? And if he had found out it would have probably taken him off sooner.

My position was now precarious. Of course it was well known by the new manager, Peter Little, where I had stood on any takeover and it took all my resources of charm to persuade him where my new loyalties lay. But his chief salesman was so impressed with me that a word from him swung things my way. Within a month he had gone and I stepped into his shoes. (Little's wife, Tracey, to whom I been introduced at our "store-warming", assured me that she had put in a good word for me too but she did not confess, I am sure, in what other, more private areas, I was particularly gifted.) When she told her husband she had fallen out of love with him, and he, in utter ignorance of the total truth, moved disconsolately back north I was faced with a dilemma. She had fallen in love, or so she thought, with me. I could believe it. No-one before or since her has enjoyed my prowess with such rip-roaring enthusiasm. She christened my JT the "thug".

Then she threatened to tell Amelia of our meetings when I began to hold her at arm's length. It was touch and go. Amelia had arranged to go on a weekend booze-cruise with her colleagues and I told Tracey that I would spend those two days in her bed, and then see her every so often, as long as she promised not to phone Amelia. She agreed. I won't go into detail. Suffice it to say that she could barely walk by the time I left her on the Sunday afternoon. I hoped I would never see her again. And when news reached her that her husband had had a tidy win on the lottery, she had a sudden crisis of conscience and rejoined him in Leeds.

It was such a relief that I had managed - just - to keep my secret from Amelia. It would have been a calamity if she had found out and left as she had once threatened. I loved her, you see. It seemed written in the stars that we would be together, we were so compatible. She was a Londoner I had met on holiday in Turkey. We hit it off straightway and were amazed to discover that we even shared the same birthday

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It is a slack Monday morning and I sit day-dreaming in my office. Karen Quigley's successor Emily, a twenty-something brunette with a gorgeous figure on whom I am currently working hard but not making any headway, rings to tell me that a Mr Southgate has specifically requested speaking to me .

"Watch it," she warns me. "He is not best pleased."

I smile. Sweet-Talking The Odd Complainer is my specialist subject and I tell her to put him through.

“Hello? Mr McDonald? I’m phoning to complain about the sofas - or rather the two-seater - we have just taken delivery of. I’m not bothering to look at the three-seater. It’s still on the van and that’s where it can stop.”

Something in his voice makes me uneasy. He sounds familiar but I can’t place him. The fact that he has noted and remembered my name makes me wary. I adopt my most concerned tone and ask him what the problem is.

“Well, Mr McDonald, I hardly know where to begin. First of all the driver was abrupt, rude even. As soon as I opened the door he thrust a paper under my nose, a disclaimer to sign, tantamount to me giving up my right to take action against your firm should he and his mate damage the goods because of the tightness of the angles in our passageway.”

“Well that’s usual pr-“

“Then he refused to remove his shoes - we have a beige carpet and you know how much rain there’s been - saying something about the insurance not allowing it....This caused us great inconvenience putting extra sheets down.”

“Well -“

“When they eventually bring in the two-seater I really cannot believe my eyes. The plastic wrappings are streaming with wet and covered in dirt. He mutters something about the state of the warehouse - which I hardly dare imagine! - Anyway the wrapping comes off and at first glance - to my astonishment - the sofa appears unscathed. Then I find a scuff mark beneath one arm and my wife points out that the leather on one of the back panels is perished.”

“Perished? How do you mean?”

“It’s thin and wrinkled like an old skin. Not acceptable.”

“Mr Southgate, our restorer will be round at the earliest oppor-“

“Oh no he will not. I know enough about leather to tell it cannot be rectified.”

“Well perhaps we could negotiate a partial ref-“

“No. Absolutely not. We want the sofa replaced or a full refund.”

“But it’s the last one in stock. We have no more on order.”

“I can quite see why if that is the quality. Do you have no quality control procedures?”

“We take delivery of furniture from China in their wrappings. It’s not practical to -“

“So, you send out your goods WITHOUT inspecting them. I can scarcely believe you just said that. What sort of an outfit are you?”

A shit one. I cover the speaker and look at the ceiling. I flip myself a mint and sigh. Pompous arsehole.

“But that is not the worst of the matter. When I tell the driver to reload the sofa onto the van he actually has the nerve to ask me for the fifty-nine pound delivery charge! When I begin to complain he shouts at me at the top of his voice to SHUT UP and moves towards me in a threatening manner. My wife starts to cry - she is far from well - and he pushes her out of the way.”

“That is appalling, Mr Southgate. I will make sure that we have no more to do with him and his business.”

“You mean to say that he is not an employee of yours?”

“We sub-contract delivery, and most customers are entirely satis - “

“So you mean to say that you have any old white-van-man deliver? That is disgraceful. You will refund the thousand we paid you immediately. I can hardly believe that we have been treated so shabbily.”

Suddenly I place him. He had been a very grey man, a Mr Clever-Dick with a dowdy, stuck-up wife. He had tried to impress me with his old-fashioned range of vocabulary

and I had played his game, using my own batteries of word-power to impress him with my wonder at his astuteness. He had been a push-over. On an impulse I now made a false move.

“Mr Southgate. May I say one thing before I set about refunding you? You should not have shopped here. You are clearly a cut above our usual customer. You should have gone to a higher-class establishment and I can only assume that your finances are not quite in kilter with your aspirations.”

“Mr McDonald.... I know a lot of people. You will bitterly regret that remark, I do assure you. It was very cheap. Like you are cheap, and like the outfit you work for. Good day to you.”

A slack Monday is followed by an even slacker Tuesday. There are more of us dawdling around the store than customers.

“It’s always a bit like this at the end of January,” I assure everyone in passing. “Sales are over. Punters are paying off Christmas. This wet weather isn’t helping. It’ll pick up in Feb. Just wait and see.”

But it does not. Badcock, the store manager, calls me in and waves some stapled sheets under my nose; a letter. It is from Mr Southgate. My heart skips a little to read such an elegant polemic against the quality of the goods we sell, about our appalling service and customer-care, ultimately ending thus:

As an elder at Sibberthorpe church I come into contact with many people from many walks of life. Rest assured, I shall not stint in relating what a misfortune it was for us to enter your premises. I shall dissuade as many friends and relatives as I can from making our mistake.

In conclusion, may I condole with you in that you must be desperate indeed at your inability to recruit good staff, if you are forced to employ such rude, cynical and mendacious persons as Mr Jack McDonald.

I feel myself go very hot all over to read this. I try to make a feeble joke which is deservedly met with silence. Badcock really does not like me much, and he has a constant bad cold. He is fairly new and we have failed to hit it off. There is nothing I can point to, but the chemistry is wrong. He is all calm and efficiency, reminding me uncannily of my A Level English teacher, Maggot Moore. He even resembles him. Badcock undoubtedly thinks me too extrovert, flash even.

“Off course”, he says now in his grey monotone, sniffing and polishing his old-fashioned glasses “There is absolutely no way that such a senior salesman as you, with such a wealth of experience, would be so unpardonably rude to a customer, even to such a ridiculous, pompous man as Mr Southgate....So why do you think he makes those allegations against you, Mr McDonald.”

Not Jack. He blows again, long and hard, on his lenses and rubs them with a tissue. He places them carefully back on his fleshy red nose and fixes me with those calm, steady, blue eyes. Thinking on my feet I find the perfect explanation, and the perfect patter.

“I only vaguely remember....he was in a temper.....All I said, I think, if my memory serves me correctly, was that we were an excellent value-for-money store.....and that for a more personal - but more expensive service - with in-house delivery thrown in, he would have to look elsewhere, and probably pay around twice as much.”

I shrug. Would this do the trick? Badcock makes a steeple with his fingers and rubs them down his nose. No, decidedly that would not do. I realise, with some irritation and indignation that I am on the carpet. He studies for an age the back page of the letter and eventually brings himself to say *sotto voce* "So when this gentleman writes that you said his aspirations clearly exceeded his finances, was that a fiction?"

"Look. That must be the construction he decided to put on my words. I can't remember what I said weeks ago, word-for-word, to one particular client amongst many!"

"So if you can't remember word-for-word a conversation which was not special for you, then it is possible at least that his recollection of a conversation which was special and therefore entirely memorable for him, is more likely to be the correct one?"

I already feel a little low this morning. The foul damp weather will not lift and I have had a tiff with Amelia. One of the speakers in my car is on the blink. Now I return Badcock's steady gaze with interest.

"Where are you going with this Terry? You know perfectly well that I would not be intentionally rude to a customer. This guy has taken whatever I said and twisted it. He's not a happy bunny and he wants a good helping of revenge. I'm a convenient target."

Badcock seems not to have heard any of this. He assumes I'm lying, I realise with anger. It only occurs to me much later that I had, of course, no right to be annoyed with him. He hands me the letter.

"Jack, I want you to write him a full apology. Send him a hundred pound voucher. Order his wife a big bunch of flowers. Repute is everything. We are not exactly bursting at the seams with customers."

"Slack periods happen."

"They're not so slack next door. Go and look for yourself. I did yesterday. You have been a real asset to this company but do not get the idea that you are fireproof. Nobody - and that includes me - is indispensable. Just remember that the next time you have to deal with a customer complaint. Get the staff together can you, and give them a pep-talk. Let's sell some fucking furniture! That's why we're here. Oh, and I'll have your reply to him in time to catch the post, if I may."

Dear Mr Southgate,

I have had an opportunity to read of your letter and am truly sorry if you thought I was implying that your aspirations exceeded you income. It is, of course, always disappointing when we fail to provide our esteemed customers with the quality and service which we undertake to provide, both for us and for them.

Ours is a store which offers excellent value for money and prides itself on doing so. In order to accomplish this aim, we are obliged to keep our costs to a minimum. There are, as I made clear on the telephone, more expensive retail outlets around. I did not intend a personal slight on you when I alluded thereto. A suite costing one thousand pounds will have attributes which one at half that price will not possess - a fact which I scarcely need to point out to you, a man of obvious discernment.

I assumed, when you ordered furniture from us, that you had decided to go for good quality at a fair price. We have all our differing spending priorities! I, for example,

drive a top of the range Audi, whereas most people prefer to settle for a more modest saloon.

Please accept my apologies for the disappointment and inconvenience occasioned to you and your wife, and for any unintended insult to you. I enclose a voucher as a token of our good will and remain,

Yours sincerely,

Jack McDonald

I know that Badcock will not be astute enough to detect the mockery I have sewn into my antiquely worded verbosity, but trust that Southgate would see it readily enough. A week later I receive my answer. A withered bunch of flowers in brown paper. In the envelope included, there's a brief note explaining that his wife has died, so I knew where I could *stick them*. What a pity. But that's that. Or so I think.

*

A week or so later, I'm on my way home, cursing and banging that faulty speaker while the lights are on red. One of my favourite symphonies is on and the farting noise is ruining it. As I speed away the music stops altogether and I shout an expletive. This seems to be answered by a tut-tut-tut and for a second I think I might have picked up a taxi driver's signal on short wave. But it is Southgate.

"Really, Mr McDonald. What intemperate language! So unlike the elegant prose and smooth patter in which you excel."

I glance round, expecting to see him in the back, but the seat is empty.

"Mr Southgate? How have you –"

"Easy, young man. When you are on this wavelength....in this dimension."

"What?"

He laughs.

Wavelength? Is Southgate some clever wizard with citizen band radio? My next door neighbour used to bore the arse of me with tales of his contacts in Newfoundland.

The symphony returns, crystal clear. As the slow movement builds, I hear humming again but it is not waspish but a voice humming – and then la-la-la-ing.

"This is lovely soothing stuff, young man. Is it Beethoven?"

I brake and pull over. Opening the boot, I hear him laugh again and say he's much too big to fit in there. He tells me to look at page thirty of the evening paper as soon as I get home.

SOUTHGATE, FREDERICK of Sibberthorpe, suddenly, 18th February, surviving his dear wife and our beloved mother Cynthia by only six days. Family flowers only please....

I hear Amelia come in from work. She puts down her rain hood and shakes her lovely blonde curls,

"Don? You alright? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

The next morning, I leave the radio off and am relieved to hear nothing. Badcock wants a word. He tosses the advert I have sketched out for the local rag across the desk at me.

“A free pouf with every sofa or two armchairs? I can hardly contain my excitement, Jack.”

He sniffs and puts his vapour stick up his nose, steadily gazing at me with his bloodhound eyes. I tell him it’s worth a try.

“Let’s just run with it, Terry.”

“Run with a pouf? How much will the ad cost?”

“Full page? Six hundred quid.”

He tells me he’s getting flak from HQ. We sit on the edge of one of the nation’s wealthiest areas but are returning almost the worst sales figures.

“I want everyone in here for a pep-talk first thing tomorrow before we open, Jack. My arse is on the line.”

I’m driving home when Southgate returns. Glimpsing his grey face in the windscreen for just a second, I swerve over to the gutter and stop.

“I hear your sales are down, young man. Are you surprised? I did tell you I know a lot of people!”

“This can’t be down to you. And anyway, you’re supposed to be dead! How are you doing this? Is it some sort of hoax or scam? Blackmail??”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve come back because I have some very bad news. My boss is not at all happy with you. You’re a cheat, a bighead, a hypocrite, a liar and a fornicator. You’re in trouble. Look at me.”

To my horror, I see him now in the mirror, very pale but substantial. I turn to grab him but something freezes my hand and I withdraw it in pain.

“This cannot be happening. It’s a dream.”

“Be quiet and listen. I’ve been sent from Purgatory. I’m there for a while because of a little blemish on an otherwise perfect life....I was church treasurer, you see, and I needed to borrow a little for a cruise my wife had set her heart on.....I was going to pay it back, but then we had the misfortune of going to UVW for a suite. You know the rest. I’m only *technically* an embezzler and so the Chap in Charge – the angel who fell out with You-Know-Who - has given me a special task. It’s sort of killing two birds with one stone, supervising your punishment *and* letting me get revenge on you at the same time.”

“I’m not really hearing this! Wake up!”

“Even Purgatory has got to move with the times, especially now it’s so overcrowded – like the jails. You can hardly get your breath down there....So the boss has come up with a new scheme called P.O.T.S.”

“P.O.T.S?”

“**Purgatory On That Side.** In other words – this side - here. And you, my young friend, should feel honoured to be the very first to benefit.”

“To *benefit*? From *Purgatory*?”

Mine had been a Catholic school and I know you have to go to Purgatory to have your sins burnt away prior to a heavenly ascent – the more and the greater the sins, the longer the stay.

“That’s all for today, young man. Times up!”

And he is away. I close my eyes and open them again, expecting to see my bedroom wall and my fine photo of Swithland Wood. But instead I see a traffic warden taking down my registration number. I am on double yellow lines!

I open the door and begin to stagger and babble. The warden retreats in alarm. Seeing a passing police car, he waves his arms. An officer approaches, sniffs the air around

me and recoils. I am invited to blow into his breathalyser. Ten minutes later I am being processed at the police station.

I am sitting in a cell having given more breath and then blood. Southgate appears at the end of my bunk and smiles.

“Welcome to your first purgative experience. I have to be honest with you – as honest as you were dishonest with us – it ain’t going to be pleasant.”

“But I’m not drunk! Haven’t touched a drop! It’s not fair!”

“Fair? Fair? You talk about Fair? That awful junk you conned me into buying – was that fair? The experience made my wife so much worse that she died. Fair! Have you kept count of how many women – some not much more than girls – you have...had...since you have been with Amelia? Thirty-seven. Is that fair to her?”

“Can I help it if they throw themselves at me? I’m flesh and blood. And who are you to cast stones, you embezzling hypocrite? By the way, that dowdy wife of yours, I suppose she went straight to heaven! Or did she have a skeleton or two in the cupboard you didn’t know about?”

A throat-clearing draws my attention to the pimply face at the cell door window – the face of the arresting officer. The door opens and he comes in, holding his nose and shaking his head. In all his years, he says, he has never seen a more clear-cut case of drink-driving.

“You still smell like a brewery. You couldn’t walk or talk. The breathalyser nearly broke. And you’re still talking rubbish to yourself three hours later. You PISS-HEAD.”

He stands aside and waves me past him. I am free to go. The blood test shows me as sober as a baby. I stagger and demand to be driven back to my car on the main road. “Take a taxi,” he snarls.

Amelia is sitting up in bed with a creamed face and reading her magazine when I get in at just before midnight. My car had been towed to the police pound and I am now nearly two hundred pounds out of pocket in parking fines and taxi fares. I begin to speak but she holds up a trembling hand. She flicks the pages and pops a mint. I wish she would make a terrible scene but she affects not to care. I close the door behind me and on the other side, I explain briefly what has happened without mentioning Southgate, but even so, it sounds ludicrously unbelievable. It is dreadful to see her light below the door turn to darkness. I creep to the spare room.

The next morning I wake up late. How alien and unnerving a silent house is after a fall-out. Like Outer Space. In the kitchen, propped up against a marmalade jar there is a note which I dread to open.

The next time you’re going to have a session with one of those brainless bimbos from the shop, please do not insult my intelligence with one of your cock and bull stories. I’d rather you phoned and said I’m shagging the new girl who’s really impressed with my pathetic chat-up routine – then I’d know I could turn the oven off and scrape your dinner away.

When did I last feel more miserable? I hate being fallen-out with Amelia. I’m out of favour, out of pocket and out of sorts – and out of jail; but I am in Purgatory.

I struggle into work half-an-hour late looking very haggard and hung over. When Badcock strides past me without a look or hello I realise I have missed his staff pep-

talk. He walks down the corridor and slams his door. Trying to make amends, I stroll around the floor for a while, clenching a fist and winking and nodding encouragement at the boys and girls whose responses are smirks and sniggers. After a decent enough show of interest, I retreat to my office for a strong coffee - and find Him sitting in my swivel chair with his feet on the desk. I hurriedly close the blinds.

“No need for that, young man. Only you can see me. I trust Amelia was very understanding?”

“Now listen here, Southgate! I know my mind is playing tricks. It’s the pressure, the weather - or a hormonal imbalance....I’m going to the doctor’s. He’ll give me tablets and you’ll be history.”

“If only! It’s time for me to tell you what you’re looking at. Last night was just a mole hill. Bad situations will get worse and more complicated even when you might think they’re getting better. Raising and dashing hopes and that awful sinking feeling you get are the essence of the punishment.”

I pick up my catalogue and throw it at him. It stops dead and drops to the floor. To my horror the title changes to Julius Caesar. The lovely face of Miss Terry appears to me and droops away in wrinkles.

I call him a bastard and he bristles in mock mortification.

“I sent you an apology, a voucher and some flowers, and this is how I get served!”

“You think it’s me doing this?” he wheezes.”I’m only the messenger and minute-taker. Oh no, no, no - this is all being set up and co-ordinated by some very nasty demons. Ah, I’ve got to note your show of aggression, I’m just being told by one. My advice for you is to improve on three fronts: one, stay calm and be resigned; two, stop cheating on Amelia; three, stop telling lies about that rickety rubbish you sell.”

“And if I do?”

“Well, the mental anguish you will have to endure this side will last for...three years and two months. The physical torments on the other side – mmm - you’re facing fifty years.”

“Fifty years?? Physical torments? What kind?”

“You’re not to know – the uncertainty principle of mental anguish, you see. The imagination can inflict many more scars than the...er...instruments. But they’re not as cruel and unusual as they used to be. Just think yourself lucky.....” (He looks around and whispers confidentially to some entity unseen, nodding and smiling...)It’s okay, they say I can tell you...That Richard Dawkins will be in for a hundred and fifty... and some, the worst...never get out.”

“A hundred and fifty years just for being an atheist? That’s hardly fair! Most people are these days.”

“Precisely! And that’s why we have to resort to outsourcing schemes like this. We’re chock-a-block down there.”

“And what happens after fifty years?”

His eyes gaze at the ceiling and, smiling in rapture, he presses his palms together.

“Heaven? But I don’t want to go to heaven and sit around bored to tears – with the likes of you – for ever!”

He goes to reply but stops and listens, nodding, says he’s sorry to the fresh air, but he’s *learning on the job* - and then takes out a little notebook with my name on in which he begins to scribble, whispering to himself as he does: “...mmm...trivialising atheism.....inappropriate remarks on heaven....insulting holy boring people....”

He presses down with the point of his pencil and waves the book at me.

“It’s all here! And you’re just piling on more pain. After that outburst, it’s two more weeks this side or six months over there. You choose. It’s all very sinner-centred, the new scheme.”

“Oh that’s very, very, very considerate of your people” – (and, so that the demons can hear me, I shout) - “I’m really touched!”

A rap comes on the door. I let up the blind and discover lovely Emily looking at me very strangely. She has just heard me say *I’m touched* and her face says she wouldn’t disagree.

“Oh,” says she “I thought you were with someone, Mr McDonald.”

“Emily! I was just...er.....practising my lines for a play I’m in. And I’ve told you – call me Don.”

I beckon her in but she holds her ground. Slowly He scribbles and mutters.....”*told a lie.....attempted.....seduction.*”

“Oh come on! I was just being friendly!”

Emily backs off, shaking her head. I tell her I didn’t mean her.

“Mr Badcock wants to see you,” she whispers. “Urgent.”

The local paper has arrived and Badcock holds it open for me to see the full page advert.

“Looks....good,” I whisper - in case the new lie is detected and recorded.

His finger jabs at the picture of the pouf and his red face, with the vapour stick in his nose, appears around the edge. Now I see what he means.

“Oh dear,” I say.

“Oh dear?” he snuffles. “That’s six hundred quid down the Swanny.”

I rally. “Oh come on. How many folks are going to notice? They probably think it’s spelt like that. Make them put it in again, spelt right.”

“I phoned them. They had a look. That’s how *you* spelt it.”

“Me? I’ve got a degree in English.”

I hear Southgate snigger.

“Oh now I see! *You* bloody altered it. Or one of your bloody henchmen.”

Badcock screws up the paper and gets to his feet.

“What are you on about? *I* altered it? Are you trying to make a monkey out of me?”

Southgate sits down, holding his sides in helpless fits of laughter.

“You turn up late – no phone call – looking like a tramp. I’ve a good mind to send you home! Go and sort yourself out.”

I push up the slats of the window blind. Amongst all that UVW tat, how pointless now my life seems! My world is a huge showroom, a world full of hideous trash and trivia. The hanging photo-placards of jovial, beautiful middle class families, the special offers and slogans in bursting red stars and the jolly music, interspersed with that treacly female voice insinuating itself with *unbeatable* offers into the ears of the punters – the total effect has become nauseating. Those rickety devices built for our comfort and convenience, the bits and pieces which fit the angles of our bodies, are ludicrously ugly, and I imagine a people-less world descended on by Aliens who are able to deduce, all else failing, our shapes, sizes and flexible parts from our furniture, as they might deduce our feet from our empty shoes.

I realize I am becoming obsessed with staring at those old-fashioned armchairs we ostracize into a corner – the type much prized by old Warrilow - with side wings and buttons and bendy legs, designed especially to accommodate the achy old bones of pensioners. Mine will never occupy one. Does that make me happy or unhappy?

Southgate has made himself comfortable in one and is waving my book at me, pointing to an elderly couple who are trying out one of our most repulsive two-seaters. He sucks his pencil and holds it aloft ready.

“Good afternoon,” I croon.

“It says a free pouf with this advert,” declares the old gentleman.

“Yes, Sir. It’s a limited offer and you need to make up your mind today...” *Southgate is shaking his head and licking the pencil* “...But, but, of course, I could make a special exception for you, if you wanted to sleep on it.....” *He smiles and taps his teeth* “...and I could put a reserve notice on it.”

“Is this fabric hard-wearing?” screeches the lady and I hesitate. Southgate twiddles the pencil.

“Well, it all depends how much it’s sat on. It would be best if you could put a throw over it....”

“Next door tried to sell us a load of stain-removers for an extra £120.”

This is a scam we pull too. Washing-up liquid is just as good. The fluids cost a few quid to produce and make us a nice profit and commission. Southgate leans forward at the ready.

“I tell you what...I’m prepared to throw the cleansers in – with the pouf – for an extra twenty.....I mean, ten.....no five.....okay, okay, okay....for free, if you buy today.”

“What’s the frame like?”

“It’s very.....quite robust – as long as you only trampoline on it now and again. With fair wear and tear this will last around five years – at £459.99 that’s about sixty pence a week.”

They are sold. I catch Sunita’s lovely eye and she sweeps in to close the sale.

“You see, young man! If you tell the truth – or come close, then you can still shift the stuff..... I’m impressed. Look, I’ve written nothing.”

I gaze around me and all the objects are glowing. The shoppers have become aliens picking and puzzling over them. An irresistible impulse seizes me and I begin to laugh, chuckling at first, until I am almost crying. People have stopped to look and Southgate urges me on.

“Go on! You have your audience.”

I leap onto a nearby pouf.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls! I am Don, salesman-in-chief. Lend me your ears a moment. Everything you are being told and sold here is false. All you see before you is from China - as we are now incapable of making our own rickety rubbish. Good quality sofas have equal amounts of neutrons and protons which consist, of course, of six quarks – up, down, bottom, top, charmed and strange – but the Chinese, being very clever, have injected some anti-quarks into the foam...enough for the foam to deteriorate more quickly than it should. The more you park your lardy selves on the cushions, the quicker the quark-effect. Such that, one morning you’ll come down to watch Jeremy Kyle and – pouf! – your sofa will vanish *be-fore your ve-ry eyes*. But, fear not! – (said he, for mighty dread had seized their troubled minds) – our rivals have solved the problem by injecting enough gluons, mesons and bosons into the stuff to counteract the so-called Sofa Effect. So I advise you to go to XYZ next door. Thank you.”

Lovely Emily is staring at me. Badcock has appeared gaping, minus his snot-stick.

“Bravo! Bravo!” shouts Southgate, twirling around on a table on one leg.

I grab my coat and scrape a few things from a drawer into my briefcase. The shoppers should be streaming out, but they are still browsing, still bouncing up and down on beds and sofas, still leafing through swatches as I make for the exit.

I am singing along to a Mozart aria on my way home. I tell Southgate I'm going to find something more honest to do in the time I have left. He materialises in the passenger seat and seems rather subdued.

"Have I earned any remission for that performance?" I ask.

"I fear not, young man. It's like time. It only flows in one direction."

I go to reply how unfair that is but stop myself just in time.

"What if I start going to church? Give a shed-load of money to charity?"

"You should do that anyway."

"Look...Can I say something...in my defence?"

"Carry on – but be tactful..."

"Okay...assuming your boss...and his Boss are listening...I was created individual and with a will of my own...right? I never got any religion in my family upbringing.....are you getting this?"

"You had RE at school. We all did!"

"My RE teacher, Cummins, was rubbish! Look it up in your book!"

"Sorry. It only has your shortcomings in. Anyway, you were saying..."

"Yes...why should I be more likely to worship....You Know-Who....and follow the Ten Commandments....than a native of the Amazon rainforest? Is *he* being punished for being an ignorant heathen??"

For once, Southgate is stuck for an answer. I grow bolder

"Why can't I just be left to it....to live and die and moulder away like *him*? My punishment would be *not* to go to heaven. I could be like a fruit dropped from the great tree of life into the leaf litter. I'd soon get over it."

He turns his head towards the back seat, listening and nodding and saying *right...okay...right* over and over, before turning back and flicking to the front of my Book of Sins. He sucks in a breath, blows and tuts.

"They're right. It's all here.....*playing up your RE teacher.....hiding his spectacles.....putting a whoopee cushion on his chair*. Nobody in your class had a chance to hear the Word!"

"B-but it was only a joke! Hold on....What about the French?"

"What about them?"

"They can't have RE at school. It's against the law. Are they in Purgatory?"

"Funny you mention them! I was wondering why they get fast-tracked...usually going South, I'm sad to say."

"That...is...so...ARBITRARY."

He sighs and begins to mutter and scribble.....*questioning Divine judgment*.

I sob in frustration, as he stabs the book in triumph with the point of his pencil and congratulates himself on beginning to get the hang of it. He ceases abruptly to grin, as if remembering his errand, and lays a ghostly hand on my shoulder which chills me to the bone.

"Don.....you're in for a big surprise in a few minutes. Best you prepare yourself."

He fades away with a rueful smile. What could it be? He has never called me Don before. It must be pretty bad. I slow down in case I get snapped by a speed camera. I check my mirror for a police car. I check the dashboard for warning lights. Is that great oak tree looming up on the left about to topple down on me in the gale?

My mobile phone rings and I pull over.

“Don? Guess who!”

It is a growly northern voice and it makes me go cold.

“Long time, no see,” she says. “How’s Amelia?”

I take a deep breath and try to sound friendly. “Tracey! Goodness me. How’s Leeds?”

“Fuck do I know? I’ve bought a new property here in Forest East. Me and Pete didn’t work out after all. Still not compatible in the marital couch....left a lot to be desired... know what I mean? But we’ve gone fifty-fifty so I’m sitting pretty...and I’m just dying to see you.”

Southgate is back shaking his head.

“I can’t see you, Tracey. You know what the deal was.”

“That was then. This is now.”

“What’s happened to your voice??”

“Oh I had a face lift and it’s a bit tight. Getting used to it.”

I look at Southgate. He has closed his eyes.

“Tracey..... I’m in a jam and I do not need this.”

“Look, just come round once a week after work. Does Amelia still go out on Wednesdays? Come round tonight. How will she know? Unless I tell her. It’s win-win-win.”

She gives me the address and rings off. I look at Southgate and he shrugs.

“How much would once a week cost me in Purgatory?”

He gets out my notebook and looks at a chart.

“This side or the other side?”

“Both.”

“This side...six months...the other...two years. Look, why don’t you just tell Amelia and beg for forgiveness?”

“Because I swore five years ago I’d never stray again. She found out about a sales assistant. She’d leave me. That would be very painful because I love her. She’s all I have.”

He tells me how sorry he is.

“It’s a dilemma and you can’t win. That’s what this is all about. I’ll catch you later.”

Wednesday is Amelia’s Tai-Chi night. When she comes in I tell her how sorry I am for the previous night and put a nice cheese omelette with chunky chips under her nose. To my surprise she eats it and begins to thaw out. Soon we are embracing and we promise each other we will make up good and proper when she comes back after Tai-Chi. By seven thirty she is on her way out. I wait five minutes and drive around to Tracey’s place, determined to throw myself on her mercy and offer her some bargain which will cost me a couple of months at most.

I discover that she has bought herself a fake Georgian demi-mansion in an exclusive close. Her face-lift, courtesy of her husband’s good fortune, has made her look fantastic, even though her tiny, piping mouth now reminds me of a rat’s arsehole. She leads me by the hand across her low-lit lounge to a buffalo hide sofa which would put UVW’s best effort to shame. A fake log fire is sending out warm tones across the beige carpet into which a long-haired Persian cat is sinking. There is a tall bronze of Michelangelo’s statue of David in the hearth. A crystal glass of wine and some canapés are awaiting me on a yew table. Soft muzak is playing.

No amount of finery can disguise Tracey’s vulgarity. She is wearing a kaftan and when she puts her knees under her chin, it slips down her over-pampered thighs as if she’s starring in a bad porn movie. She smiles a cute smile and hands me a fishy

canapé but I refuse. I try not to breathe in her heavenly perfume but in spite of my resolve to remain aloof there is one part of me stiffening in resistance. She notices and giggles.

Six months or two years? Is it worth it? Life without Amelia? How can I work out these sums when my ears are thumping with my zinging blood?

“Go on, Don. Have one. Smoked salmon in oyster sauce. Good for the libido. Not that you need it, I see. Go on. Have a sip of wine. It’ll slow you down.”

“I don’t need slowing down.....Please, Tracey I need to –“

“You might,” says she, unpicking the top button on her robe, “The first time...”

She is not particularly pretty but her body is a fulsome wonder. Her nervous fingers now reveal those astounding breasts – have they been augmented? – which culminate in roundels like archery targets with indigo inners. Her throat is flushed and I hear her growly breathing. She is wearing the briefest of panties in which her eager anticipation is imprinting a see-through oval. She moves her head into my lap and unbuttons me. I flap like a landed trout and she gasps. She flicks out her tongue like a snake and the most amazing thing happens.

My pride and joy begins to shrink until it is less than a minnow. I jump up and she points, unable to decide between a howl of dismay or hilarity.

The howl of laughter has come from Southgate but I am unable to speak. Tracey buttons herself up and folds her arms tight across her bosom.

“I thought you might appreciate the decision being taken for you,” says Southgate.

“But what am I going to say to Amelia?”

“Fuck do I know?” says Tracey. “Why ask me?”

Of course, I am no longer welcome there and I am soon on my way.

On the way home I ask Southgate if it was reversible and of course, the answer is NO.

“You will have to concentrate on the spiritual aspects of your relationship now.....although there are ways and means –“

“Don’t you dare start giving me sexual advice! I am quite capable –“

“Don’t get shirty with me, young man! Who got himself involved with that dreadful woman in the first place?”

I am too upset to answer.

“Don, you must prepare yourself now for a really awful night and day. When you get in you’ve got to read the paper. Very bad news.”

He gives me three page numbers and tells me he’ll see me later. Very bad news? What can be worse than the loss of my best friend?

I stare at page three but find nothing of interest. It is a full five minutes before I spot it and my heart nearly stops. Under a headline Taxi Rank Dispute Heats Up, there is a grainy photo taken at night. The taxi rank is full and drivers are on the pavement arguing. Heading off to the right is a pretty woman in a fur. Her profile has been caught accidentally by a street light. It is Amelia and she is arm in arm.....with a man.

I turn to page twenty-three. It is full of small ads. My gaze is drawn by the words FOXY KITTEN. I dial the number given and am treated to the following recorded message in a phoney French accent: *‘Ello. I am Amélie. Text me a photo of your face and your prize possession - preferably at attention – and if I am interested I will send you a delicious photo of myself and a basic price. Clean, smooth-shaven men only, and only on Wednesday evenings. Time and extras by negotiation in advance. A Bientôt!*

What horror worse than this can page five hold? I am shocked but then almost relieved to see a picture of a very haggard looking Karen Quigley, my lover and mentor at Warrilow's. Dying Mother Pleads For Twins To Visit – reads the headline. The report is heart-rending.

They were taken into care when I was seventeen. I had a drug problem and my boyfriend had left me. Eventually, I agreed to have them adopted. All I know is that Amelia went to a family in London. Joseph might have stayed here. They would be thirty-four now. Their birthday is the 20th September.

Our birthday. I know Amelia was adopted. But surely not me! I cannot ask my mother or father – they are dead. There is no-one to ask. But it doesn't matter. The doubt is as painful as certainty. If my head were a balloon it would burst. Amelia will be home at nearly half-past eleven. She and "the girls" always go for a drink after Tai-Chi. I will be in the spare room. I write a note telling her I have a touch of flu and not to wake me.

I dream of walking out of the furniture store – not onto the mall but into the woods. Amelia smiles and takes my hand. There are bluebells and all the birds are calling. There is a stream nearby whispering to us to come closer. Reeds are flowing like green hair in the water and the eddies are constantly altering the shape of the stones they are caressing. I think of the water as time carrying away past events I wish to forget. My sins have cancelled out her sins and we can begin anew. Eve was made from Adam and they too were a kind of brother and sister.

I wake to see the bare wall of the cell into which I have been locked, and the truth crushes the heart and breath out of me. Distant sounds and echoes are disturbing because their causes are unclear. I relive it all – the hammering on the door at five; the dark uniforms; my Audi, nose in the air, about to be towed away; the grim caution rapidly delivered; the order to get dressed; Amelia's anxious face on the landing shouting at the officers; the closing of the front door behind me with a sickening finality.....

The interview room.

"Mr McDonald, the pathologist reckons she died around eight p.m. A nosy neighbour took your number. You admit she was blackmailing you. You have a motive and you were there!"

"I didn't do it. I didn't do it. Before we had sex I changed my mind and drove away. She was alive when I left her."

The cell door opens. A mug of weak coffee and a greasy bacon sandwich are thrust at me. I am told that I will be interviewed again at nine.

"Well, Jack. Forensics has so much evidence against you now that you might as well confess and get it off your chest. Recognize these? You should. We found them in your glove compartment."

The cocky detective has put a pack of playing cards on the table. The spotty PC who arrested me for drink-driving is standing by the door looking very smug.

"The Jack of Spades is missing. That was a pretty unpleasant thing to do after you bashed her brains out with the bronze statue."

"What was?"

“Oh come on, McDonald! Why waste everybody’s time? It’s definitely the Jack from this pack of cards. You rolled it up and stuck it in her you-know-what! Your calling-card. How sick and perverted was that?”

The pimply bobby leers.

“How could you do this?” I ask the air.

“That your conscience talking, Jack? PC Howkins here told me you talk to yourself. Plead guilty and claim you’re insane.”

“It wasn’t me, Don. It was the demon. Tracey’s time was due. She was a nasty, selfish piece of work, a much bigger hypocrite than you – no scruples at all. We thought we’d kill –“

“- Two birds with one stone. That was very ingenious of you, Southgate.”

The detective looks at Howkins and both shake their heads in wonder. I cannot say another word and am soon returned to my cell *to think it over*.

I put my hands together to pray for forgiveness and for a happy ending to this mess. An hour passes. I am dozing when the cell door opens and the constable comes in. He sits on the chair opposite my bunk.

“You’re free to go,” he whispers almost apologetically. “It couldn’t have been you. You were here. Someone is trying to frame you.”

“How do you know? What do you mean, I was here?”

“Here, when....I’m afraid I have some terrible news. We went back to collect all your clothing this morning....and found your partner, Amelia.....I’m really sorry....It was the same scene as Tracey Little. We never realized....There was another card missing....”

“The Jack of Hearts?”

* * *

A day after I had finished reading Don’s account, there came a rap at my door. I was not a little taken aback to find a grey-haired man standing on the step. He introduced himself as the Reverend Townsend and I invited him in.

He had been given my address by the supervisor of the psychiatric unit where he was the visiting pastor. It would be his difficult task to conduct Don’s funeral service and he was anxious to glean any information he could about a person whose only friend and visitor had been me.

While I made him a cuppa, I made my mind up what to condense from his account – and how to put the very best spin on it. I told him that he had been very troubled about - what I called - his misjudgements, but that in the end he had prayed for forgiveness and had found a kind of relief. This pleased Townsend mightily. He could, he said, develop this and find ample verses from the New Testament on the theme of redemption to *come up with a decent eulogy*. Without wanting to mislead him, I ventured to say more.

“Above all, he wanted to be punished for his past – and that’s why he did what he did to himself, I reckon.”

“What particularly troubled him?”

Mmm...how far should I go?

“He was a furniture salesman. He exaggerated quite a lot.”

Townsend put down his pen and laughed.

“Is that all? What do salesmen do then?”

I considered whether I ought to put him fully in the picture – but what was the point? Don had suffered greatly for his sins. There were plenty out there far worse than him who lived untroubled lives, in fine style, with no prospect of ever having to atone for their vileness in a godless universe. In his own sick mind, Don had been punished by his own conscience personified as Southgate.

At the crematorium, besides me, there were three young men and women I assumed were his furniture-disciples, and Jennifer, the supervisor of the psychiatric unit. On the other side of the aisle - and they intrigued me – was an elderly couple. Townsend said a prayer and then paid such a glowing tribute to Don that I felt very hot. He nodded in my direction and said he was grateful to me for my *kind words* about an unfortunate man I had taken the trouble to befriend. We listened to an excerpt from one of Don's favourite CDs and watched the curtains slowly close around the coffin. At the final note, when they re-opened, the coffin had carried him over.

Jennifer kept me talking longer than I wished, so that when I hurried outside the old couple had vanished.

I drove home in a gloomy mood with the radio on. An evasive politician was being interviewed and I was only half-listening until I heard: "One hesitates of course to speak ill of the dead but don't you think you may have been a bit too generous in your assessment of the deceased party? Aren't you afraid it might come back to haunt you?"

I thrust out a hand and turned the radio off.