

Eddie Shore and The Moss

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This is a work of fiction. It popped into my head spontaneously, as if by magic. Any similarity to real events or people is therefore a spooky result of some deep underlying force at work in the universe.

Chapter 1

“This is not a test.” concluded the voice of the Tannoy.

It was a test, obviously. He knew it and the rest of the staff knew it. How? Because everyone had been sent a memo telling them that there would be a fire drill sometime in the next 24 hours.

“Ah, how efficient.” he thought, tossing the script onto the desk by the microphone and making his own way to the nearest fire exit. One of these days he would just set the alarms off himself and see how bloody efficient things were then ... well, he’d like to, but he probably wouldn’t actually do it.

Outside, selected members of staff were standing at the four designated collection points (lamp-posts), surrounded by small groups of people, ticking off names on their lists. Everyone seemed quite happy. They stood about, got ticked off, and then started chatting cheerily.

“Just like clockwork.” he muttered to no-one in particular.

Looking around he couldn’t see his boss anywhere, which was a shame because “general manager and assistant manager are mutually self-accountable”. The phrase had stuck in his mind as a classic.

Having accounted for himself he made a mental note that the general manager was being mutually accounted as elsewhere and promptly threw it in his mental bin. Unfortunately his mental bin was full, with small notes like “what happens if the list-holders are absent or can’t find their list in the unlikely event of fire breaking out without first giving a day’s notice?” and biggies like “and what if the cinema actually has hundreds of customers in ... arsehole!”, so the note fell back out.

“I suppose I’ll have to find him.” he said out loud, again to no-one in particular.

“Who?” piped out Elaine Smith nervously, looking down at her list and hoping she hadn’t blundered.

Since he hadn’t been looking quite directly at her, he didn’t immediately register that she was talking to him. The resulting pause made Elaine slip from mere nervousness towards paranoia but she saved herself almost immediately by noticing that all five of the people on her list were indeed still standing right next to her.

“What...” started Elaine, hoping that a completely different question might help shed some light on what was now only a slightly confusing situation.

“The general manager, Elaine, is not accounted for.” he said, not waiting for her to finish in case she came up with a question which would just prolong the agony a bit further.

“Oh, I think he went looking for you Mr B.”, said a voice behind him.

Turning his head he replied “Thanks Jeremy. I guess we ought to wait here until he finds me then ... tea anyone?”

Ten minutes and a cup of tea later the bells stopped and the cinema staff began making their way back inside. How thoughtful of his boss to provide a cuppa to warm the troops in the car-park on this chilly November day.

“Now that’s what I call a plan Jeremy. Dissuade the staff from returning to the building too early, or nipping off home, by setting up a tea bar in the car-park. Brilliant.” he concluded with a smile.

“I guess, if there’s a real fire, we’ll have to warm our hands on the flames.” he added ironically.

There’d still been no sign of his boss, apart from the bells stopping, which must have been him since everyone else was outside in the cold sipping hot tea and wishing they had ‘risked their lives’ just a little bit by stopping to grab their coat on the way out. Starting back towards the main entrance he wondered what would meet him at the door. Had the general manager really been scouring the building for him these last ten minutes or just convincing himself that everyone had really got out?

Stepping up to the main doors he was still looking out for his boss when his “warm our hands on the flames” jibe popped back into his head. Actually, it not so much popped as crashed: like an echo that somehow manages to get amplified and comes back all full of itself. Suddenly he was unspeakably angry with himself for saying that.

“It’s the sort of thing Sylvia would say.” he thought, shuddering and stopping in his tracks.

A young assistant projectionist called Joe Franks bumped into the back of him. Before he could say “Excuse me Mr B”, whilst thinking “you idiot”, one of the fire extinguishers by the door went off. The

hapless soul who'd been inspecting it, mild mannered janitor Henry Wilks, suddenly realised that not-only did he not know what to do when told to "check all the extinguishers" he was clueless about how to proceed faced with a red metal cylinder violently spraying water over his colleagues.

With no off-switch, whichever way he turned seemed to make things worse. Every piece of furniture and decor around him seemed to have been specially placed to deflect water right at someone. Finally deciding that the floor was the only safe bet, he grimaced with resignation as the remainder of the water splashed over his own trousers and shoes.

"That was lucky" said Joe to Eddie, smiling in the realisation that they were now the only two people in the vicinity who could be described in any sense as dry.

"Luck?" said Eddie, "in my experience, there's no such thing as luck." he continued, quoting his all time hero Obi-Wan Kenobi ... the Alec Guinness portrayal that is, the jury was still out on young Ewan McGregor in his mind.

Splashing across the carpet to the dejected Henry, Eddie had no trouble producing a comforting smile, unlike the rest of the staff, who were either wearing scowls or smirks, depending on how wet they were.

"No worries Henry. At least we know they work now." he said, winking.

"Thanks Mr B. I'll get it mopped up. Do you want me to, err, check the other extinguishers now?" asked Henry, his voice tailing off rapidly, in hope more than expectation.

“I think we can leave that until later Henry” said Eddie reassuringly, “and ... just count ‘em up eh, no need to actually inspect the contents next time.” he whispered, winking again.

Returning to his office, a small room used by several people who liked to think of it as theirs, he picked up the fire drill script again.

“One. The General Manager shall determine the appropriate time for the test and shall operate the alarm from a position of his choosing.” read Eddie to himself.

“Why does he insist on calling it a test?” he wondered.

“I’m sure I wasn’t the only person to point out that everyone else on the entire planet calls it a fire-drill or a fire-practice. But no, Jeff ‘Sylvia’ Stevenson says it’s a fire-test and that’s that. As long as he gets his little procedure down on paper and filed away then he’s happy. Doesn’t matter if it actually works well or not. I bet he’s in his office now plotting average exit times on some poxy chart.”

Realising that the red mist was rising, he stopped himself and tried to think of something more constructive. This had been happening a lot lately. In fact, ever since Sylvia had come in as General Manager. He was bitter but not because he hadn’t got the job. Well, not quite. He hadn’t even applied for the job, mainly because everybody knew they would bring someone in from outside. He could have applied though, and made them at least consider him. Looking at Sylvia’s performance over the last two months he knew now that he could do better.

“Why didn’t I apply?” he thought for the umpteenth time, staring at the fire-drill (test) sheet (script) that Mr Stevenson (Sylvia) had handed him the day before. No answer came. Instead, the door

opened and in walked Jeff Stevenson.

“Come in!” thought Eddie.

“Ah, Eddie.” said Jeff, looking directly at Eddie and smiling. In a tribute to all the management courses he’d been on, Jeff then forced himself to pause for just long enough to allow Eddie to speak, if he’d wanted to, before saying “How do you think it went?”

Eddie had been on a management course too, once, and despite the impression he always tried to give people, largely to avoid getting sent on one again, he had actually quite enjoyed it. Not so much at the time, the course had talked as much bollocks as sense, but that was still 50% sense. Afterwards it had really come into its own, as Eddie realised that most managers have a special ability to cling to the bollocks bits and completely forget the sensible stuff.

As if to prove the point, Jeff then changed his open question into a loaded one by adding “I thought it was great. All out in under five minutes!” before Eddie could speak.

“What was the target?” asked Eddie, as if he didn’t know and, more impressively, as if he cared.

“Erm, 7 point 5 minutes.” replied Jeff, almost gleefully, checking his notes to make sure he was right.

“Great.” said Eddie, at the same time nodding in an attempt to avoid the slip into sarcasm.

“How is ...” he started but felt a smile coming on so he bailed out, putting his hand over his mouth as if he was about to cough.

“Sorry. How is that calculated exactly, seven and a half minutes?”

“Well, that’s a good question,” replied Jeff, moving right into the office and perching himself on the edge of Eddie’s desk, “what you

do is...”

Eddie wasn't listening of course. He pushed his chair back a bit, notionally to give his boss a bit more space to sift through his print-outs, but actually because he really didn't like being near him. The noise washed over him and he displayed his mastery of the great human art of saying “oh”, “yes” or nodding in the right places without listening to a word.

As Jeff's tepid version of evacuation dynamics drew to a close, Eddie's mind drifted back from thoughts of his own self-thwarted ambitions to the day's films ahead.

“Does that make sense?” concluded Jeff, his positivity dented slightly by the realisation that his figures were slightly wrong because he'd counted some of the staff twice.

“Perfectly.” lied Eddie, “Err, we open in 15 minutes so I have to go I'm afraid.” he added.

“Yes, of course.” agreed Jeff, looking at his watch.

As Eddie got up he realised that Jeff was sitting on the one piece of paper that he needed. Nothing more suitable than the obvious “Excuse me, you're sitting on my running order” could rise above his disgust at the thought of picking up a piece of warm paper so he said nothing. He would have left the room first if Jeff hadn't suddenly sprung to his feet and almost dashed out, saying “Things to do.” as he went.

Eddie looked at the running order on his desk. Next to it, undisturbed by its author's backside, was the fire-drill script. A feeling grabbed him. He picked up the pristine A4 page, screwed it up into a ball, opened the window and threw it out. The window, being

more of a vent than a viewport, was 6 feet off the ground so Eddie couldn't see through it without standing on something. He was only 5'11" but he always claimed to be 6 foot. Well he was in his shoes. If anyone ever asked him how tall he was when he happened to be barefoot then he would say 5'11".

Eddie had never stood on something to look through the window, and he didn't now either. He didn't know what was out there, the shape of the building was complicated so he wasn't even sure which direction his room faced. He felt no need to know about the view or the fate of the fire-test script. He'd trusted his feelings, everything would be fine.

Chapter 2

Later, walking home, his thoughts turned to Sylvia again. He smiled to himself. All the staff called him Sylvia, or just Sylv, behind his back now and Eddie had started it. One afternoon, pissed off with Stevenson after he'd referred to him as "duty assistant manager" for the fourth time, he'd whispered "Silver's on one again" to Henry. Since Henry can't hear half of what's said to him in a normal voice it's not surprising he misheard it as Sylvia.

"Ha. Sylvia. That's a good one. Suits him." chuckled Henry.

Eddie paused, not sure whether Henry was an undiscovered comic genius or a deaf old codger. Stevenson always wore a silver-grey suit, hence Silver.

"Suits him. Yeah." said Eddie, deciding that Sylvia was funnier than Silver anyway and knowing that he must make it his mission to promote the nickname at every opportunity.

Eddie thought that every time he heard someone say Sylvia it would make him feel better about only being an assistant manager. It did. Even if he overheard someone talking about a person who's name actually was Sylvia, it made him feel good.

“Sylvia” he thought to himself, and smiled again. It even worked when he said it to himself.

Rounding the corner into his road he spotted a big puddle, almost as deep as the kerb was high. He hurried past it, trying to suppress a memory that he knew might pop out. It did. He burst into laughter, briefly, then got hold of himself. He was home now and that was enough to wipe a smile off his face anytime.

The house was old. Not very old, late Victorian. Reassuringly old, Eddie always thought. Old enough to prove it could last but not so old it might start falling down without serious maintenance, also known as rebuilding. In fact, bits of the house had fallen down, but only bits that Eddie had ‘improved’ himself as part of his efforts to modernise the place. And it was modern now. Brush-marks on most of the walls, new picture rails that were almost level and bookshelves that sagged in the middle; all testament to the age of DIY.

Every DIY job Eddie had ever done was the same. It started with high hopes and an honest intention to do a good professional job. Once started the realities of the house soon took hold: nothing was flat and no pair of things were at right-angles to each other. At some stage Eddie would decide to be pragmatic and settle for an OK job, which meant one which looked fine from a distance.

“Flat and level, overrated in my opinion.” he would say jokingly if anyone should question his workmanship.

Only one person had ever questioned his workmanship, and that was his mother. Not that she was the only person who could spot the flaws in his decorating techniques, or the only person blunt enough to speak up. She was, pretty much, the only person full-stop to

have spent more than a few minutes in the house, other than Eddie of course, in the two years that he'd lived there. A heating engineer was the only other contender, spending most of four consecutive days there fitting a new boiler, but he was very much a get on with it and leave sort of chap rather than the 'you wouldn't believe some of the jobs I've 'ad' type that Eddie was dreading.

Opening the door he stepped inside and before he could even reach for the first button on his coat he heard a shrill beep. Standing in silence he tried to make it even quieter by straining his ears to pick up the next beep. Beep. Upstairs. On the landing he strained to hear again. Beep. Right above his head. Trudging back down the stairs he took off his coat and hung it up before going to the kitchen. Opening his bits'n'bobs drawer he wondered if there would be any 9V batteries left. It was a while since a smoke alarm had gone flat and he couldn't remember buying any new ones. Tea-towel, 60W light-bulb box (empty), packet of AAA batteries (3 left, what were they for?), Comic Relief red nose.

"Aha" said Eddie out loud, spotting the lone 9V battery.

"Last one. Must remember to get some more." he thought, making a mental note.

As he replaced the almost flat battery he counted up the number of smoke alarms in his head, "Three up here. One in the hall. Ex-one in the kitchen".

Why the previous owner had installed a smoke alarm in the kitchen he didn't know. It hadn't lasted long after Eddie moved in. It was bad enough having to try and rescue his dinner without the added ignominy of waving a tea-towel at a plastic box for two

minutes while it sings “burnt it, burnt it, burnt it!”

With burning still in mind Eddie stood by the oven to open his mail as his pizza, fresh from the fridge, cooked for 8-10 minutes.

“In at 36” he noted.

“Credit card, loan, credit card, charity, bill” .

It was 38. The phone rang. Bugger. Running into the living room he picked up the handset, “Hello?”

“Hi, it’s only me.” said the voice on the other end.

“Mum, I’m in the middle of cooking, I’ll have to call you back later.” said Eddie.

“Oh, but I’m going out in a minute.” came the disappointed reply.

“Well, you call me back when you get home then.” said Eddie, almost snapping.

“Unless it’s urgent. It’s not urgent is it?” added Eddie quickly and much more softly, suddenly worried he might have upset her.

“No, just calling to find out if you’re alright...” she said, in the classic mothers’ tone.

“OK, speak to you later then.” said Eddie, putting down the phone.

He ran back to the oven. It flicked onto 45 as he arrived, “Perfect.”

Skilfully manoeuvring the piping-hot pizza from the oven bars onto a large white plate, with the aid only of a single fork, would have been all the more impressive if Eddie had then been able to find a clean knife. Instead he had to resort to rummaging in the dishwasher, which he had forgotten to switch on both the previous

evening and in the morning before he went out.

“Bugger” he thought, examining one particular knife which now appeared to have at least 4-day-old pizza cement on it: in fact, it was over a month old, since every time he ran the dishwasher and found something still dirty, he’d just pop it straight back in there. Of course, Eddie had no idea that this same knife was spending so much time in the dishwasher because a) all his knives looked exactly the same (under the pizza) and b) it’s of no importance whatsoever.

A knife which had only been used for buttering toast stood out as the best candidate for a run under the hot tap. Having already wasted enough time, Eddie skipped the drying bit, even though there was a nice clean tea-towel at hand, and marched out of the kitchen parading his dinner before him. On any other evening he would have dodged around the dining table without a thought, on his way to the living room. But now he stopped and looked at the table.

“I ought to use that more.” he said quietly to himself, out loud.

Maybe because his mother had just called or maybe just because he liked to surprise himself, he sat down and ate at a table for the first time in ages. The pizza didn’t taste any better, or any worse. His mind didn’t wander to anywhere profound, undulled by the TV. He still dropped a splot of tomato sauce down his front, even though he was sitting up straight. Yet, somehow he felt different; strange - no, puzzled - no, upset - no, but different - yes.

Eddie made no attempt to analyse his sudden feeling of difference. Instead, he simply thought “Odd!” and went back to the kitchen in search of ice-cream. It wasn’t much of a search because he’d brought a box of just-past-sell-by Magnums home with him and even the

worst of memories couldn't fail to hold the information 'Magnums in bottom basket of freezer' for less than an hour.

Opening the wrapping as he went, this time Eddie's only pause in the dining room was to drop the torn brown paper onto his dirty plate as he passed.

It was dark outside, as is normal for November evenings, and it was dark in Eddie's living room too ... even after he'd flicked the light switch to its traditional 'on' position. The only clue, and it was a dead give-away to a seasoned light-operator like Eddie, was the short "dink" noise that had accompanied the click of the light-switch.

"Ah, the death-cry of the lesser-spotted white 60 watt bulb." he thought, followed by "Nuts" out loud, as he remembered that he was out of replacements.

A lesser mortal might have tripped on one of the myriad of objects that littered Eddie's lounge floor, risking their precious post-pizza Magnum. But not Eddie. His skills in the art of fiddling about in the dark had been honed to a sharp point, over many years, in various cinemas. Not doing what would obviously be first choice fiddling activities, but more mundane things like looking for lamp switches as he was now. Somehow, finding the lamp-switch with Magnum intact came as little consolation. Almost as little as the effect that turning the lamp on had on the brightness of the room.

Peering round in the semi-gloom, Eddie at last spotted what he was looking for. The TV remote. "Gotcha" he whispered, picking it out from under the magazine section of a recent Sunday paper. There was a TV guide around somewhere, but Eddie didn't even think to look for it. He switched on the TV at the set and as it clunked and

glowed into life he virtually launched himself at the sofa, twisting in mid-air and landing, outstretched, remote in one hand and Magnum in the other.

It's no small testament to the power of TV (and Magnums) that Eddie, now bathed in light, never once wondered why he'd just spent time creeping about trying to turn on his pathetic little lamp when he could just have switched on the TV directly. To Eddie, TV could never be thought of as just light: to him, in some very very sad way, it was ... his friend.

Tonight was slightly special. Just as most people, who work Monday to Friday, have Friday nights; Eddie had DOT nights ... nothing to do with the internet, 'Day Off Tomorrow'. On most of these nights Eddie took no chances. Just in case there was nothing worth watching on TV, he'd pop into the video shop on the way home and rent a couple of videos ... actually, three videos. Always three videos.

His rationale for needing three videos was very complex, and only partially influenced by the fact that as a Platinum Member of the video shop he could take out three for the price of two on certain nights. Firstly, Eddie saw lots of films at the cinema: therefore he'd already seen the majority of those on offer at the video shop. Those he hadn't seen were either girlie chick-flicks that he'd missed on purpose or films that had gone 'straight to video'. His first choice was to find a film that he hadn't seen which at least featured someone or something he recognised. This was usually possible, even if it was a case of 'From the director of ... a film you vaguely remember seeing that wasn't completely terrible'. Depending on how long it'd been since his last visit, choice two could either satisfy the same criterion

or it would have to be a stab in the dark.

Stabbing in the dark at the video shop, not literally obviously, was a skill that Eddie had elevated to a combination of fine art and robust science. The first rule was to avoid sequels to sequels: usually the first sequel to a trashy film was of similar quality to the original, but all subsequent films were dire and only got made because ‘some people never learn’. The second rule was don’t pick a video because you fancy the bird on the cover or want to join in with what it looks like she’s getting up to. Usually you’ll get a ‘sex’ scene in the first 5 minutes that’ll have you watching, or fast-forwarding, the rest of the film in vain hoping to see a bit more.

Rules three to nine are all rather esoteric, relating to subtleties in the artwork or wording; and rule ten, for reasons which Eddie hoped would never come to light, was never choose a film which has anything to do with rabbits.

Having chosen two films he hadn’t seen, Eddie then used his third pick as a banker, a safe bet, something he knew was really good. This was the hardest choice of all because of the responsibility it held: the job of choice three was to step in if either of the first two choices was too bad to watch all the way through. This film had to save the day if one, or god-forbid both, of the other films failed.

Either because his choosing technique was so good, or because his standards on DOT nights were so low, Eddie always ended up watching both of his new films. Tonight was no different. A low-budget sci-fi film carried him off to alien worlds that definitely bore no resemblance to Arizona. A horror film made him jump twice and say “yuk” out loud once. Then, as on every other DOT night, he

started the third film.

“I have to watch this, it’s a classic.” he reasoned.

About five hours after flopping down on the sofa, broken only by a trip to the toilet and a kitchen raid for an unfeasibly large sandwich, Eddie made his way upstairs to bed. As he climbed, laboriously, he found himself whispering, “Use the Force Luke!”

Chapter 3

Stepping off the curb he pretended not to look to his right. He'd looked left but that was as far it went with him and the Green Cross Man. A dodgy character if ever he'd seen one ... and look what happened to him, turned into Darth Vader by all accounts.

His peripheral vision caught sight of the sickly grey BMW heading directly at him. He continued. The driver honked and stopped, in that order. Eddie stopped too, and stood in the road, in front of the car, glaring at the driver. Five seconds passed, then ten more. The driver honked, Eddie glared, another car turned up and joined in the honking.

The beamer inched forward as Eddie's glare subsided into a stare. Actually, it millimetred forward but Eddie was a die-hard imperialist so he thought it was inching.

“Go on, just go on.” he thought.

Suddenly the grey man (he'd obviously bought the car to match his skin tone) snapped and reversed back rapidly ... straight into the car behind, which had been creeping forward too.

Eddie walked off and left the now silent cars and their far from

silent owners to themselves and their insurance claims.

“Bloody BMW, only good for one thing, remembering the order of the bridges in New York city: Brooklyn, Manhattan and ... one beginning with W”. He hated quizzes.

This wasn't New York city. He'd been there of course, and that acronym had stuck in his mind, lurking, minding its own business until now. No, this was somewhere in England ... but Eddie didn't know where, exactly. He'd jumped on the first train that arrived at the station and got off at the first stop he hit after finishing a chapter of his book.

It was his day off after all. There were two things he hated doing on his days off: one was staying at home, the other was going somewhere. Faced with this repeated dilemma, Eddie had invented an ingenious solution - go nowhere. That was the plan anyway. In the two years that he'd been trying to go to nowhere he'd invariably ended up somewhere by mistake. However, he'd always been pleasantly surprised by the nearly-nowheres and had quite enjoyed being there ... especially since it was easy to convince himself that it was better than any of the somewheres that he could have thought up in advance.

Of course, the railway played a major part in the going to nowhere. Despite a train's seemingly inherent ability to actually get nowhere quite fast, to Eddie the railway organisation itself was irritatingly obsessed with going somewhere. This obsession was embodied by ... the ticket! Small pieces of paper which pop out of a machine at one place and then seem to only live for being inserted into a machine at another place. Since you actually needed a ticket

to even get onto the platform at Guildford, it was very clear that the railway just wasn't going to be happy about people using it to deliberately go nowhere.

This was half the fun; or, depending on how close to nowhere he got, maybe all of the fun. Firstly, Eddie wasn't a fare-dodger and never had been, despite what he might have told his friend Ian Briggs when he was at school. Eddie always had a valid ticket, it just wasn't valid for where he was going. How could it be? At least he always bought a ticket to somewhere that was at least as far away as he expected he might get, if he failed to get to nowhere. Sadly, if not obviously, this was not an argument that had much mileage when it came to train guards, literally, as Eddie had discovered to his dismay at the first attempt. Forced to get off the train at the very next stop, Eddie had taken the guard's advice and gone back to Guildford but hadn't bothered to go on to his 'proper destination'.

The setback was easily overcome by a couple of simple observations. One, guards are supposed to be polite and helpful. They don't like to bug the vast majority of fare-paying customers, who are just trying to get somewhere, after every stop. Two, the guards have other things to do as well as check tickets and are usually tired or unmotivated, so they can't remember which tickets they've checked and which they haven't. As a result, every time they come round they say "tickets from X" to no-one in particular, and only check the ones they are offered. So ... don't offer!

Even if the guard is having a good memory day and is being particularly zealous, then there is one final stratagem that will let your ticket stay safely in your pocket. Read a book. This always

worked for Eddie and he hadn't had to show his ticket on a train since he'd started doing it. Slightly worryingly it didn't always seem to work for other people, and Eddie often speculated as to why, so that he might avoid slipping up in the future.

One minor distinguishing feature was obviously the physical appearance of both reader and book. It seemed that schoolboys were just suspect whatever they were doing, as were women chewing gum or wearing high heels. Bad choices of book were harder to pin down: magazines and newspapers were definitely out but proper books seemed to fail too sometimes. All Eddie could think of was that the guards were somehow quite good at spotting who was concentrating on their reading and who was trying to pull a fast one.

Having avoided the guards on the train, you might think Eddie would deliberately get off at a small unmanned station to avoid presenting his ticket again. This had occurred to him at the outset, but he'd immediately dismissed the idea for one very important reason - anything he did to directly influence his destination could and would spoil everything. It was like Schrodinger's cat - as soon as you look in the box, the cat's dead ... or something. If his station had ticket barriers, which were shut as they often aren't, then he would have to deal with it.

Eddie had become great at dealing with station staff. His favourite line was, "Shit! This isn't Reading? I have an important meeting in ten minutes. Can I use your phone?". At which most railway staff would politely refuse and, seeing he did have a valid ticket to Reading, would let him through and direct him towards a public pay phone.

On this particular day there had been no ticket barriers. That wasn't the only thing this place didn't have, character being right up there at the top of the gone missing list. He'd been wandering around for about half an hour and hadn't seen one thing that he could even vaguely call nice. In fact, what there seemed to be was more of an industrial estate than a town.

"This place stinks!" said Eddie, stopping suddenly.

He took a big sniff of air to prove his point. It didn't literally stink but the smell wasn't that pleasant either - a hint of diesel oil and the suspicion of pig farms nearby dominated the nose.

"Well, there's nothing here worth seeing." announced Eddie, to himself.

"Looks like I've finally found nowhere." he added disappointedly.

Eddie stood on the spot and sighed. He turned round slowly, half hoping that there would be a quaint little village peeping round the side of one of the large grey boxy buildings that almost surrounded him. After 360 degrees he started on a second circle just in case he'd missed something, but gave up after 57 degrees in disgust.

"Hmmm, it's gone half twelve." pondered Eddie, looking at his watch again to make sure it hadn't stopped.

He was hungry already since he'd had a late but light breakfast.

"Not a great deal of choice in the immediate vicinity Mr B." he thought, putting on his best Henry Wilks impression.

Considering the high eyesore rating of the location, Eddie remained fixed on this spot for a surprisingly long time. More than 5 minutes in fact. For the whole of that time Eddie's mind was in something of a muddle. Not because there were many options at his

disposal, but because he couldn't quite get to grips with the sheer dullness of the place. It troubled him.

"How could I end up in such an awful place?" would be a fair summary of what he was thinking, although "nuts", "dump" and "not even a Burger King" were some of the actual words which popped in and out of his mind.

Who knows how long he would have stood there, jelly brained, if he hadn't suddenly noticed a massive lorry trying to turn into a T-junction about 200 yards from him. Because of its length the lorry had to totally cut the corner, which it had started to do but had been forced to stop by a grey BMW heading in the opposite direction. Eddie strained his eyes to see if it was the same BMW that he'd encountered earlier but he couldn't tell. There was nothing behind the car but rather than back-up and wait it proceeded to mount the pavement, squeezing between a sign-post and a wall before finally zooming down the road towards and past Eddie.

As the BMW sped away Eddie could see that the back-end was damaged. Before it was more than 100 yards past him a single brake-light lit up. Eddie panicked, thinking that the driver had spotted him and was going to come back after him. He turned to run and got three strides before he heard both "run Luke, run" and "chicken!" in his head at the same time. He stopped, turned back and saw that the car had gone.

Something was going on.

"I don't like this." he said out loud, quite loudly and almost, but not quite, angrily.

Somehow the outburst cleared his mind and he seemed to know

what to do.

“Home time.” he decided.

“The station?” thought Eddie, looking around for a sign-post.

All he could see was a blue sign with a bicycle on it and an arrow. He set off in the opposite direction.

“Everybody knows cycle routes lead you out into the middle of nowhere and then abandon you, right?” he reasoned.

Leaving the middle of nowhere he rounded a corner and heard a faint cry behind him that sounded a bit like his name. He didn’t turn or slow down. If someone here knew him then he didn’t care, this shithole was their problem.

After a few minutes walking and a few reaction turns at sign-posts that meant nothing to him, he spotted a sign for the station.

“At last. Things are picking up.” he thought, smiling.

Another minute and his smile vanished. This wasn’t the station that he’d got off at. It was bigger, much bigger.

“Oh well, maybe I’ll get home quicker from here.”

As he approached the electronic ticket barriers he fished out a ticket from his pocket and posted it into the slot. Out it popped, but the gate didn’t open.

“Can I help you sir?” came the voice of the customer assistant to his left.

“Yes, my ticket wont work.” said Eddie, handing the man, who was dressed rather reluctantly in smart blue uniform with a bright red waistcoat, his ticket.

“This is an old ticket sir.” said the man, who’s name was Ralph.

“Look, July the eleventh it says here.” he added, trying not to

sound weary and only just failing.

“Oh dear.” said Eddie, very successfully not sounding like he was starting to enjoy the encounter.

“I don’t know why I keep the old ones. Never seems to be a bin around to put them in. Lets see...” he added, pulling out a wad of tickets from his jacket pocket.

“July, July, October, May, November last year...” he muttered as he flicked through.

“Stop! That one.” said Ralph to Eddie’s surprise.

“What?” said Eddie, only just managing not to sound worried.

“There you go.” said Ralph almost gleefully picking a ticket from Eddie’s collection.

“See, we’ve just changed to a different type. This is a new one. Yes, today’s the day, it’s the return half and ... oh, it’s for the wrong line though.”

“How can that be?” said Eddie, looking at the ticket and totally failing to find anything about it which looked different from his others.

“I don’t have any other tickets and I’m here aren’t I?” he added for good measure.

“Errr” said Ralph.

“I mean, I came from Guildford today with the OUT half of the ticket so how can this half be wrong?” challenged Eddie.

“Do you still have the other half sir?” asked Ralph, as yet undecided about the validity of Eddie’s argument if not his ticket.

“No” said Eddie simply and in a tone he’d practiced all his life; a tone which said “OK, I can’t prove it, but hey, I’m an honest guy

so please trust me...”

“In that case, I’m afraid I can’t let you through with that ticket sir. You’ll have to pay a supplement to upgrade it.” announced Ralph, in a tone he’d recently been practicing; a tone which he wanted to say “Sorry, just trying to do my job to the best of my ability in the fairest way I can.”

In the spirit of the day he was having, Eddie totally misinterpreted the inspector’s tone as “Sorry pal, maybe someone else did screw up but tough, shit happens, now pay up or else!”

“Well, I’m not very happy about that,” started Eddie, “I’m going to have to take down your name and write a letter of complaint about this,” he added, bluffing, “now, how much is it ... Ralph Martin ... which of those is your first name?” he concluded.

As he prodded at the awkward but cheap keys on his ticket machine Ralph was gearing up to say “It’s Mr Martin sir, and that’ll be X pounds”. Unfortunately for him the machine refused to issue a new ticket so he said instead “excuse me a moment sir”. A few more button presses later and Ralph’s face started to redden involuntarily.

“Ah. Your ticket is actually more expensive than the one you need sir... that’ll be fine... sorry to keep you sir.”

For an instant it did occur to Eddie to ask for a refund, but the thought passed quickly and he moved on through the gate, held open by the red-faced inspector. He paused a couple of paces later and turned but before he could open his mouth the inspector said “Platform 2 sir. Over the footbridge.”

As he headed for the bridge Eddie smiled, “That’s more like it!”

Chapter 4

The train arrived. Well, a train arrived. Eddie couldn't tell if it was his train because it was unmarked and there were no working information screens.

“How hard would it be to stick a sign on the front, or the sides, or both.” thought Eddie glumly.

Noticing that the train was one of the most ancient he'd ever seen running, the sort where you have to shove down the window to open the door, he was about to think something even more glumly when the platform Tannoy butted in.

Unfortunately the station announcer had waited until the train was almost in the station before talking. Tannoy versus 475 tonnes of train slowing to a stop, no contest. Whether this was deliberately malicious, the result of pure incompetence or merely an act of bad judgement, no-one will ever know. Since, seconds later, the announcer suffered a complete collapse of pride in his job and quit on the spot. Asking himself “What's the point?” and finding no answer had tipped him over the edge. He would run away to Scotland and the fact that absolutely no-one noticed he'd gone for over a month

would, in every way, justify his decision.

Now all was quiet, save for the odd door slamming as customers, once known as passengers, boarded the ancient relic of a train they had been served up. The Tannoy gave a sharp crackle, almost as if it knew to its own embarrassment that it ought to be saying something.

The platform was equipped with one large new-looking display board. It was completely blank apart from a single little orange light in the bottom right corner. The orange light flashed on and off every second. This had been bugging Eddie for the whole of his wait.

“That’s just taking the piss.” he’d thought.

“If the thing doesn’t work then switch it off. Don’t leave it blipping like that. It looks like it’s just about to show something. It’s saying ‘I’m switched on you know, I do work, if you’ll just wait a few more bloody minutes then I’ll show you something useful OK!’ ”

If Eddie had been counting how many times he’d looked at the display board to see if it had decided to show something, then he would have lost count by now. Those of a perverse disposition may be amused to know that just as Eddie looked away from the display for the last time it rose from its slumber to reveal that this was indeed Eddie’s train. Eddie would have been more amused to know that the strain proved too much for it and it almost immediately fell into darkness, never to so much as blip again.

Eddie found himself almost exactly between two carriages, alone. All the other people, who had just spent the last 20 minutes with him waiting to be passengers, had now confidently got on the train. This was a shame for at least three of them, who would soon discover that this was a ‘fast’ train and would therefore be trotting, however

annoyingly slowly, past their stop without quite stopping. A fourth unfortunate was a man called Clive Stevenson who, unbeknown to himself and everyone else, was the current record holder for falling asleep on a train and missing his stop. Clive would today miss his stop for an amazing four hundred and third time, but since it wasn't technically a stop this wouldn't improve his figures - a minor complication that wouldn't stop anyone sleeping at night, or Clive sleeping during the day.

Both carriages looked equally full so Eddie chose to go left. If in doubt go left, that had always been his mantra, or part of it, along with "always call tails" and "never go first".

Opening the door he enquired of the young woman sitting beside it "Is this the Guildford train?"

"Dunno" she replied, adding "not going there." as a disclaimer.

"Yes, this is for Guildford." said someone else as if they hadn't spoken to a soul all day and just had to say something.

A whistle sounded and a guard shouted something that sounded like "c'mon get on" because it was. Eddie got on the train and pulled the door to behind him. It clicked wimpily rather than clunking shut properly so he opened it again, this time slamming it shut as hard as he could. By now the required number of whistles had been blown and all the proper flag-replacement things had been waved so the train lurched into motion. Eddie was knocked backwards slightly and allowed himself to drop gracelessly into the vacant seat behind him, opposite the curt or dim girl who had so recently and utterly failed to be helpful.

As the train gathered what speed it could for its age, the girl

avoided Eddie's attempts at eye contact by rummaging in her bag. As bags go it was pretty ordinary, he mused, but not entirely what you'd expect in the hands of this particular carrier.

"Let's look at the evidence." he thought to himself in a gruff but logical, Inspector Morse, sort of way.

"What we have here is a young woman, 18-24, not particularly attractive... (Objection my lord! Sustained), wearing blue jeans, a cheap brown leather jacket over a rather unflattering and seemingly too short red skimpy top (She'll catch her death of cold) and high-heeled shoes. How likely is it that a person dressed like this would be carrying a well-worn black leather..."

Eddie's analysis faltered at this point because he couldn't think of any word to describe the bag other than 'bag' and he was looking for something a bit more precise. The bag was purse-shaped in that it had a flap that folded over the front and fastened down, and it had a carrying strap: on the other hand, it was larger than a typical purse and it had a carrying handle on the top like a briefcase.

Eventually the girl's rummaging stopped as she took out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. Before Eddie could say "this is a no smoking carriage" he realised that it wasn't.

"Arse" he thought.

"No-one else seems to be smoking, maybe she'll only have the one." he hoped.

Placing a cigarette nonchalantly between her lips she presented her lighter to it and flicked the flint-wheel. Nothing happened. She tried again, and again.

"Yes!" thought Eddie with delight, "her bloody lighter doesn't

work.”

“Got a light mate?” she enquired of Eddie in what seemed like a newly acquired tone of friendship.

“What?” said Eddie, amazed that she should ask him, a non-smoker, for a light.

“A light?” she repeated, waving her fag at him in explanation.

Realising to his annoyance that it was perhaps reasonable to expect passengers in a smoking carriage to be smokers, he said slowly “I have a box of matches, do you want to buy them?”

“Buy ‘em?” she replied in puzzlement, not sure if he was joking.

“Yes, buy them.” said Eddie a little more aggressively.

“You know, like in shops, you buy cigarettes, you buy a lighter, it runs out, you buy a new one or you buy matches...”

Almost two seconds of what passes for silence on a train passed. Eddie’s mind was racing. What was he going to say if she decided she did want to buy his matches? He didn’t have any. What had made him say that? For a split-second it had seemed like a smart thing to say, but now he was in a hole and he had to stop digging.

“Errr, actually...” started Eddie, patting each of his pockets in turn.

The girl wasn’t listening or watching. She’d already wasted more time on Eddie than she cared to spend on most people and was already scanning the carriage for another source of illumination. When Eddie looked up to tell her “I don’t have any matches after all” she was looking to his right so he didn’t say it.

The new temporary focus of the girl’s attention was a bearded geezer sitting on the other side of the carriage by the window. Eddie

glanced across at him, then did a double take and looked back again more closely. Sitting down it was hard to tell exactly, but the geezer was obviously tall. He was sort of draped across the seat untidily, like the long raincoat he was wearing had just been thrown there without him in it. One leg was straight, disappearing under the seat opposite and the other was bent, its cowboy-booted foot pressed against the front edge of the seat. Beard, boots, next Eddie was drawn to the top of the man's head, expecting a hat. There was no hat, all the more surprising since there was very little hair either. Eddie glanced around the luggage racks, disturbed that there was no hat...

Hat searching was no sooner started than it was interrupted by the geezer getting up and walking the two steps up to the girl. Taking a shiny Zippo lighter out of his hitherto unseen waistcoat pocket he leaned over to the girl and lit her up, saying "here you go darling ... on me!"

"Cheers." she replied without smiling, as the geezer returned to his seat and posture.

The geezer didn't look at Eddie at all. The girl looked at Eddie. He looked straight back at her and she blew smoke right back at him. He held his breath without looking like he was holding his breath. This wasn't the first battle he'd had with a smoker. It was the first in a train though and the smoke seemed to whirl around him for ever, bouncing off the walls, roof and other passengers in a determined effort to attack him.

As hopeless situations go, this was one. All that Eddie could think was "Bollocks!". This was almost entirely his own fault. As non a non-smoker as you could get, he'd got in the smoking carriage.

He'd managed to sit opposite the only active smoker in there and, on top of it all, he'd pissed her off.

"I bet she'll smoke every last fag in that packet at me just to wind me up." he thought, perceptively as that was exactly what she intended to do.

Actually, that's what she always did on trains and this occasion brought her no more pleasure than usual since she still hadn't twigged that Eddie didn't smoke - she just thought he was being a tit ... "buy the fucking matches".

The smell of smoke subsided slightly. Eddie decided to brave a controlled breath now rather than wait for a final dignity crushing gasp at the last possible second. He breathed out through his nose and then in, keeping his mouth closed. To him the air was rank. As someone who was sensitive to the slightest whiff of smoke, this was total immersion. He managed to avoid coughing, assisted by the distraction of the train slowing down as if to stop. He kept looking at the girl as she prepared for her next attack.

Eddie knew he couldn't stay here much longer. Neither could he bear the thought of letting her win by moving to another seat, preferably in another carriage. As the train slowed slowly he decided that if it stopped at a station, rather than in the middle of nowhere for a rest as is more common with these old decrepit excuses for trains, then his best escape was to get off the train here, pretending it was his stop. There was a tiny flaw in this face-saving exercise - he'd already mentioned rather publicly that he was going to Guildford. Fortunately for Eddie's morale this was something that he'd completely forgotten in the heat of battle and it was with joy that

he spotted signs of a station approaching ever so slowly now.

He got up, still looking at the girl, and reached for the window catch. As his hand touched the catch he looked down at where the platform should be and saw to his horror only tracks. The platform was on the other side.

“Piss, piss, piss.” he lamented to himself, turning and heading for the door on the other side of the train.

Woe upon woe.

“Excuse me please.” he said in a very weak mousy voice to the bearded geezer whose long legs were now blocking his way.

The geezer instinctively pulled in his long legs to let Eddie pass. He didn’t even notice that it was Eddie since a rather buxom blonde on the platform had caught his eye and he was taking the opportunity to ogle her as much as possible before the train departed.

Under normal circumstances Eddie would have been joining in the ogling. But, as he opened the door, he could feel the smoking girl’s smile burning into his back. Then, to make his humiliation complete, he heard the helpful soul pipe up for the second time in the day with “Err, this isn’t Guildford.”

Chapter 5

Home. The front door squeaked as he opened it, sounding like “Loser!”. Wasn’t he even safe in his own home? Eddie stood wearily and warily on his door-step for five seconds. He took a deep breath and stepped inside, half expecting the floor to give way beneath him or a torrent of water to come gushing down the stairs. Nothing happened, so he turned round to close the door rather than run back out through it. Before he could shut the door though, something caught his eye. Through the glass-panelled door to the living-room he could see the red light on his answering machine was flashing.

Eddie closed the door and stood in the hall. He looked at the flashing light and stood. He turned his head left a fraction and then right a fraction. He stood and looked, then looked and stood. It was bad news, it had to be. The light was definitely flashing faster than usual. Not much faster, barely perceptibly faster, but absolutely definitely a tiny touch faster than he was comfortable with.

Switching on the hall light, he carefully hung his coat on the third hook along by the stairs. This wasn’t the usual hook for this particular coat but this was no usual day. Better to play safe and go

for the least loaded hook rather than the right one...

The stairs felt steeper too as he made his way purposefully to the spare-room. As the words ‘spare-room’ lolled through his mind he noted the ridiculousness of the phrase ... “sure, take this one away with you, it’s a spare.”

Eddie’s spare-room was, if he’d actually ever been bothered to think about it, technically a guest-room. You’d have to say technically because no guest had ever stayed in it, which was a shame because it was probably the best kept, and certainly the tidiest, room in the house. Amply furnished with a double bed, dresser and wardrobe it would have satisfied all but the fussiest of visitors.

It was a wholly unremarkable room. If more people had visited it then sooner or later someone would have called it bland. Not bland in a bad way, just not very interesting. Everything about it was a cliché. The walls were magnolia and the carpet was a plain mid-blue. The ceiling was brilliant white and the furniture was stripped pine. The lampshade was one of those spherical paper-lantern ones and the curtains were ... closed.

On closer inspection there were a few anomalies, if deviations from very late twentieth century style magazines and TV programmes count as anomalies in a Victorian semi. There were no pictures on any of the walls. The top of the dresser was completely bare. There was no bedside table of any description, unless you count the floor. It was minimal, but not minimal as in all the unnecessary clutter taken out; rather, minimal as in only a few bare essentials added. All the empty spaces cried out for occupation. It was a room waiting for someone to come along with ‘just a few things’. It was an

empty room trying to look full. On the right-hand wardrobe door, about halfway up, just off-centre, was a small yellow sticker with a smiley face on.

There was one feature which had been done nicely. Situated directly above the living-room, the guest-room had an original fireplace which shared a chimney with the room below. Not being a fan of real fires, or more precisely not being a fan of making real fires, Eddie had opted for the make-over shows' favourite technique of putting a container of dried flowers and a few never-to-be-lit candles in both fireplaces.

To avoid draughts he'd also fitted boards to seal up the chimney, in the flue just out of sight. Or so it seemed.

Eddie entered the room holding a small torch that he'd fetched from his bedroom on the opposite side of the landing. It was a cool torch, a cool anodised blue pen-light torch. Still, no competition for the built in house lights which Eddie now used to assist his quick check of the guest room. Satisfied that everything was in order, Eddie switched on the torch and switched off the room light. The hall light was still on downstairs and created a small bar of light at Eddie's feet as he pushed the door shut.

Kneeling in front of the fireplace Eddie pushed the flower vase right to the back of the space and the candles to the sides. Taking his Swiss Army knife he opened a wide flat blade and leaned into the fireplace, looking up at the board in the chimney. Anyone else inspecting the board would see only a piece of wood, its sturdiness when pushed leading the inspector to conclude that the visible screw heads fixed the wood to some other bits of wood whose sole purpose

was to cling immovably to the inside of the chimney, presumably aided by some screws of their own.

Obviously there were small gaps around the edge of the wood which anyone but the most ardent craftsman would put down to the limitations of amateur DIY. Eddie inserted his blade into the gap on the left-hand side of the chimney and slid it along slowly. At one particular point the blade met with some small resistance and as Eddie pushed it there was an inaudible click. Eddie then moved the blade to the right-hand side of the chimney and did the same thing; slide, resistance, push, silence. Then he did it again on the right, back to the left, back to the right, right again, then three lefts and another right.

As Eddie pushed the blade along the gap this final time there was a substantial click and the board jumped slightly. He pushed the front of the board and it moved easily upwards, hinged at the back, into a vertical position where it became caught by a catch. Folding the blade away and replacing the knife in his pocket, Eddie turned himself over so that he was lying on his back looking up the chimney through what was now clearly a secret hatchway.

A faint and somewhat soothing draft wafted by his face as some of the warm air in the room made its bid for freedom with a mad dash up the chimney. Some cold air out in the hallway wondered what was going on and burst in under the door to find out, making a whistly moaning sound as it came. Eddie looked towards the door, then down at his clothes. He shone his torch to confirm that he was wearing the pair of blue Levi jeans that his mother had, surprisingly, bought him for his last birthday. His top wasn't quite so new or

surprising: he'd bought it in the Gap sale several years before and originally it had been cornflower. Now it was a pale bluish grey but it was very comfortable and looked fine under a coat.

Sooty smells either reached his nose or rose from his memory, it was hard to tell which. Either way, the effect was a powerful reminder of the last time he'd visited this place.

"Christ, the soot!" he muttered under his breath.

He wasn't too worried about the jeans, he had other pairs. In fact, he was a bit suspicious of this particular pair. His mother had criticised him for years about buying "overpriced trousers, just for the name". So why had she bought him another pair? This was a much played-out thought which didn't recur now. Instead Eddie's mind was drawn to another of his faithful old tops, the 'red' one which had effectively lost its life in the dark chimney, and he didn't want a repeat.

Two thoughts hit him simultaneously from opposite directions. "Hey, the red top is in the wardrobe" and "Shit! The red top is in the wardrobe". Actually, they can't have been quite simultaneous because Eddie definitely felt an up starting before the down hit, a sort of emotional speed-hump.

"If it is there then it's the biggest security cock-up since Watergate." he whispered to himself, the gravity of the situation seriously impairing his sense of irony, though not his ability to stand.

With the room light on again, he paused for the slightest instant before the wardrobe then grabbed the left-hand door and yanked it open. Nothing. He opened the other door and that side was empty too. Eddie sighed with relief, closed both doors, sat on the edge of

the bed, put his head in his hands and very very nearly cried.

Fifteen minutes later Eddie was back on his back, in the dusky dark guest-room, looking up the chimney. This time he was wearing an old gardening top and some old gardening trousers. Since he hardly ever gardened this label was simply an abbreviation for 'too knackered to go out in, but too comfortable to throw away'. The 'red' top had avoided detection. This was reassuring, because if he couldn't find it then no-one could. He hoped that he'd disposed of it properly, but couldn't think for the life of him how he'd done it. He also steered well clear of wondering if someone, a mystery agent, might already have found it.

Putting all remaining doubts about the integrity of the secret before him, behind him, he reached up through the hatch. It was only 3 feet wide and the entrance was further constricted in several places by the locking mechanism. Eddie fumbled slowly and calmly in the near dark, having switched off his torch and slipped it into a pocket. He needed both hands right now and holding a cold metal torch between his teeth was not something he enjoyed, however cool it was. Soon his hands found two handles attached to the front wall of the chimney. Pulling himself into the fireplace and up the chimney was a tricky task but eventually he manoeuvred himself so that he was standing in the fireplace. Carefully he pushed the flower vase and candles with his feet back into their original positions.

Just above the handles was a metal ladder, also fixed to the wall. Eddie hauled himself up a couple of steps until he was almost clear of the hatch top and then tapped at the catch with his foot. The hatch lowered gracefully back to the horizontal and the locking mechanism

re-engaged with a confident click.

“Perhaps like the sound a prisoner hears when he’s shut away for the night?” he’d wondered previously, but not this time. This time he was wondering where the light switch was.

Apart from the tiniest sliver of light almost creeping past the edges of the hatchway below him, Eddie now found himself in almost total darkness. The top of the chimney was open to the air but had a cap to stop rain, snow and birds falling in.

“Shit.” he whispered under his breath.

There was a small lamp in the chimney, cunningly wired up to only come on when there was someone standing on the ladder. Unfortunately it had always been a bit temperamental so he’d added a time-switch that would pop the light on for a few seconds when you pressed it. It was the location of this switch that currently escaped him.

After a minute or so of feeling about he suddenly froze. Barely audible he just caught the faint suspicion of the sound of his telephone ringing. Remembering the red flashing light he started up the ladder, in the dark, humming ‘Red, Red, Wine’ by UB40. On no account did he want to overhear the message when the answering machine kicked in.

At the top of the ladder was a square hole in the chimney, covered by a thick black curtain. It would even have been black if the light had been on, which it still wasn’t. Lifting the curtain, Eddie climbed through the hole onto a carpeted floor on the other side. The floor moved slightly relative to the hole and then sprang back again. Turning round, Eddie closed a small metal door over the inside of

the hole. As he did so a light came on.

“Things still work in here then.” he said out loud, bolting the door with four heavy bolts, two on each side, which were all as long as the door was wide.

The floor felt a bit bumpy where Eddie was kneeling. He looked down and smiled, the ‘red’ top. He looked at his old clothes, sooty. He looked around the exactly rightly lit den and kept smiling, “safe”. In the chimney a lamp came on, flickered and went out again.

Chapter 6

Wednesday morning. There were two reasons why Eddie thought it was Wednesday morning: firstly, yesterday was Tuesday and secondly, he'd only just woken up. Reviewing the bare facts he wondered if actually it was still Tuesday night, but after a few moments reflection he decided that he'd had a reasonable night's sleep and that it therefore was indeed Wednesday morning.

If Eddie had been 10 feet lower, in his normal bed, this would all have been trivially obvious. It was Wednesday morning. Almost exactly 7:13am to be more precise than necessary, as was the habit of his trusty digital alarm clock. Brightly as the red 7-segment digits proclaimed the time, their efforts were totally wasted by the greater than usual elevation of their only regular viewer.

Lying on his camp-bed in total darkness, Eddie was actually wondering what time it was. Wednesday was a work day this week and yet he was in no hurry. He wondered what time it was because he didn't know not because he cared. Moments later his subconscious decided that he didn't know what the weather was doing either and he started wondering about that instead.

His mind wandered slowly, meandering amongst the trivial nothings that successfully distract most of the people most of the time. Time, weather, what can I have for dinner tonight? Calm, ordinary, normalness hung around him. It permeated his whole being. He was one with the calm. Everything was just fine. Nothing was out of place ... apart from the fact that he was hiding in a pitch-black secret room at one end of his attic.

How different his state of mind was now from that of the previous evening when he'd entered his den. Gone were the feelings of panic, persecution, hopelessness and barely contained terror. Gone but not forgotten. Over the last 12 hours he'd let those feelings whizz about in his head, bounce around in his guts and numb his heart. Gradually he'd calmed down, assisted by the overarching sense of security that this place gave him.

Finally he'd fallen asleep and his thoughts had turned to a dream, the memory of which had all but faded already. It had been a good dream, one of the best, one of his favourites. A major situation of some kind had erupted unexpectedly; usually it was a mysterious band of ruthless men who had taken hostages for some unknown reason in a local public building. This time it was in the doctors' surgery at Dapdune, a stone's throw (if you are Hercules) from Eddie's cinema. Nine men in black had captured a dozen or so members of the public in the waiting room.

A hero was needed and by a stroke of luck Eddie had spent the best part of an hour the previous day in that very waiting room. Now the waiting would pay off and he needn't be annoyed at hanging around for so long just to get a poxy little bottle of eye-drops for his

conjunctivitis. Eddie had studied the room in minute detail, almost as if he knew that one day the knowledge would be important.

Hearing a newsflash on the radio, Eddie slipped out of work unseen and headed for the surgery. Once there he bypassed the police cordon by climbing up a nearby building and leaping from roof-top to roof-top.

The waiting-room was circular with a cone-shaped glass-panelled roof. Eddie peered through one of the dirty, almost opaque, panels and could just make out where the eight villains were standing. They were almost evenly spaced around the middle of the room. Each one had a small machine gun pointed at a couple of the hostages, who were seated around the outside of the room on the usual, backbreakingly uncomfortable, chairs.

A small child was crying and pointing at the even smaller teddy bear which protruded, barely visible, from beneath the boot of one of the attackers. This was Eddie's chance. In a moment of weakness the bear-squashing brute moved his foot and bent to pick up the bear. Eddie leapt, feet first, through the glass roof towards the attackers directly behind the bear-man.

Each of Eddie's feet smashed into the head of an attacker, rendering them almost certainly instantly stone dead. Springing cat-like towards the bear-man, across the centre of the room, the two pairs of baddies on either side of him opened fire: the air filled with bullets and smoke. There was blood, lots of blood, none of it Eddie's. The four dumb bandits had taken out each other. Eddie sustained only a minor graze to the left shoe and even that went unnoticed as said shoe smashed through bear-man and carried on to wipe out

the eighth man, whose gun had jammed without getting off a single shot: probably due to poor maintenance.

There was silence as the smoke started to settle, but it didn't feel over to Eddie. Sure enough, looking towards the main door, Eddie saw the hitherto unseen ninth man raising his gun, in slow motion, to fire. Dropping to his knees Eddie grabbed the coffee table before him in both hands and launched himself, table and magazines first, at the last man. Shots rang out again, there was a short cry from the hijackers' leader, Eddie felt pain in both hands and his left side.

It was over, all the bandits were dead. As he rubbed his hands to confirm that the door frame and not bullets were the cause of his now fading pain the hostages came forward and started patting him on the back. Some of them wailed "Thank you". Eddie accepted their adulation graciously but his mind was racing, how was he going to get out of here without getting caught up in any bothersome police and press activity.

Having spotted the perfect exit route he made his way to slip out under the cover of confusion and relief. At this point he discovered the source of the still present pain in his left side: one of the table legs had punctured his best shirt with enough force to bruise him slightly.

"Bugger" he said to himself, "that was clean on."

Had he wanted to he could have switched a lamp on. There was one standing on the floor within arms reach. A rather stylish one at that: it had a brushed aluminium circular base and a tall sleek standard, with a delicate cream ovally cylindrical paper shade. Perhaps a bit much for a secret den. Which was exactly why it was

there, or rather, why something more mundane was not there. How better to let people know you're building a bunker than by buying a load of sandbags. Everything in his den could have sat quite happily anywhere else in his house, and most of it had at some time. Even the camp-bed had graced the guest-room on occasion.

No, Eddie stayed in the dark. He didn't need light here because he knew exactly what little there was to see. One bed, one lamp, one pile of old magazines (nothing seedy) and some extra old clothes in case it got cold. At the back of his mind he also suspected, quite rightly as it happens, that there might also be a couple of worryingly large spiders lurking around that he'd rather not confront.

The digital clock ticked over to 7:15am. Eddie didn't see it but he did hear it. Not a tick, the sound of one of the latest chart smashes on Radio 1. He didn't like Radio 1 (he wasn't supposed to, he was 30 years old) which was exactly why his digital clock radio played it at him from 7:15 every morning. Eddie was definitely not a morning person and if the radio played something he liked he'd never be able to get up. No, in the morning he needed every bit of help he could get to force him up and out ... this was the least inhumane way he'd found so far.

On this particular morning, as we've already noticed, Eddie was 10 feet above the digital clock radio and somewhat shielded by a ceiling and a hanging floor. Fortunately for him, his loathing of the sound coming out of it was so great that the mere faintest hint of it that his position afforded was still sufficient to muster the desired effect. In fact, hearing a muted version, in his current mood, had a worse effect than usual since he couldn't help straining to hear if

they were actually playing something he recognised.

Having stirred his ‘get up you lazy git’ reflex, Eddie almost leaped out of his bed, but didn’t. This wasn’t exactly a typical morning and it deserved a special bit of thought rather than a robot-like trudge to get ready for work. Not least because he had to negotiate a descent of the chimney, preferably without breaking his neck.

Sitting up he switched on the lamp and surveyed the scene. It wasn’t much of a scene but it was exactly as he expected and it was his scene. His in almost every sense of the word: he’d thought of it, he’d built it and he was the only person who’d ever seen it. As far as he knew he was the only person who knew, or could know, about it. A special place for him and him alone. Untouched by the world. Outside the world almost.

The thought trailed off, as it always did, like a dramatic movie trailer...

Eddie sat in silence as the 7:30 news bulletin started. Fifteen minutes later he was in the bathroom, showered, dressed and cleaning his teeth.

“I’ll go to work as normal. If I’m not just imagining things, if there is someone or some organisation doing this, then I... An organisation? What organisation would be after me? How would ... oh, I dunno.”

He stopped brushing and stared his white-lipped reflection hard in the face.

“I have to carry on like nothing’s happened ... but watch my back. Let them make a mistake.”

Eddie nodded at himself, pursing his lips with conviction.

His chin was looking a bit rough. Normally he shaved the night before a work day, a habit born of numerous hurried early morning razor accidents in his younger days. Eddie took a watch out of his trouser pocket. It only had half the strap so was unwearable in the usual manner. Having broken two years previously Eddie had popped the watch in his pocket intending to get a new strap: however, he soon found that he much preferred having a timepiece that was a little more out of view and had never got the strap fixed.

“Nearly five to eight ... designer stubble will have to do.”

Less than five minutes later he was opening the front door to leave for work. He stopped in the doorway. The red light on the answering machine was still flashing. It had to be stopped. Turning, he went back into the hallway and clasped the doorhandle to the lounge.

“Why the fear? It’s just a message. Listening to it wont change it. Ignoring it wont make it go away.”

Approaching the machine Eddie could see he had 3 messages. He pressed the PLAY button.

“You have 3 new messages.” it said, “I know.” replied Eddie sarcastically, totally failing to appreciate the efforts of the designers to produce a product that was easy to use, even for blind people.

Eddie hated features like this and was totally oblivious to the fact that he had actually turned it on, by accident, himself. He would also never realise that this was a feature he could easily turn off again because he would probably never again even find, let alone read, the manual.

“Tuesday at three fourteen pm” pause “Hello? Mr B? Are you there?” pause, beep.

It was the voice of Henry Wilks.

“Hmmm” thought Eddie, puzzled. “Why would he call me at...”

“Tuesday at three sixteen pm” interrupted the machine.

“Hello? Mr B? This is Henry Wilks. I thought you ought to know that there’s a staff meeting tomorrow mornin’. Err. Mr Stevenson just told me about it. I remembered it was your day off and thought I’d let you know. You know what they’re like round here, never tell you anything then jump on you when you screw up. Anyway, just thought I’d let you know.” pause, beep.

“When Henry?” said Eddie out loud to the machine. “What time?” he added, not phased at all by the fact that he was questioning a stored message on an inanimate box of electronics.

“Tuesday at seven forty eight pm” offered the machine.

“Hello dear, just me calling for a chat, speak to you later.” added his mother unhelpfully, punctuated by a final two beeps from the machine and followed by a silence that Eddie knew only he could break.

Chapter 7

The walk to work was one thing normally guaranteed to cheer Eddie up. Lack of cheer wasn't really the problem though. His head felt fuzzy, like he'd gone to bed at 4am after too many beers only to discover that he did have to get up at 7 for work after all.

"Walking helps to clear the mind Henry" he'd said once, philosophically, on the occasion last June when he'd got completely soaked by a freak rain shower only yards from the cinema door.

Today his mind wasn't clearing, largely because he was thinking about what he should be doing, rather than about what everyone else was doing as he usually did.

As he overtook a static queue of cars he didn't feel as smug and self-righteous as usual. Eddie didn't even notice the young sharp-suited driver frantically searching his briefcase for the spare mobile-phone battery that he 'never' forgets. On any other day that would almost have rated a chuckle out loud.

Coming straight towards him was a middle-aged man wearing a suit of such staggering brownness that Eddie was forced to take notice.

“Hmmm, brown.” he said out loud in mock homage.

The man was still 20 metres away so he didn’t pick up the fashion comment. Just to make sure he didn’t catch any follow-ups either, the man’s mobile phone rang out loudly. A hint as to the frequency of this event must be the fact that the man didn’t even break stride, he snatched the phone from his inside pocket and examined the screen.

“Oooh.” thought Eddie, more his normal self now.

“What do we have here. Someone not looking where they are going.”

To say that Eddie enjoyed walking into people, especially people deep in conversation with a mobile, wouldn’t be fair. What he did enjoy was giving people every chance to notice that they were about to walk into him and seeing if they took it. If they didn’t, well tough, that was their problem really.

The time when the “Oh I’m such a clumsy idiot” girl had managed to drop her phone and break it was the one notable exception. He’d not been able to walk off leaving her in tears and instead had bought her a coffee in a suspiciously convenient nearby Starbucks. All his potential regrets quickly evaporated though as the girl bored Eddie silly for half an hour with an account of her almost Olympic talent for mishaps.

Having positively vetted the caller, brown-of-browns suit man pressed a button on his phone and raised it towards his ear to answer. All in ample time to spot Eddie coming head-on and body swerve him.

“Morning.” said Eddie loudly as they crossed.

“John, is that you? Who’s that?” asked the caller, unheard by

Eddie who was now smiling on his way.

Sadly, this proved to be a false start. Carefree as he tried to be, even a few more robust “hello”s and “morning”s, directed particularly at people who looked least prepared for it, failed to muster any long-lasting improvement in his state of mind.

Another thing had occurred to him too. His timing was off; not a lack of time, just the wrong time. Normally he set off at exactly the same time and walked at roughly the same speed. So, he guessed, did she, or rather they, because he almost always passed her (them) at the same point going in the opposite direction along North Street. Today he was walking late.

Her name was Amanda Charles. Eddie didn’t know this and I add it here only to distinguish her later from other women whose names Eddie doesn’t know either. What Eddie did know was that she was tall and slim with long blonde hair and that he could see her every morning by the post-office at about 8.30am walking to work with her sister.

How he knew they were sisters was, much to Eddie’s annoyance, lost in the past. The mystery was all the greater because Eddie was sure beyond all doubt that he had never spoken to either of them, nor had he ever spoken to anyone about them. Neither did they look similar enough to lead the average admirer to assume they were siblings. There were similarities between them but not very great ones and the differences were great ones, in Eddie’s eyes: Amanda was blonde, her sister was a brunette; Amanda had blue eyes and ... he’d never looked at her sister’s eyes.

In the time before the revelation of the sisterhood, Eddie had

been quite happy to admire Amanda in silence and to almost totally overlook the ‘other one’ as you would the partner of your favourite movie star arriving at a premier. The partner isn’t unpleasant to look at, far from it, but they never make it out of your peripheral vision and serve only to highlight the star in centre stage.

Once informed of the relationship though, Eddie’s eyes were strangely drawn to the sister (whose name, I forgot to mention, was Claire). If she was her sister then she must be special too. Suddenly he found himself attracted to Claire, but why? This sudden change had disturbed Eddie greatly. The sister hadn’t changed, only he had. Was he transferring some of his admiration from Amanda and projecting it onto Claire for some reason? Was Amanda a real blonde? Maybe she just dyed her hair to make herself look better than Claire? Maybe Claire had been blonde too but she dyed her hair brunette to look different from Amanda?

All of this had bothered Eddie quite deeply for some time. He had only ever had one real relationship so the six or seven fantasy ones that he currently maintained were very important to him. On this morning some of these old worries returned to him, in place of the absent young women, who unbeknown to Eddie were both still at home in bed with colds.

After passing the post-office without seeing Amanda, Eddie crossed to the other side of the street on a whim. A sign? Would he spot her up one of the side streets ... no. By the time he got as far as Waterstone’s book shop it had finally occurred to him that as it was he who was running late, he would have seen them further up North Street not lower down, unless they were running even later than him.

Eddie paused and pretended to look into the window at the books.

“Don’t lose it. Don’t let them win without a fight.”

Eddie took a well disguised deep breath and turned to cross back to the other side of North Street. He could have done so immediately, but he was distracted by a man on the opposite side of the road. The man was large: he was tall, he was broad and he was fat. It wasn’t his size, however, that had distracted Eddie. Rather, it was the fact that the man was standing directly in front of a pair of doors sporting two big ‘Fire Exit Keep Clear’ signs and ... smoking.

Eddie’s thoughts flashed back to his encounter the previous day with a ‘malicious’ smoker and he shuddered involuntarily (which was the way he always did it). What made it worse was the way the man was smoking. He wasn’t just loitering co-incidentally by the fire doors and smoking. No, as far as Eddie could see this person was saying “I’m daring you to come over here and tell me to move.”

He didn’t cross over. Instead he squatted down and slowly tied up his shoe laces ... which took all of thirty seconds, including the time to untie them in the first place, since they had been perfectly well tied up to start with.

Returning to his feet, with nicely re-tied shoe laces, Eddie glanced back at the man in disappointment. He’d been hoping a pigeon would crap on the man’s head or a 38 tonne truck would veer out of control onto the pavement and crush him. He waited another few seconds, looked away, looked back and, miraculously, nothing happened again.

Crossing reluctantly Eddie felt a horrible sense of helplessness.

“People shouldn’t be able to get away with that.” he thought.

“One day, he’ll get what’s coming to him.” he continued, trying

to put some positive spin on the situation and his total lack of action.

As it happened, the man (who was called Ralph) never did get what was coming to him: he didn't die of lung cancer, or of a heart attack caused by being overweight; he actually died of a heart attack caused by the shock of being told that he'd been left fourteen million pounds by a relative he never knew he had.

The traffic pouring over Bridge Street was heavy. Almost as if it had been waiting for him to want to cross before it turned up. A small smile muscled its way onto Eddie's face as person after person arriving at the pedestrian crossing pressed the little button ... just in case everyone else had forgotten and the 'Wait' was only lit up by mistake. Once Eddie had told a foreign tourist that the lights had to change immediately if 10 people have pressed the button. The tourist had listened intently as Eddie pointed out that only the crossings with large metallic buttons had this feature, since they needed to scan the fingerprint of the presser to make sure it wasn't just the same person blipping the button.

"Because you are visitor, it probably wont have you on file," he had added, "so you could try pressing the button once with each finger."

Unfortunately the lights had changed at this point and Eddie hadn't been interested enough to follow the man to see if he would try the tip at the next crossing. A mental picture was funny enough. As it happened the man never had the chance to try the trick since every crossing changed as he approached it for the rest of his trip. He went home and passed on the tip to a handful of his friends who, on their trips to the UK, discovered only crossings with small plastic

buttons ... and that is how the great debate about why the British scrapped their biometric scanning technology started.

It was now almost 8:55 and casting a casual eye around his fellows in waiting Eddie surmised that all self-respecting tourists would be either tucking into a full English breakfast in amazement or half-way to Windsor Castle by now. Finally the green man showed his face, by which time half the crowd were over the road, preferring the slowing cars as their signal to set off.

Wheeling left into Bedford Road he was almost at the cinema.

“Excuse me young man.” piped a little grey-haired old lady sitting in an old brown mini-metro by the side of the road.

“Could you help me get out of my car please?” she followed.

Eddie looked at her, and at the car. There was no sign of a wheelchair or anything so his immediate reaction was “Then what? If you can’t get out of the car, what are you going to do?” but he said “Errr...”.

Eddie glanced at his watch, meaning to give the impression that he would be late if he had to get involved in some complicated manoeuvring of old-person and any, as yet unseen, machinery.

Instead Eddie realised that he was already on the verge of being late and so he said “Shit, I’m late!” followed by “Oh, sorry” as instant regret hit him like a wet fish.

“It wont take a second,” said the old lady, “it’s just that the little catch on the door has got stuck ... look, I can’t pull it up with my fingers, can you try?”

Eddie pulled at the catch and it popped up without much effort.

“Oh, thank you so much.” said the lady, pushing open the door.

“Oh, that’s OK.” said Eddie, slightly bemused.

“Bye.” he added, setting off hurriedly across the brick-paved path to the cinema.

As he reached the door, behind him the old lady got back into the car, locked the door and drove off.

Chapter 8

Staff meetings were usually held in the lobby, because they weren't meetings, they were speeches by the general manager. In the case of the previous general manager, George Thompson, they were also very brief events and so the lobby also provided the least disruptive venue, being the most central spot.

“Short and sweet, folks.” he would say, then something like “I just wanted to let you know personally that we’ve come seventeenth in this year’s best cinema poll. Well done everyone, up two from last year. Keep up the good work.”

George, as he liked everyone to call him, had been a very quiet, shy, even nervous man. He never seemed particularly uncomfortable in group situations, but that was largely because he always managed to be involved for such a very short time in them. The whole staff loved him. He’d always been positive with people, he’d never criticised anyone and he only mentioned the cinema polls on the rare occasions that they improved their position. It didn’t matter that most of the staff hardly ever saw him. It didn’t matter that no-one really knew what it was he did.

Then, one day, George did something that surprised everyone. At the age of forty eight, on a Thursday afternoon, in August, he retired. He didn't just announce his retirement, he retired then and there, on the spot.

"I just wanted to tell you all that I've decided to retire." he'd said to a mixture of gasps and puzzled expressions.

Eddie had guessed before he even spoke that something odd was on the cards because George had arrived in the lobby for the 'meeting' wearing his jacket and carrying his small brown briefcase: two things he'd never done before and George was nothing if not consistent.

"I've really enjoyed working with you all." he added. Then, before anyone had even got close to thinking "Oh no, here come all the old clichés" he simply closed with "Goodbye and thank you.", turned and walked out.

The staff had stood in the lobby, silent, much as Eddie was now, wondering if something else was going to happen. Nothing did. They'd all looked around at each other, wondering what to do. Interestingly, no-one said or even thought "he's joking, right?" because even though a surprise, somehow this event was so quintessentially George Thompsonian.

Belatedly someone had shouted out "Bye George, happy retirement!" after him. Other people opened their mouths to shout too, but thought better of it.

"What now, Mr B?" said Henry Wilks eventually, after what must have been several minutes of muted muttering.

"Back to work everyone. I'll find out what's going on." he'd said boldly, with an air of confidence which surprised no-one but himself.

Eddie's surprise at finding the lobby deserted was fading. Sylvia was as different from George as chalk and cheese. The analogy was an unfortunate one, as it made Eddie think of food. Having missed dinner the previous night, a more substantial breakfast than usual would have been a good idea.

"God I'm hungry. If this meeting drags on then I might just starve to death..."

The array of sweets, popcorn and ice-cream before him wasn't particularly tempting and the hotdog machine was switched off.

"Bugger. How long does that take to get going?" he wondered briefly before realising that if there was no-one here then everyone was probably already in the meeting, wherever that was. A sense of urgency came over him and then went away again.

"No point in rushing, that'll just make it obvious that I'm late. No. Find the meeting calmly, go in like I was delayed by something more important."

"Not very clever, wandering off and leaving the front door unlocked though." grumbled Eddie to himself.

The moment of smug self-superiority was quickly evaporated by the uncomfortable suspicion that it was probably his job anyway.

"No Mr Stevenson, I wasn't aware of the new process for special general meetings. Sorry." said Eddie quietly and on the turn to make sure no-one had crept in behind him.

Eddie unclipped the large bunch of keys hanging from the second belt-loop on the right of his trousers. He knew exactly which key fitted every lock in the building. Even the two almost identical keys for the two store cupboards didn't faze him since he'd painted a small

red dot on the key for the one nearest his office. Eddie was proud of doing his job well, at whatever level: you wouldn't catch him trying key after key in the projection-room lock like Sylvia did...

With all the main doors locked and a major sweet robbery averted, Eddie turned his mind back to the staff meeting. The staff-room was also empty, of people anyway. It did have the usual four chairs and a wonky coffee table with the last eighteen issues of Empire magazine lying, untouched, on top. This was where the staff didn't go for their breaks: mostly because it was far too small and too dark in a 'don't even think about calling it cosy' sort of way.

Standing at the end of the lobby, in the hub, Eddie looked along both the corridors leading to the screening rooms.

"Where was everyone?" he wondered.

Suddenly, he noticed a notice: right at the end of the right-hand corridor, on the right-hand door to screen one. He was too far away to read it but as he walked up the small flight of stairs towards it he knew roughly what it said.

"Staff Meeting, 9am Wednesday, JS"

Eddie looked at his watch. It was just after 9:10am.

"Not too late to see our Sylvia on the big stage I hope." he thought.

Sure enough he wasn't; peering through the door he saw the whole staff sitting in rows A-C, under dimmed lights, fronted by Jeff Stevenson and his presentation.

Dismissing the fact that the presentation might actually be of some interest as a total no-brainer, Eddie was left with two clear options. One was to walk away and pretend that the meeting didn't

apply to him, the other was to sneak in and pretend that he was only allowing it to apply to him out of the goodness of his heart rather than as a professional requirement.

As Stevenson's monotone delivery rambled on, Eddie decided that he had to play safe and try to casually insert himself into the meeting. At the back of his mind he just knew that there would be a memo somewhere advising him of the meeting, that he'd missed it and that Sylvia would probably enjoy carpeting him if he didn't show. It was just paranoid and defensive to think that Sylvia had simply forgotten to inform him before his day off. Even though this was the simple truth.

Walking as confidently into the gloom as he could, Eddie hoped that Sylvia would be too wrapped in his message to try and humiliate him with some smart comment. He wasn't: he was too wrapped in his message to realise that it was actually his fault that Eddie didn't know about the meeting, and not nearly wrapped up enough to resist a pop at one of his least favourite underlings.

"Ah, good afternoon Eddie, so good of you to join us." he quipped, thinking himself funny but not getting the laugh he'd hoped for.

A few of the staff who hadn't noticed Eddie sneaking in looked over to make sure it was him and not an axe-wielding maniac who merely resembled him.

Eddie sat down on the end of row C without saying a word and Sylvia continued with his presentation.

"Sylvia, Sylvia, Sylvia ..." said Eddie to himself slowly ten times and he'd almost regained his composure when he heard "... and at

precisely 9:24am Mr Bridget issued the instruction to evacuate the complex.”

The words ‘Mr Bridget’ were emphasised. Jeff Stevenson was trying to say “somehow he got this right, even though he can’t get himself to my staff meeting on time”. The absence of any real subtlety went completely unnoticed, even by the six people who sniggered out loud. Jeff congratulated himself on the reaction, not realising that they were sniggering at the Bridget, not his little dig.

“No! You total wanker.” was all that Eddie could think.

He felt numb. The sniggering six glanced at him childishly. A couple of the dimmer members of staff finally worked out that Mr Bridget was Eddie and smiled as knowingly as they could muster. The few who had known that Eddie’s surname was Bridget, but whose memories of it had lapsed because it was never ever heard, raised the odd eyebrow slightly or looked up at the safety lights in faint recollection. As quickly as it arrived, the moment passed, for everyone except Mr Edward Bridget of Guildford, Surrey.

The rest of the presentation passed Eddie by completely. Lost on him were the whooshing text, the pop-up boxes and the stylish background images. He failed to hear that average exit times were almost ten percent better than the requirement and that the overall staff performance index would now be raised to seven. He even missed Sylvia’s laptop freezing, crashing and laboriously rebooting while Sylvia tried to fill the pause by fielding an impromptu question about what the overall staff performance index was for anyway.

Eddie’s mind was miles away, and he wished his body could join it. His initiative to use only first-names on staff name badges, in

the name of friendliness to customers, seemed like three months of wasted effort. The phrase “Please; call me Eddie” echoed somewhere, everywhere, until it was gradually drowned out by the word ‘Bridget’ being repeated, more and more sternly, as a command.

The voice was terrifyingly familiar. The single word, any word in fact, uttered in that voice made him tremble. He heard himself responding to the instruction in a squeaky 11-year-old voice “Yes Mr O’Leary?”.

Norman O’Leary was not an unpleasant man. If Eddie had ever met him socially then he may well have liked him. O’Leary was an old-fashioned schoolteacher and he was Irish, a combination of qualities which Eddie had found quite alien at the age of eleven. He was also the first man that Eddie had encountered, on a regular basis, who had a beard: the novelty of which was enhanced even more by its being jet-black, when the rest of O’Leary’s hair was on the white side of grey.

The Irish accent was something that had grown on Eddie over time, although he was still oddly amused every single time O’Leary said “noy” instead of “now”. The old-fashioned schoolteacher bit was something else though: the most unfortunate attribute of which was the tradition, upheld without exception by Mr O’Leary, of referring in class to girls by their Christian names “Helen, Mary, Susan” and to boys by their surnames “Brown, Smith ... Bridget”.

At age 11, a boy called Edward Bridget has heard Edward or Eddie or Ed all his life. That’s who he is. The Bridget is incidental. It appears on the odd letter he gets from his granny. He only needs it for things like his savings account book because he knows that there

are a few other Edwards living in England too: in fact he knows two others himself, one from his swimming class and one that used to go to the chess club until his family emigrated to Australia.

To suddenly have your surname thrust at you as your formal identity on going up to the ‘big school’ is bad enough when it’s just your form-master who does it. To have your peers realise that your new moniker is also ‘a girl’s name’ and to delight in repeating it is purely traumatic.

For a short time the name had mutated into Bridge when a tough and cool, if impenetrably thick, lad had decided that it was even more insulting. This was fantastic for Eddie because he thought, like several other kids that he yearned to impress, that Bridge was quite a grown-up nickname. Unfortunately it didn’t last, and the already dwindling tag died out altogether when the tough kid got expelled for possession of cannabis.

Norman O’Leary was, in Eddie’s eyes, the source of his young pain. Eddie didn’t know that his name was Norman, just that his initial was ‘N’. If he had known then on some reflection he might have drawn comfort from the fact that, being a distinctly non-Irish name, Norman may have been teased himself at school. But Eddie never knew, and as far as he was concerned the ‘N’ stood only for ‘Nemesis’.

The classroom faded as the lights came up in screen one. Norman O’Leary turned back into Jeff Stevenson and said “Any final questions?”

No-one spoke, or raised their hands. Most of the younger, teenage, members glanced around furtively, feeling uncomfortable about

the lack of questions and wracking their brains for something, anything, that they could ask. Finally one of them cracked: Craig Brown put up his hand and, after a nod from Sylvia in his direction, asked “When is the next fire-drill, err, test due Mr Stevenson?”

“Anytime in the next six months. Keep on your toes.” replied Stevenson, smiling.

“Oh yes,” thought Eddie, “keep on your toes for that surprise memo telling you about tomorrow’s fire ... it could come at any time.”

He wasn’t tempted to interject. He kept all the difficult questions to himself. He was like a wounded animal, after it had passed out from the pain.

“Any more questions?” asked Sylvia, in a neutral ‘don’t mind if you do, don’t mind if you don’t’ sort of way.

This time there was a nice comfortable silence. No pressure. Someone had asked a fairly relevant question, they’d been paying attention, the job was done, they were all off the hook.

“OK. Then that concludes the meeting. Thank you. Back to work.” said Sylvia, gesturing with both hands for people to get up.

Everyone did get up, except Eddie, who was fighting to control an uncontrollable urge to shout “So, if this isn’t work then what is it, a fucking holiday camp?” or something to that effect.

As the rest of the staff filed up the two aisles to the exit, Eddie grappled with himself. His pain made him want to lash out, but in his heart he knew he mustn’t, that it would make things worse. The more staff that left the easier it got though, until it was just him and Sylvia left in the room. There was no point in shouting without an

audience. Now he was calm.

Jeff Stevenson was so busy unplugging cables from his laptop and coiling them up into their various pockets in his carrying bag that he failed to notice that Eddie had stayed behind. It would have been fun to wait until he turned to leave before speaking, just to see the momentary shock on his face, but he spent so long faffing about with the cables that Eddie just got bored of waiting.

“Is that a new laptop?” he quizzed, boldly but not too loud.

Sylvia, still puzzling over why the last cable seemed too big to fit into the last pocket, jumped out of his skin. Not literally, that would have been unpleasant and not at all funny, whereas throwing the cable in the air so that it could spring open and land scarf-like around his neck was somewhat amusing.

Sylvia turned, somewhat flustered, to Eddie and then looked back into the laptop case.

“Yes, I got it last week.” he offered quite defensively but then regaining his composure “I traded in the old one. Didn’t have enough memory.”

“Ah.” said Eddie simply, thinking “I wonder if that’s him or the laptop”.

Jeff wasn’t sure what Eddie was trying to get at, so he changed the subject.

“I’m sorry about criticising your late arrival in front of the whole staff Eddie. I’m sure you were unavoidably detained.” he said, offering an olive branch.

Eddie liked olives but he wasn’t sure if this branch was barren or not so he paused for some time before deciding not to go with

“I wasn’t properly informed that there was a meeting” and instead served up “Yes; I thought I smelled smoke so I went to check it out. Bit embarrassing if the cinema burnt down while you were debriefing us about the fire ... test.”

“Yes, yes.” said Sylvia, ashen faced and looking to the door.

“Fucking A.” thought Eddie, “Where did that one come from. You’re a genius Eddie.”

His mood was lifting immeasurably. For the moment he was on top. Bridget was the last thing on his mind.

“Are you sure there is no fire? There’s no smoke without fire, as they say.” asked Jeff gravely.

“Yes, no fire. Maybe it was cigarette smoke lingering or something.”

“So you’re sure there’s no fire.” pressed Jeff, not really convinced now and wondering if he ought not go and have a good look himself.

“I did have a good look around. And besides, we only checked the smoke alarms yesterday ... didn’t you?”

“So you are sure?” said Jeff again, visualising a beeping smoke-alarm.

“Oh yes. Eddie Shore.”

Chapter 9

The Friday after that black Wednesday. B-day. Bridget Wednesday. The worst setback to western civilisation since Hollywood realised it could make a fortune from Eddie's childhood heroes by making (bad) films (movies) about them. This was much worse than even 'The Punisher' and 'Batman & Robin' combined. Whether it was worse than the effect of the whole Incredible Hulk TV series was a matter for debate: something which occupied Eddie's mind for all of two minutes.

“OK, not quite that bad.” he'd concluded.

Where Thursday had gone was a minor mystery. Minor because a moment's thought given to it by any reasonable person would have revealed that, rather than experiencing the longest Wednesday night of all time, Eddie had just omitted to advance his personal calendar at the appropriate rate.

If Eddie knew consciously that Thursday was his day off anyway, then he hid it amazingly well as he emerged from his den at about 6am.

“Woah, Friday morning! Looks like I slept through most of Thurs-

day.” he announced to the world in triumph.

Close scrutiny of the situation by an independent observer at this point would have burst his bubble instantly, since Eddie hadn’t seen or heard anything today to tell him that this was Friday. He had to have experienced Thursday, but he continued in denial.

At the bottom of the stairs he turned right towards the kitchen and paused by the calendar hung on the wall. Below the lucid picture of water lilies by Monet, the proper title of which was of no interest to Eddie, several of the November days were ringed in red. Thursday 29th was ringed.

“Oh, it was my day off anyway. That’s lucky.” he said, like a kid in a drama class, who hates drama and is just going through the motions whilst looking ahead to the games lesson that follows.

Eddie continued the charade into the kitchen. He made toast from the last two pieces of bread in the bag.

“Great, I like the crust best.” he lied out loud.

He filled a bowl with cornflakes but most of what he got was the mashed up and dusty bits at the end.

“Nice.” he said, unconvincingly to no-one in particular.

The cornflakes soaked up all the milk he had left, so he decided to have black-coffee instead of tea. Unfortunately he found that he’d run out of coffee too so he had to have black-tea. This last straw was unspinnable so he simply said nothing.

Placing his bowl of cornflakes and mug of tea on the dining table as carefully as he could, Eddie turned to go and get his toast. He caught sight of his reflection in the glass covering a large photo-montage that he’d made. First he paused, then moved his head

forward a few millimetres for a better look. He frowned. He forced a fake smile. He checked out his profile on both sides. He concluded, “Your powers are weak, old man.”

Eddie sat in silence as he ate his breakfast. Well, quiet anyway. The cornflakes crunched in a slightly annoying and uneven way because of the dust content. The toast crunched too, in an extremely well-done, almost burnt, and ‘you just ran out of butter and had to spread the last little bit incredibly thinly’ sort of way.

At least he had plenty of time: even after a leisurely breakfast it was still barely 6:30. Eddie sat and looked at his wall-clock, a small chic Habitat affair, for almost 5 minutes to convince himself that it hadn’t stopped. Both his eyes wandered around the room, over the ceiling, down to the floor and back to the table. The lack of anything grabbing his attention led him to try leaving one eye on something and getting the other to sneak off and look at something else. He failed, but then managed to pass a further ten minutes with one eye shut, wondering why two eyes had forged such a monopoly in the animal kingdom.

With all distractions exhausted there was nothing left to do but shout out, as loud as he possibly could, “I am Eddie Shore!”

He sat, trembling, with both hands flat on the table in front of him, looking at the toast crumbs on his plate. Confused.

The re-emergence of his Bridgetness wasn’t bugging him as much as he thought it would. Yes, it was bad: but not bad enough to explain the total amount of buggedness that he was experiencing right now. Maybe because he hadn’t actually done very much over the years to promote his ‘new name’.

Obviously he'd considered changing his name legally, many times in fact, but his mother wouldn't like it. She nagged him enough as it was without giving her a "dreadful insult" to drag up whenever she wanted. Even if he went for Edward Shore she wouldn't like it.

"Your poor father gave us that name and now it's all we've got left of him, how could you Edward?"

For years he'd told himself that when he got married he could be modern and caring and go for a double-barrelled name: then, after some short time he could drop the Bridget and keep the Smith or Jones or whatever as his own; conceding that double-barrelling is a one-generation solution that solves nothing and then magnanimously offering to lose his own half. This plan was seriously dented when the first girl that Eddie got close enough to to even consider a future marriage, was called Helen Parker-Peters.

Mostly though, apart from school and Nemesis O'Leary, the Bridget factor had gradually declined in importance. All the jobs he'd ever had were fairly junior affairs and his colleagues had always called him by his first name, asserting their seniority but boosting Eddie's self-confidence to-boot.

On a few occasions when he'd met strangers that he seemed unlikely to ever see again, he had introduced himself as Eddie Shore, or more usually just plain Eddie and then added the Shore when prompted by folks who like the full story.

Once he'd used the name Shore on a library card but, unfortunately, when the time came to renew it he found that he needed a proof of address: apparently there had been a large increase in the number of books being lost to people who hadn't bothered to keep

the library informed of their normal whereabouts.

It was largely easier to avoid using a surname at all rather than lie about it. That was the lesson he'd learned, and it had stood him in good stead until now.

So, if the trauma of B-Day wasn't just about his name, then what was the problem?

"It's a worrying trend, isn't it." he pondered.

"All these things have been going wrong since I decided not to apply for the job."

"No, it was before then. Deciding was the first problem. It should have been clear, shouldn't it. Apply or don't apply. You ask yourself the question and out pops the answer. That's how it always works, isn't it. No-one knows where the answers come from. You ask and they come. That's just how it works. Question, answer, do it; simple."

"So why was there no answer last whenever it was?"

Eddie sat in silence, waiting for some great insight. Nothing came.

"It was August, after George left obviously..."

"Hmmm."

"Just before my birthday. My 30th. Huh, great event that wasn't."

Eddie's 30th birthday had been, just to fill you in, a bit of a disappointment. Not that it was any less low-key, some may say dull, than any of his other recent birthdays. The problem was simply that Eddie was expecting a bit more ... and didn't get it. Somehow he'd got it into his head that a 30th was something that got put on for you. He wasn't quite sure who qualified as the organiser in his case

and no-one had responded to his far too subtle hints.

With the big-day only a fortnight away he reluctantly decided that he was going to have to do it himself. His actual birthday fell on a Wednesday so he decided, wisely he thought, to move the celebration to the following Friday. Since time was short he phoned a few friends to let them know the date: still being a bit too subtle and playing down its importance to him. As it turned out, all but one of his close friends happened to be busy on that night: none of them feeling so close that they felt any need to cancel their existing plans for Eddie's little drink.

At first Eddie thought "Nuts, I'd better pick another day." but then another thought sprang into his mind: "Hang on, John wouldn't miss my 30th to go out to dinner. He'd just bring his date with him, surely."

With this Eddie began analysing each of the other excuses he'd been given and, in a staggering feat of misinterpretation, concluded that all of his friends had been instructed to lie. The architect of the deception had to be Mike, the only person to say "Yes". And the reason was ... a surprise party.

Eddie had thus spent his 30th birthday 'do' out with Mike, Mike's friend Bob who Eddie barely knew and Jo the quiet girl from work who bought him a card and a small gift every year. Henry Wilks had started out with them too, but by 9pm the volume of the music was "rattling my false teeth too much" and he had to retire home. As the night went on, Eddie's expectation of reaching the next pub to find the rest of his friends there shouting "Surprise!" gradually diminished until he finally accepted, at last orders, that it wasn't

going to happen.

Mike's insistence that he "had to" go on to a club "at least for a bit" raised his hopes ever so slightly, but he knew before they got in that there would be no joy ... and he was right. With his mood dropping fast he was ready to leave the club by midnight and only Jo's insistence that he was a "really good dancer" persuaded him to stay. By the end of the night he staggered off home alone, cheered only by the memories of having snogged Jo and seen the skinniest girl in the world throw up down Mike's back in the queue at the cloakroom.

"Ah, was that the first disaster? My birthday?"

Eddie got up and went back into the hallway to look at his calendar again. He flipped it back to August, another lily Monet that could have been the same one as November's and Eddie wouldn't have noticed any more than he cared what the title was.

"George left on the ninth, a Thursday. My birthday's the twenty-ninth, a Wednesday ... but the party was on the thirty-first. Last day of the month? Thirteen backwards? Is that supposed to be unlucky?"

He stood and mulled over August a bit longer, passed quickly through September and October, which held no significant dates at all for him, and then ended up looking at November again.

"Today's a Friday and the last day of the month too!" he exclaimed.

After a brief, silent, pause Eddie's shock vanished. The surprise was due entirely to noticing anything at all, rather than some deep and sinister message. He hoped. Returning to the dining-room, he

instinctively passed through to the kitchen and switched on the kettle to make another cup of tea.

His mind was wandering again, and his body followed it back into the dining-room. He didn't hear the kettle boil and click off, which was good because he still didn't have any milk: indeed, he'd only managed to drink half of the previous cup.

The last day of the month thing was bothering him now.

"I'll call in sick," he thought, "something bad's going to happen today."

No sooner had he settled on this as the best course of action than he changed his mind.

"Then again, bad things have been happening all week, so what difference will it make."

And back again.

"But maybe today is going to be so bad that it'll make all the other things seem like peanuts in comparison."

Finally, bearing in mind that it was Friday, the longest and busiest day of the week in cinema-land, Eddie decided that he would go to work after all. If he kept busy then it would take his mind off all the disasters that were haunting him. He didn't want to even try and imagine what might happen next. What was coming would find him wherever he was...

The walk to work was better than the previous two days. Nothing really stood out as being wrong except that his joy at seeing Amanda again by the post-office was tempered by the fact that she was alone.

"I hope your sister's OK..." he worried, "... probably just got a cold." he guessed, correctly, finding a new sense of optimism from

somewhere.

As he approached the cinema, with some sense of trepidation, he thought he recognised the mini-metro that was pulling away from him along Bedford Road. Since he didn't know anyone who would be seen dead in a car that old, he couldn't imagine why it should seem familiar. Eddie decided to not give it a third thought, as proof of his determination to take control of the day.

At the door he could see Henry Wilks waiting for him.

"Is there a plan then Mr. B?" he said as Eddie entered.

"Plan Henry?" said Eddie, slightly distracted, "Yes, Henry, we do have a plan" he added, smiling and returning to the ritual.

"And is it cunning Mr B?" suggested Henry, as usual.

"No Henry. It's bloody brilliant."

Chapter 10

When he wasn't working, Eddie usually spent his Sunday mornings looking through the paper. If he ever tried buying a paper that unashamedly set out its stall to entertain rather than present news then maybe one day he would actually read some of the paper. As it was, Eddie nearly always bought The Sunday Times, or The Observer if his local shop had run out of his 'usual'.

Eddie didn't take any interest in current affairs, business, finance, or travel. He also found the style of the sports sections a bit too laborious: often he'd start reading a report and give up after two paragraphs, wondering if the reporter was ever going to get round to mentioning the match or race of the headline.

No, Eddie was only really interested in the more entertaining parts of The Sunday Times, which usually just meant the pictures.

Today was different though. Today was plan day 3. Today there was no newspaper, instead Eddie was looking at a map and eating toast. Both the map and the bread had been purchased the previous day, plan day 2.

The map was a bit too big to fit on the dining table and leave

space for breakfast pots. At 1:200,000 and covering everything east of Andover and south of Ipswich, it was more than a metre across and almost as tall. Folded into four, Eddie finished off his toast whilst marvelling at the Isle of Wight.

“Look at all those places. I thought it was mostly empty.” he mused.

“Hulverstone, Mottistone, Brighstone, Limerstone ... Kingston? Hmmm, I wonder.”

Eddie picked up the map and tried to re-fold it to find Kingston-on-Thames. Having found it, just in the top half, he tried to judge by eye if it made a straight line with Guildford and Kingston IoW. It did, roughly.

“Excellent!” said Eddie out loud, proudly.

He had no idea what it meant, but this was exactly the sort of thing he was looking for. His plan might just work. He didn't allow himself to think about it too much though: since the outline had come to him on the threshold of the cinema, the details had been emerging steadily as he went. If there was one thing Eddie knew about mysterious forces driving cunning plans it was this “don't ask too many questions.”

With his tea and toast nicely polished off, Eddie could have opened out the map onto the table, but he needed something a bit more permanent. The long wall parallel to the front door was the obvious candidate, occupied only by two small pictures of Rome and New York. As he removed them he was first struck by the peppering of small holes that he'd made in the wall trying to get the Rome picture level with the other one. Then he noticed the World Trade

Center.

“I stood on top of that tower...” he recalled.

For a moment he paused, Rome in one hand, New York in the other. No words came into his head. He was looking at the photograph and seeing a succession of images bobbling in the peripheral vision of his mind’s eye. Nothing was very clear, it was a mixture of planes and people: not from news coverage, he’d avoided that to the best of his ability, but from his own experience.

When words did come, they arrived in an American accent. A man’s voice. The customs officer at JFK. The first ‘native’ that Eddie had spoken to on American soil. Eddie had told the man that he wasn’t sure exactly where he’d be staying for the whole of his visit, because he wanted to travel around a bit. The man had intimidated Eddie, made him feel uneasy. That was his job. Eddie didn’t remember anything about the customs man now apart from what he’d said next, with a smile, “OK. But be careful. There are lots of crazy people out there.”

Even after nearly ten years, those words still stuck in his memory. At first he’d thought it was funny, that the customs officer had just said it to put him at his ease and send him and Mike on their way with a smile. About half an hour later he wasn’t so sure: getting off the bus on arriving in Manhattan the first thing they saw was a man sprinting towards them followed by two policemen. The policemen had pounced on the man, handcuffed him and led him away.

“Welcome to New York.” Mike had simply said.

Eddie felt that he ought to re-hang the New York picture, but nowhere suitable leapt to mind so he resolved instead to replace it

in its old place as soon as his plan was completed.

Bearing in mind the number of holes that the wall already had, Eddie decided to Blutak the map up. Unfortunately he could only find a small ball of the stuff in his bits'n'bobs draw: a quarter in each corner just wasn't enough to hold the map taught enough, given the depth of the folding creases in it.

"Maybe I could iron it?" pondered Eddie, surveying the unwanted terrain clinging, just, to his wall.

Having concluded that he did actually possess an iron, but before he'd even begun to try remembering where it might be, the map fell off the wall.

"Nuts!" he said out loud.

Picking up the map, Eddie removed the three small pieces of Blutak that were still attached, pressed them together and used the combined ball to pull the fourth piece from the wall: a small patch of dry paint came away with it.

"Great. OK, lets see."

Holding up the map to the wall, he pulled it tight and the creases lessened substantially, but the map was still clearly nowhere near flat. Accuracy now could be vital to his plan. He had to see to all the details properly. After a few more minutes of trying to fold the creases the opposite way to cancel them out, Eddie finally conceded, "I will have to iron it."

The first place that Eddie searched for his iron was under the stairs. That was where he put things that he knew he might need but actually rarely used. He found it, in its box, pristine, almost untouched. Occasionally, when he'd spotted the iron box whilst looking

for something else or if he heard someone talking about ironing, Eddie would ponder the total futility of ironing clothes. Today he didn't, nor did he think of his mother, who had bought him the iron when he left home, and her sad devotion to the cult of the ironed shirt. Today the iron was the right tool for the job: today it was going to flatten his map.

"This should be easy." said Eddie, boosting his own confidence.

"No cuffs or collar on this one." he added, laughing.

He even remembered to cover the map with a tea-towel to stop it scorching. Half-way through there was a minor hiccup when the power-lead of the iron proved too short but, on the ball, Eddie solved the problem almost instantly by ingeniously turning the map around.

After the best part of 20 minutes, Eddie proudly surveyed his flatter map. Some of the creases were still visible as fine scratches on the paper but the map was, essentially, as flat as it was ever going to get and, a point Eddie missed, flatter than the wall onto which it was about to be stuck again.

The search under the stairs had unwittingly also thrown up a reel of cream masking tape.

"What did I buy that for?" he'd wondered before testing a small piece on the wall to see if it would fetch the paint off too.

It didn't so Eddie now had his adhesive. Carefully starting at the top-right corner, Eddie smoothed and stuck along the top edge of the map, then down the right hand side, then the left, and finally along the bottom.

"You are here!" said Eddie, in a really bad attempt at an American accent, stepping back and trying to take in the whole of the

South East of England.

One immediately obvious fact leapt out at him straight away: Guildford was one of only a handful of towns and cities labelled in all capital letters. London, Dover, Hastings, Brighton, Portsmouth.

“Oooo. Nice.” he thought, feeling proud somehow.

Checking the map’s key and seeing that such a label was reserved for a ‘Primary route destination’ made him glow even more. Further inspection however revealed that Basingstoke, Bracknell and Staines were also there in big letters, which took the shine off somewhat.

By now it was about 11.30am and Eddie was hungry again.

“Hard work this planning.” he announced to the kettle, filling it and then tipping half of the water out again.

“Save power! Just boil what you need.”, pause, then laughing out loud “What sort of an accent was that supposed to be?”

While the toaster got on with the business of toasting the toast, Eddie stirred his memory casually for some context on the ‘Save power’ slogan.

“All the leaves are brown, the leaves are brown, and the sky is grey, the sky is grey, dur dur dur dur-dur...” he sang suddenly, trying to trick the block into believing he was thinking about something else, which quite soon, he was: “What is that song called?”

Pop went the toaster. Actually it was more of a squeaky scrape than a pop: Eddie’s toaster wasn’t in the best of repair and now could only aspire to popping up as crisply as it once had. With two nice fresh perfectly browned pieces of toast before him, Eddie had better things to do than hang around wondering if the toaster needed cleaning.

Back in the dining room, freshly provisioned with tea and toast, Eddie sat back and looked at his map-wall. The song title was still bugging him a bit so he deliberately made himself scan over the whole map as a distraction. From this distance he couldn't read the place-names, or make out any of the symbols; what was obvious was the spider's web of roads and railway centred on London: a mass of arms reaching out, with a few connecting bits for good luck.

"Bloody London eh. I really ought to have a go on that big wheel..."

"When was the last time I went up there? Was it the zoo with Mike's nephews? Christ, that was ages ago. The wheel was definitely up though wasn't it."

"All the museums are free now too..." thought Eddie, continuing with his '100 more reasons why I ought to go up to London more' thread.

Eventually, the toast gone, Eddie turned his attention back to the map and to his embryonic plan. A grain of doubt remained as to whether he should have made the den his centre of operations, rather than the relatively insecure dining-room.

"This will have to do, the den's a bit too small. It's not as if there are any windows that look onto the planning-wall. I'll just have to make sure no-one comes into the house for the time being." he convinced himself.

His true doubts were about the integrity of the den itself. Though mostly subconscious, the idea had crept into some parts of his mind that someone had discovered his secret place. Infra-red, ultra-sonic, whatever. For Eddie now, nowhere was completely safe. This was in

part, part of the revelation behind his plan: if nowhere was safe, then he had to find out where the most dangerous places were. Maybe then he could predict where the next attack might come, and do something about it.

“Now, where are those pins?” said Eddie out loud, rummaging in a W.H.Smith bag and pulling out four boxes of coloured pins: red, green, yellow and blue.

“Let’s start with the red ones: definite attacks” he mused, opening the box of red pins.

Carefully he placed one as close to where he thought the cinema was as he could, judging by the railway station, the river and the main roads. The pin for his house was a bit trickier, since it was just somewhere in the brown mass representing most of the residential parts of the town.

“They know where I work and where I live...” stated Eddie sternly, looking at the two red pins in Guildford.

For a while he stared through the pins, letting the map blur before him. Given the initial holey state of the wall, even though it was Sunday, it seemed pointless just peppering Guildford with more pins. Sure there were some probable attacks, yellow pin, and the odd suspected attack, blue pin, but there was more to be learned from the bigger picture than from the details near his home town.

“Bigger picture? How Sylvian. Anyway, two pins is enough for any town. That’s not a rule, it’s a guideline.”

Eddie found himself looking at the unopened box of green pins. He carefully turned the box around in one hand, reading every word printed on it. Looking up at the map again, his eyes sought out three

towns in turn. Smiling broadly, Eddie threw the box back into the WHS bag.

“I wont be needing those just yet.”

Chapter 11

Sitting in his office the next day, drinking coffee, Eddie was annoyed. The coffee was bad, but that wasn't why he was annoyed, he'd resigned himself to bad coffee years ago. The office was uncomfortable, particularly the part he was in closest contact with, his chair. This monstrosity of bad ergonomics wasn't why he was annoyed either, in fact he quite liked it because it allowed him to slouch.

Today, plan day 4, Eddie was annoyed because he'd come across a tiny little hitch in his plan. He needed a projector: not a film projector, one of those little overhead ones that shine light up through an acetate sheet and focus it onto a screen, or wall ... or map. Finding one had been easy, Sylvia had ordered a new one in his first week, for giving motivational presentations to his staff. When it arrived, to his horror and Eddie's amusement, he had realised that he'd bought the wrong thing.

Sylvia was a technology junkie. He liked to think that he was up on all the latest kit and wouldn't be seen dead using an overhead projector. What he'd meant to order was a snazzy LCD projector for his snappy laptop computer. Unfortunately the order numbers

were very similar and, well, it was an easy mistake to make. It was also an easy mistake to fix but, being Sylvia, rather than admit that he'd slipped up, he'd pretended that he needed the overhead too for displaying some "old legacy material", whatever that meant, and then quickly bought a new LCD projector, relegating the old overhead to a store cupboard for safe-keeping.

This was all perfect for Eddie. The projector fitted into his plan nicely and no-one would miss it. The problem was, how was he going to get it home without anyone noticing? He couldn't exactly sneak it out under his coat. It weighed a ton. He wasn't even sure he could carry it all the way home without collapsing.

Eddie was still mulling over the options when a figure appeared in his doorway. It was Jo, the quiet girl. She paused for a second until Eddie looked up and then came in. All managers and assistants at the cinema operated an open-door policy, by order of Jeff Stevenson. This meant that any employee could turn up and ask a manager a question at any time, without an appointment. To Eddie, the obvious way to implement this was to always leave his door open and to talk to staff when they came to see him. Sylvia, being more senior, preferred to leave his door closed and to encourage staff to always try their questions out on an assistant manager first before coming to him.

"Hi." said Jo, meekly.

"Hi Jo" replied Eddie, smiling, "did you have a nice holiday?"

"It wasn't really a holiday..."

"Shit." thought Eddie.

For a moment he assumed that he'd put his foot in it, that her

absence the previous week had been due to some terrible event.

“She must have been to a funeral, or to hospital. Oh my God, what do I say now?”

“I was just helping my mum move house.” added Jo, looking up again and, slightly embarrassed herself, not noticing Eddie’s mild panic.

“Oh great!” said a relieved Eddie, with a bit too much enthusiasm.

He was rocking from pillar to post here and he knew it. Now he just sounded like an idiot, rather than an insensitive idiot.

“I mean...” he started but couldn’t say what he really meant and couldn’t think of anything plausible enough to get him out of the hole.

Eddie gave up trying to think what to say and just looked at her. The light in the corridor was slightly brighter than in here which, combined with her dark clothing, created a semi-silhouette effect. Staff uniform was black trousers and a black T-shirt edged in green at the neck and sleeves. Like most of the female staff, Jo chose a fairly tight T-shirt and indeed had been one of the rebels who had altered hers slightly to expose a tiny bit of her middle. Being Jo, she hadn’t been one of the first of course: only when it seemed to be becoming the defining mark between the ‘younger girls’ and the ‘older women’ had she taken the plunge.

It was a stylish modern look. The cropped tops weren’t exactly regulation but he liked them, the punters seemed to like them and it showed a bit of innovation and spirit in the staffesses. Of course, Jeff Stevenson was horrified. It was the first thing he changed, a decree

issued on his very first day: ‘All members of staff will ensure that their uniforms fit properly.’ followed by a full page of beating about the bush which so obfuscated the message that Eddie remembered overhearing someone translate it for Jennifer Pierce simply as “no crop tops”.

Sylvia didn’t like the girls wearing tight trousers either. Unfortunately for him though, he couldn’t find a politically correct way of stopping them; which had made him fume. He’d even called Eddie in for an “off the record” chat about it. This had given Eddie an early, and very clear, insight into just how big a twat Sylvia was. On reflection, the most annoying thing about the whole episode was that Sylvia had chosen to confide in him ... as if he was like-minded!

Today, Eddie’s preoccupation with his plan was such that, on noticing Jo’s tight trousers silhouetted before him, his first thought was to recall the trouser-chat with Sylvia rather than notice what a great figure Jo had. He’d never noticed it before either but, after a few more fractions of the current second, he eventually did.

Jo fidgeted a bit, saying nothing and Eddie assumed that by now he must be staring. He wanted to say “Jo you look great! What’s changed?” but couldn’t come up with anything that actually sounded complimentary.

By now the silence had run to several seconds so Eddie broke it, trying to buy himself some thinking time.

“Look, sorry, where are my manners, please sit down.”

Eddie’s desk was against the wall with the door to its right. There was a second chair just inside the door, occupied by Eddie’s coat. Standing, Eddie picked up the coat and went to hang it on the back

of the door. There was no hook on the back of the door, which was one of the main reasons why Eddie hadn't hung his coat there in the first place. He was quite calm now though and quietly lowered the coat onto the floor, out of sight, behind the door.

When he turned back, Jo was sitting on the chair, right leg crossed over her left and both hands resting on her right knee. As Eddie turned his own chair to face her and sat down himself, he had a strong feeling that there might be some body language going on that he ought to be interpreting. The only thing he remembered about crossed legs was to do with towards and away from you ... but she was facing him so that didn't seem to be relevant. For a second he wondered if it mattered which hand was on top but before he'd had chance to realise that he didn't know, Jo spoke.

"I just wanted to ask you something." she said, quite confidently.

"Sure." replied Eddie, positively, and nodding for emphasis.

This time, before he could over-analyse what he was doing, Jo carried on.

"It's about the ticket printer. You know, the one that breaks."

"Oh." was the best Eddie could do.

He normally might have been pleased at not sounding disappointed, but right now he was too busy being disappointed, and wondering why he felt disappointed, to bother with admiring his self-control.

"Yes. It always seems to break for me. I don't know why. The other printers seem fine and other people seem to be able to use that one without breaking it."

The practicality of the problem diverted Eddie's other, more emo-

tional, thoughts into a quiet little spot by themselves. He'd sort out Jo's little problem, then worry about the little problem of Jo; whatever that was.

"I think you probably just use it more than other people Jo. And later in the day, you know it always goes wrong when it gets a bit hot."

"Yes." offered Jo quietly, in partial agreement.

Reading between the lines, even though she'd only said one word, Eddie could tell that there was more to this than she was saying.

"There's more to this than you're saying." suggested Eddie, softly.

"Well. It's just that..." she paused, as if gathering up the courage to speak of some great wrong, and then let it out "last night it broke and a woman got upset at waiting and I couldn't really do anything and Mr Stevenson had to come out and calm her down."

Jo lowered her eyes before adding finally, "And afterwards he said that I was useless."

The next thing that Eddie said was make or break as far as this episode was concerned. It needed careful consideration. He needed to be tactful, sympathetic and understanding; without being condescending. Unfortunately he didn't have time for consideration, because a long pause would have ruined the moment, so he just said the first thing that came into his head.

"Ah. That's because his people skills aren't as finely tuned as mine."

Jo laughed, which reassured Eddie immensely. Now he did make a conscious decision: he had to either continue to side with Jo, at

Sylvia's expense, or become neutral and seek to resolve the issue in a purely professional manner. It wasn't a hard choice.

"He's the useless one. That printer should have been fixed a month ago, when it first started playing up. This isn't your fault at all Jo."

She smiled.

"Sorted." thought Eddie. "That's what she wanted to hear. And it's true anyway. If Sylvia spent half as much time on real problems as he does on his poxy little pseudo-projects then we'd all be a lot better off."

With anyone else, or with Jo on any other day, that would have been the end of it. Eddie would have said something like "OK. I know it can be difficult but bear with me. I'll see if there's anything I can do.", then he would have got up, the other person would get up in response and then leave happy. Now was different though, he didn't want Jo to leave.

Before Eddie could make any more sense of what he was feeling, or even gain a small clue as to what to say next, Jo stood up.

"Thanks Eddie. I hoped you'd understand. Thanks." she smiled again and turned to leave.

Eddie stood too and desperately wanted to say something, but he was so determined not to say the wrong thing that nothing came. Jo left. Eddie sat.

"Urgh." he sighed, putting his head in his hands.

If this had been a new acquaintance, a stranger, a fresh face, having this strange effect on him then it would have been a bit more understandable. 'Love at first sight' seemed to mean something sud-

denly. But this was Jo. He'd known her for ages. She'd never really had much of an effect on him before. He snogged her on his birthday when they were both pissed but that hadn't meant anything to either of them ... had it? Sure, he liked her, what was there to not like.

Eddie's mind filled with images again. This time they floated around above a backdrop of Jo's silhouette. Occasionally an image of Jo's face would sweep in from one side and zoom up, smiling, to obscure everything else.

Eventually Eddie just gave up worrying about why he was suddenly so into Jo, and just got on with thinking about her instead. After a while though he started worrying about how little he really knew about her. In fact, the more he thought about her, the less he seemed to know.

Nothing really coherent had managed to fight its way into Eddie's mind for the best part of ten minutes when suddenly, a particularly tough, nay fearsome, thought just battered its way in by its sheer terribleness.

"What if she's gone and got herself a boyfriend."

If Eddie had been going anywhere then he would have stopped right in his tracks: as it was he just stayed as stopped as he already was in his chair.

"Is that why she's changed? But has she changed though? Is it me who's changed? Oh, fuck it!"

Eddie didn't often use the f-word, not even to himself. He was seriously screwing himself up now. Standing, he went to close the door but barely had he moved it when he noticed his coat on the floor behind it. Picking it up, he fully opened the door again and

dropped the coat back onto the chair that he'd cleared for Jo.

As if transported back in time, the coat reminded Eddie what he'd been thinking about just before Jo came in: the projector.

“The plan. Think about the plan.”

With some effort Eddie finally managed to not think about Jo for a few minutes. Unfortunately the best he could do though was to think about nothing instead: images, swirly patterns and star-like dot patterns.

“Do not under-estimate...” clinging to something familiar.

And at last some inspiration. The projector had to get from here to his house but was too big to carry far. There was nothing for it: he was going to have to sneak it out under his coat... one piece at a time.

Chapter 12

By the time Eddie got home on Monday night, with the metal lens-hood from the OHP in his pocket, he felt calm again. The whole house felt safe. He felt no need to retreat to the den. He felt his feelings.

This seemed like progress.

“Home and reaching for the towel.” he announced, entering the dining-room and looking at his map-wall.

“I wonder if I am bugged.” he thought, continuing in the privacy of his own head.

For a whole five minutes Eddie stood, facing the map, contemplating the possibilities of surveillance. Yes, they might be listening. They might be watching too. They couldn't read his mind though, that had to be impossible: he didn't even know what he was thinking himself some of the time, so what chance did anyone else have?

The options were quite clear. Either he inspected the whole house for bugs every day: which was something he had no idea how to do. Or, he simply accepted that he was bugged. Or, he simply assumed that he wasn't. Either of the 'ors' led on to the conclusion that he

should just try and act normally. Or should that be ‘act normally’ and not ‘try and act’...

“Oh nuts to it. This is my house. Anyone listening will learn nothing. I am the master here.” said Eddie at last, out loud.

The ‘master’ bit came out a bit wet and he wished he’d not said it. Nevertheless, with this proclamation he felt somewhat cleansed and free to get on with his business without fear of being spied on.

In the kitchen Eddie set about making his special cheese on toast. The trick was to use a nice big doorstep of white bread and top it with strips of Stilton and either Gruyere or Edam. Recently he’d been having a hard time choosing which cheese to use so today he confidently ploughed ahead and used both.

Just as Eddie placed the cheesy extravaganza under the grill, there was a pop in the dining-room. Eddie turned and saw that the light bulb had blown. He smiled and turned back to the grill.

“Bang goes their camera.” he thought.

The cheese started to bubble a bit and Eddie felt a warm glow inside: the glow of confidence, of power, of control.

Fantastic as it was, Eddie’s dinner was not something that he wanted to spend a lot of time on this evening. He quickly polished off the cheese on toast, direct from the grill, uncut, without a plate and whilst standing by the kitchen sink looking out the window at the black December night.

“Nice.” he concluded, not even realising the added bonus of zero additional washing up, ensured by using a dirty left-over knife from the previous day’s washing up to cut the cheeses.

Rubbing the crumbs from his hands into the sink, Eddie went

over to the bits'n'bobs drawer and took out the other 60W light-bulb: he'd got a pack of two the previous week after the living-room one had blown. The old bulb rattled when he shook it gently. It was a standard sort of rattle for a dead bulb. There was no need to break open the bulb to see if there was actually a camera in there; it was time to get on. Carefully, Eddie inserted the new light-bulb, using a handkerchief to hold it; partially this was force of habit, someone somewhere had told him once, or he'd read, that greasy spots on light-bulbs shorten their lives; his hands were also a bit sticky with cheese.

After fixing the light-bulb, Eddie decided that now was a good time to wash his hands. So he went back into the kitchen and turned on the cold tap. Perhaps not the obvious choice to the uninitiated, but Eddie knew that the hot tap was far too hot for hand washing and he couldn't be bothered to fill the sink with a comfortable mix: Christ, if he wanted to go to that much trouble then he would have gone all the way to the bathroom and used soap too, rather than the little drop of washing up liquid that he was now rubbing in.

Hands cleaner, and dryish thanks to a rather sad looking tartan tea-towel which was a bit more tea than towel, Eddie returned to the dining room once more for the next phase of his plan.

"The book." said Eddie, picking up another of his most recent purchases.

"Star Finder. Hey, found one, and another, and another." he laughed, flicking through from back to front.

Sitting down he opened the book at the front. Eddie knew nothing at all about astronomy, apart from the fact that constellations

were groups of stars and that some of them had something to do with signs of the zodiac, which was astrology and not astronomy anyway. Eddie had always wanted someone to ask him what sign he was, so he could say “positive” and smile, but no-one ever had yet.

One thing that Eddie had learned recently about astronomy was that high-street shops don't have many good books on it. If they have any at all then they are usually enormous hard-back manuals that cost forty or fifty quid. Eddie supposed that the bookshops were probably assuming that global warming would put an end to clear skies any day now, thus killing demand for star books, and were thus cleverly avoiding getting stuck with lots of stock they couldn't shift. The big expensive books would go to collectors and campaigners who needed them as props for “Look! See what you're missing” speeches.

So it was with a bit more effort than expected that Eddie had finally come across his little book on stars. Just what he needed: maps of all the constellations, not much text or padding and all for under a fiver too!

The intro, at six pages, was skipable but Eddie read it anyway, just in case there was some vital fact that might be relevant to his scheme. Everything seemed in order, although he did say “88” out loud on seeing that that was how many constellations there were.

“This could take quite some time...” he mused, checking that his box of acetate sheets had more than 88 in. It did. He'd swiped a box of 100 from the same cupboard as the OHP, only it was already opened. Sylvia must have used a couple, well, ten actually. Still, 90 was enough; easily actually because he could fit several constellations on each sheet.

Of course, the time it was going to take Eddie to copy out all 88 star constellations onto acetate sheets, ready to be projected onto his map on the wall, was actually peanuts compared to how many days it was going to take him to smuggle the projector home. He still wasn't sure it could be done.

"If only I could risk taking the map into work."

"No, no. Non-starter. Someone would see it for sure; even if I just had it up for an hour."

Eddie was very calm still. He was working the problem, feeling out all the options, finding the best solution. OK, so all the options had pretty serious flaws and almost certainly, in his heart of hearts, wouldn't work: but you can't make an omelette without spilling some milk.

At that instant the lights dimmed and came back up again. A minor power glitch. Nothing important. Not even worth mentioning really. Except for the fact that, on the other side of Guildford, a young boy of 12 was sufficiently distracted that instead of dialling Eddie's phone number, he checked his scrap of paper again and successfully tapped out the number he really wanted. The two happy consequences of this were, one, the boy got to speak to a rather nice girl that he'd taken ages to get brave enough to call, without having first had his confidence dented by Eddie Shore's wrong number routine: and, two, Eddie wasn't distracted by the phone and his own childish response to wrong numbers, just as he was about to have a plan-saving idea.

He was holding the box of acetates in both hands as it struck him. First the idea struck him, and then the box, as he bashed it

into his head.

“Doooh. You berk!”

Eddie put the box down and leant on the table with one hand propping up his head. He closed his eyes and laughed, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

“It’s so bloody obvious.”

“Don’t take the mountain to Mohammed.”

“Take a picture of Mohammed to the mountain!”

Eddie was particularly pleased with his last statement and chose to dwell on that for a moment, rather than the fact that it had taken him this long to figure out he was working backwards. Sure he couldn’t take the map to work and project the stars onto it, but he could copy the sites on the map onto an acetate and project them onto the book of stars.

What an idiot. How could he not have thought of this before? Eddie was feeling far too positive to think like this. Instead he chose to see the revelation as a further sign that he was on the right track and that his centre of operations was shaping up nicely.

Looking at the box of acetates again, Eddie smiled as he noted the bonus feature of his new improved plan: he didn’t have to copy out 88 constellations now, just the positions of the pins on the map.

For a fleeting moment he almost realised that he didn’t know how to copy a metre wide pattern onto an A4 sheet. Fortunately his subconscious saw the potential disappointment coming and pushed him into recapping on the bits of his plan that now seemed to be going very well.

The present afterglow of inspiration was relatively minor com-

pared to the triumph of the previous Friday, plan day 1. In the last few hundred yards of his walk he'd thought "if I only knew when the next strike was coming. I could prepare myself."

And that was it. The big bang.

"Yes! You know some of the places you've been hit before. Plot them on a map and look for a pattern. The pattern will predict where they might hit me next."

Of course, the 'piece de la resistance' was that Eddie already knew what the pattern would be; sort of. Just recently there had been a TV programme, a science one so it must have been Horizon because he'd gone off Tomorrow's World a long time ago. Anyway, in this programme an expert had explained the structure of various ancient sites by comparing them to patterns of stars.

Another expert, who claimed to be more expert than the first expert, said that this was bunk because you could always find a constellation that would almost fit any set of points. This had been proved using London hospitals, although Eddie couldn't remember why they had to be public buildings.

Thus, over the remainder of plan day 1, Eddie had reasoned that there must be a pattern to his attacks and that the pattern must fit the stars. However hard they tried, even if they only attacked him near hospitals, they couldn't avoid the star patterns. He would plot the attacks, find the right constellation, and then any left-over stars must be the positions of future attacks.

Whether he would avoid the future attack spots completely, or just prepare himself very well when he went near them, would have to depend on the results of his analysis. Obviously, if the local hospital

was a target and he got ill then he'd have to just risk it. Somehow though, since the whole hospital thing was really obvious to anyone who'd seen this programme, he didn't think anyone would be dumb enough to try that.

The phone rang. Eddie walked hurriedly into the living room and picked it up. He expected it to be his mother, and she didn't like it if the answering machine got there before Eddie did. Nevertheless, he didn't speak immediately; just in case.

“Hello? Sally? I think we got cut off...”

Chapter 13

“In another lifetime maybe.” said Eddie.

“Oh.” was the instant reply from a very surprised boy, who’s name escapes me for the moment.

“Because my name’s not Sally. It’s Jefferson.” lied Eddie, “What’s your name?”

“Err, Alex.” answered the boy, truthfully I think.

Alex wanted to hang up, but 12 years of persistent social conditioning had left him unable to. He needed to be dismissed, or to excuse himself politely. Eddie could have some fun here.

“Good. Alex, I have a job for you.” started Eddie.

From somewhere, perhaps the same source that had given him the strength to phone Sally in the first place, Alex suddenly mustered up all the confidence he could find.

“Look, I don’t mean to be rude, but I need to get back to Sally. It’s taken me weeks to get round to calling her and I don’t want to mess it up now.” he said, starting firmly but tending toward pleading at the end.

Eddie was strangely moved and, assuming that Alex was going

to hang up, quickly he said “Good luck then. Bye.”

Actually, Alex didn’t hang up and he heard Eddie’s message. From the speed of it though he realised that he probably should have hung up by now so he quietly put the phone down without saying anything else.

Eddie put the phone down but stood by it for a couple of minutes. Wrong numbers often come in pairs. On this occasion the phone stayed quiet. Before he could reflect on his own, slightly unusual, emotional state, a more mundane thought struck him.

“If he was already talking to her, why didn’t he just press redial?”

“Tuh, kids.”

Distraction gone, Eddie was left with nowhere to hide from what had just happened.

“I hope you and Sally get together Alex.” he said, finally, looking towards the phone.

For a crazy moment he thought it would be nice to call 1471, get Alex’s number and dial back to make sure it was engaged now: just in case Alex had lost his nerve and needed a bit more encouragement.

“No. That’s a dumb idea Shore.” he thought, in a strange deep voice, pretending it was someone else talking to him from some great distance.

The full weight of why it was such a dumb, nay ridiculous, idea that Eddie could actually give anyone advice about love, hung over him. It could have fallen right on him, right then. He might have realised that this lad, Alex, probably had as much experience now of the opposite sex as Eddie did at 30. Actually he didn’t and, as I hinted, Eddie didn’t start down this destructive path.

Instead the weight stayed well above him, safe for now, and Eddie found himself imagining a young couple running through fields of corn in the sun. Her long blond hair floated, in slow motion, behind them as they ran hand in hand. His blue eyes gazed lovingly at her, only occasionally glancing forward to check that they were running the right way. They both smiled and laughed, despite the fact that they seemed to be running an awfully long way. Eventually they arrived at a small clearing, where they stopped and lay down together.

“Woah.” thought Eddie suddenly.

From Alex’s voice Eddie guessed he was in his early teens at the latest.

“Don’t go there. They’re too young...”

He paused, then announced grandly “Ladies and Gentlemen. Eddie Shore has just turned into his mother.”

“You’re only jealous.” he offered in mitigation.

“Of who though?” he joked, initially, but then shrank back.

The weight above him creaked uneasily and a small piece broke off. It was a memory, one incident that he’d tried hard to forget. All of five years ago, starting one Saturday afternoon in Stoke park.

He’d just been killing time really. The weather was fine, quite hot actually but a bit too muggy for lounging about. A long slow walk in the park seemed like just the ticket and, after about half an hour, he’d only just made it up to the top of the park. There were lots of people about: joggers, cyclists, friends chatting, couples arguing and a man trying, unsuccessfully, to teach his son how to fly a kite, much to the annoyance of the particular cyclist who got buzzed pretty closely.

On the far side of the park, between a clump of trees and the road, Eddie could see a group of four girls sitting on a rug. He couldn't really tell that they were girls at this range, only that three of them wore ponytails. As he continued round the outside edge of the park, Eddie couldn't help looking over at the girls every so often. When he reached the bottom edge of the park, with the girls directly ahead of him, though still at some distance, he found it hard to take his eyes off them at all.

By now his heart was thumping. It had been a couple of months since he'd broken up with Lydia, his girlfriend of two weeks, and in that time he hadn't dared try to talk to another girl. Of course, he wasn't going to just stroll up to four girls in the park and try and chat them up, that would take about a thousand times more confidence than he'd ever had: no, Eddie's modest plan was to just walk by the girls, and maybe smile at one of them, without looking or feeling like a total loser.

One step at a time. Even so, limited as his objectives were, Eddie felt nervous: maybe he'd trip over right in front of them, or worse.

As he drew nearer, Eddie worried frantically about what might go wrong, whilst desperately trying to look relaxed, cool even. Then, near enough to see them in detail for the first time, he relaxed completely. Phew. The task, though not completed, could be avoided without any dishonour: the girls were all far too young for him.

Nearer still and he guessed that the oldest couldn't be more than fifteen years old. They were all wearing very tight jeans, particularly skimpy tops and fairly heavy makeup. The three nearest Eddie were all looking at some sort of magazine but the girl facing him was busy

chatting away on a mobile phone.

The phone girl seemed to be staring past Eddie into space as he approached, still a bit disappointed at not finding a set of 21-year old babes but even more relieved at avoiding the test, however simple it ought to have been.

A simple relaxed smile occupied Eddie's face as, feet from the girls and moments from passing them, the only thing that bothered him slightly was just how hard it was getting to tell how old girls and women were these days.

It thus came as a total bolt from the blue when Eddie, first, found himself making eye contact with the phone girl and second saw her put down the phone and pick up the bottom edge of her skimpy top.

"Want some Mister?" she shouted, flashing her breasts at him for an instant.

Before the other three girls had looked round, Eddie had already gone bright red. He carried on walking, looking straight ahead. He feared that other people were looking at him and he wanted to run, but he thought, probably correctly, that that would just make things look worse. As he walked quickly he could hear the girls behind him laughing hysterically. He thought he heard one of them shout out something else but he didn't make out what it was (if you need to know it was "Ooo, nice arse mate!").

He'd gone straight home to his flat, without looking back once. On the way, every girl or woman who even vaguely looked in his general direction had made him go red again. One very chic-ly dressed woman, who must have been well over fifty and didn't even look in his direction as she loaded her shopping into a Mercedes convertible,

even made him flush too.

Fortunately his flatmate had been out and he just sat, alone, in the kitchen. He tried not to think about Lydia, and how she'd let him down. He tried not to wonder if it had been his fault. He tried not to think about the three previous years, in which he hadn't had any girlfriends at all. Most of all he tried not to think about his last, first and only, proper girlfriend. Her. He tried, but on all counts he failed.

Eddie had come close to tears, got even closer, recovered a bit and then ploughed right in, weeping for England. His life might as well be over; it wasn't going to get any better now, the best years were behind him, it was downhill all the way.

Just when he thought things couldn't get worse, Eddie heard the front door. Assuming that it was his flatmate coming home, he leapt up but, realising that he wouldn't make it down the hall and into his room, retreated to the kitchen window instead. He didn't want Mike to see him crying, he would have to try and bluff it out.

As it happened the noise Eddie heard was just the letterbox, someone posting a free paper through the door. So he stood looking out of the window for ages, waiting for Mike to come in when, in fact, he was still several miles away in a small country pub talking about the recent tragedy of England losing to Germany on penalties again.

This piece of the weight, the one that had just struck him, hurt Eddie. Five years on a lot of repairs had been done, but they were mainly temporary fixes. There was a lot of damage and a great many scars. One fix, however, came ready-made along with this particular

memory and, fortunately, it popped back into Eddie's head right then.

After five minutes of staring out the kitchen window, Eddie had decided that Mike wasn't coming in after all. Alone again, in his mind, the freedom from macho restraint released his tears, which ran silently down his face. As he reached up to wipe them away, he noticed something fluttering in the top corner of the window, on the outside. It was a wasp, caught in a spider's web.

Moving to the edge of the window for a better look, Eddie saw that a spider was half-way between the centre of the web and the wasp. The spider was about the same size as the wasp, maybe a bit smaller.

"This should be good." thought Eddie "I'm with the spider."

For thirty seconds or so, which actually seemed like ten minutes, the wasp struggled, ferociously beating its wings, pausing for an instant and then beating for its life again. The whole time the spider kept just out of reach, almost seeming to tap at the wasp with a leg or two occasionally, but never actually wading in.

Eddie was fascinated. He expected the spider to suddenly leap on the wasp, which he guessed must be weakening, or for the wasp to just run out of steam or strangle itself in the web. Still the wasp struggled, and still the spider waited. The web seemed to be getting a bit damaged near the wasp, a few of the gaps starting to gape. Could the spider fix it 'on the fly?', surely he had to dive in soon.

Suddenly the wasp broke free and was gone.

"Oh!" said Eddie, "I didn't expect that."

The spider didn't move, almost as if he was as surprised as Eddie.

Then he turned around, marched back to the centre of the web and sat, motionless, waiting for the next potential victim.

“Wow!”

Eddie was experiencing his very own Robert the Bruce, or Rob Roy, or King Lear, or whoever it was, moment. The tears didn't magically dry up. The pain, embarrassment and self-loathing didn't suddenly vanish. But, at that moment, he knew that sometime in the future, things would be better.

“Better luck next time spider, man!”

Chapter 14

The light was still off in the living room. In his initial hurry to get to the phone, Eddie hadn't bothered to switch it on. Now, twenty minutes or more later, he was still standing in semi-darkness, the room lit only by the spare bits of light from the hall which happened to fall in through the door as they whizzed up and down.

For the last five minutes Eddie had just stared at the phone. His mind was almost completely blank, waiting. Occasionally he imagined a spider sitting on the handset, waiting too. If he was waiting for the phone to ring again, to punctuate the silence of the room and his mind, then he would have a long wait.

Alex was busy talking to Sally. Eddie's mother, the only other person on the planet likely to call him that evening, had tried to call him while he was playing with Alex. Finding the phone engaged, Eddie's mother was surprised. Pleasantly surprised. Eddie's phone was almost never engaged unless he was chatting to her. She'd already started speculating, quite wrongly of course, that the reason Eddie hadn't called her for a while, even though it was his turn, might be due to some new lady friend. So, happy and hopeful, Eddie's mother

had resolved not to call back that evening; maybe she would try him at work tomorrow.

A car door slammed in the street outside the window. It made Eddie jump.

“Right.” said Eddie, snapping out of his blank day-dream.

“What’s on the telly?”

He walked to the door and switched on the light, at last. Next he was going to turn round, look for the remote control, turn on the TV and spend the rest of the evening trying to find something worth watching. That’s what he normally would have done. That’s what most normal people do on most normal days: or at least, what most normal people think that most other normal people do on days that they assume are normal.

This wasn’t a normal day. Eddie was normalish but didn’t feel it. The map on the dining-room wall, across the hall and at an oblique angle, was reminder enough of what was happening to him.

Eddie stepped out of the living-room and into the hall. He turned and looked suspiciously at the empty room.

“The front of the house?” he whispered, turning again and walking into the dining room. He felt incredibly positive again.

“The plan.” thought Eddie, remembering to keep secrets to himself.

“Right, I just have to copy those pin positions onto one of these acetate sheets. Hmmm.”

Eddie had opened the box of acetates and was holding one up. He looked through the sheet at the map. He glanced at the piece of the OHP that was sitting, minding its own business, on the table.

“It’s too big.” he announced, as if stating the obvious might provoke some hitherto unseen, but equally obvious, solution.

“How do you make a map smaller?” he wondered, sitting down.

Despite remaining very positive, nothing came to him, so Eddie ventured into the kitchen in search of refreshment. Returning with a cup of steaming hot decaf and a packet of ginger-nuts, he resumed his seat facing the map.

Even putting his coffee cup down on the loose acetate sheet, melting it a bit, didn’t dent his mood. Instead it just reminded him that he now had tons of sheets, since “There need only be one!”

A few more minutes passed and the best idea Eddie could come up with was to buy a smaller map, replace the pins with pen marks and reduce it to A4 in sections on a photocopier. Well aware of his previous false start on the plan, Eddie decided to ponder further before going down that particular route.

This was getting a bit like making signs and notices on the computer at work. You eventually find out how to do it but end up with a feeling of despair that it should have been a lot easier. With that in mind, Eddie’s next thought followed naturally, “I know, I’ll ask Jo...”

Jo was quite good on the computer. Relatively. Relative to Eddie that is. Occasionally, when he got really stuck, he’d ask her to help and she would. He couldn’t ask any of the blokes for help, especially Sylvia, they would just use his weakness against him; and laugh about it behind his back. Most of the girls were equally threatening, in a variety of different ways, except Jo. Jo was quiet. Jo was...?

The nagging doubts that Eddie had experienced earlier in the day

returned momentarily. He really didn't know that much about Jo. He'd never felt the need to know before, but now he did. For some reason something had changed.

A week previously Eddie would have greeted this development with supreme suspicion: a trap to divert him from his plan maybe. Now everything seemed right: maybe Jo was a part of his plan?

"I'm drawn to her ... because she's the key to my plan?"

"She holds the key."

"Yeah right; and I'm the bloody keymaster." he thought, mocking himself.

Eddie sighed. What was he going to do? In one instant he resolved to call Jo immediately and ask for her help. Several minutes of agonising could have followed if, in the very next instant, Eddie hadn't realised that he didn't have Jo's number, or address.

"I can wait until tomorrow." said Eddie out loud, raising his eyebrows.

Time was something that remained a bit vague in his plan. Position, fine. The where question was sorted. When was a different matter. Eddie felt a bit uneasy about letting his plan run on an extra day. The more he thought about it, the more uneasy he became.

"Maybe Jo has some other part to play." and after a long pause, "I have to ask her out?"

The terror wasn't instantaneous. Eddie had asked Jo out before, several times; to his last four birthday celebrations for a start. After a few dozen instants had banded themselves together to make a moment, the horror hit. He was thinking about asking her on a date, not making up numbers for a pub-crawl.

“I could do that.” thought Eddie, unconvincingly.

Faced with the prospect of a nerve straining, gut wrenching, tongue tying moment perched on the razor’s edge between joy on the one side and the bottomless pit of rejection on the other, Eddie did what he usually did at times like these; he tried to bottle out in advance.

A master bottler was he. Most new female acquaintances were instantly labelled as too old, too young, too loud, too ugly or even too pretty. The last category was the saddest of all, and the most dishonest: he didn’t mean ‘out of my league’, that was a special but rarely applied category; no, ‘too pretty’ meant ‘just the kind of girl I’ve always wanted to go out with, and could do too, but if I ask her and she says no then I’d probably just die on the spot’.

Jo was just the right age, he guessed. He knew she wasn’t too loud, there wasn’t a too quiet category. She wasn’t ugly. Was she pretty?

Eddie leant back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. He closed his eyes and tried to picture Jo, but immediately he became aware of his neck hurting. A few seconds of fidgeting failed to yield a more comfortable position and he stood up, frustrated.

“Hmmm.” he sighed.

“What to do. Think logically. I can’t do anything about Jo until tomorrow. Is she working tomorrow? Err, yes I think so. Right, so, now. What I can do now is this map. I was going to ask Jo for help. So. On my own I can...”

Faltering, Eddie looked over the map for inspiration. Pembury seemed to stand out. Wondering if pembury was some technique for

copying, Eddie quickly fetched his old English dictionary from the living-room and looked it up. Unfortunately, the only word starting ‘pem...’ was pemmican and that was something to do with dried meat cakes.

Still puzzling over meat cakes, Eddie noticed the item at the bottom of the first column in the key. It said ‘Distance in miles between symbols’, referring to a blue number between two blue arrows. He started to wonder how far away, in miles, Jo was right now. Then, just before he progressed to wondering what she might be doing, he got the point.

“Yes! Distance between points. Scales and stuff.”

“If I measure the distances between the pins, I can divide them all by some factor and then draw those smaller distances onto the acetate. Cool.”

Buoyed by this seemingly brilliant revelation, Eddie set off in search of the tools for the first two phases, the measuring and the dividing, assuming that the drawing phase would be as simple as shelling peas. An hour later, the orange plastic ruler and cheap calculator lay discarded on the table as Eddie stared at his list of numbers and an acetate sheet with two dots on it.

One dot represented both of the Guildford pins, since scaled down they were closer together than a dot-width. The other dot was Bracknell, 3.7 centimetres away. The stumbling block was Bridge End, 1.8cm from Guildford and 3.8cm from Bracknell. How could he draw that dot? He only had one ruler, and even if he got another he didn’t think he could shuffle them round accurately enough to place the dot.

A further foray to the map for inspiration yielded nothing, except

a minor snigger when he misread the name Farthingloe and a tiny wince on spotting Balls Cross.

By way of a break Eddie retreated to the kitchen again. He didn't really want another coffee, or anything in fact, so he tried opening a few cupboards at random, the fridge, even the dishwasher, to see if anything interesting caught his eye. It didn't. Foiled, Eddie was about to resort to doing Sunday night's washing up when the doorbell rang.

"Who could that be at this time of night?"

Eddie walked quickly to the front door. Through the bevelled glass he could make out a lone figure standing outside. Without putting the chain on, Eddie opened the door slightly then remembered the map-wall and closed the dining-room door with his other hand.

There was a young man standing there. He had darkish skin, a big coat and a clipboard. He looked cold and fed-up but as Eddie opened the door a bit further he managed to put on a well-rehearsed smile.

"Good evening sir. Sorry to bother you so late. My name is An-jum. Here's my identification." started the young man confidently, before rummaging in his coat, which Eddie now rated as massive or at least far too big for him, for the plastic badge he was wearing around his neck.

The effort hardly seemed worth it as he flashed the card at Eddie so fast that he would have been pushed to say if there had been any actual words on it at all. The thought of asking to see it again did appear fleetingly but by now the cold air was starting to surround

Eddie and, since he had no intention of asking the guy and his coat in, he just wanted rid of him as soon as possible.

Before the young man could get on with his prepared patter, Eddie butted in, “Oh, thanks for coming.”

Young Anjum was ever so slightly thrown and had barely opened his mouth to reply when Eddie got in again.

“Look, it’s very cold out there: why don’t you ...”

Thinking that his wildest dreams, in the circumstances, were coming true, the young man leaned towards the door, beginning to start to step up to the doorway.

“... come back another time.” finished Eddie, closing the door.

“Bye.” added Eddie, for good measure, just through the last gap.

Eddie went straight into the dining room and closed the door behind him. He listened very carefully and didn’t laugh until he was sure that he’d heard the guy walk away.

“Timing.” he said, still laughing.

“Thank you for that.” he added later, genuinely if not slightly guilt edged.

The ruler and calculator caught his eye, symbols of his stumbling plan. Even if Jo could help, wouldn’t he seem like a bit of a prat, asking her about technical drawing one minute and out on a date the next?

“Shit.” muttered Eddie under his breath.

Positivity and objectivity were starting to fade. Jo and the plan were getting mixed up. Eddie stood in front of the map again: one last look and then he would pack in for the night and watch TV a bit.

Somehow Eddie was looking at the map but thinking about Jo. He saw Wembley, did she like football? His eyes followed the A409 to Harrow, what school did she go to? On further to Bushey Heath and he went a bit red.

Amused rather than embarrassed by his impure thoughts, Eddie was smiling as his eyes cast around Bushey, Letchmore Heath and Round Bush. Something did become clear to him: he was going to ask Jo out. Call it destiny, fate, whatever: in a way it seemed like it had already happened. In the same way that Jo had sneaked past all his advance bottle outs, now she was edging past his last line of defence.

With his confidence high again, Eddie decided not to spoil it by dwelling on the detail of how and when he was going to ask her.

"I'll just sound her out a bit tomorrow. If I get round to it." he thought.

He was still looking at Round Bush.

"Round to it." he repeated, this time out loud, but in a whisper.

"Round". The word seemed a bit bolder than the Bush; it wasn't.

"Round." he said again, trying to tease out the significance.

The old dictionary was still on the table. Eddie turned and picked it up.

"round: spherical, cylindrical, circular, curved." he read.

"Hmmm. Circle?" now he was looking at the acetate sheet with its two lonely dots.

"If I draw a circle..." he started, but didn't need to finish.

A skill he never thought he'd need, and had last grudgingly practiced over 15 years ago in school, came flooding back. The only thing

he didn't remember was the name, fittingly disproving O'Leary's theory that "a twist of some kind sticks in the mind."

"Triangulation! The combination of trial and strangulation."

Chapter 15

Ticket office duty, on a Tuesday morning, the first week in December, wasn't a very busy job. It suited Jo Tennyson just fine, because she had a lot to think about.

“Maybe it is time for a change.” she thought, several times.

“I've been here for over 4 years now. And where am I going? Nowhere.”

Jo wasn't, by nature, a negative person at all. Quite the opposite in fact, but Christmas was on its way again. Indeed, it was almost here, as the giant advent calendar in the lobby could testify by its mere presence and semi-openness.

On balance she didn't like Christmas. Yes; the traditions, the presents, the food and some of the parties were great: but, on the other hand, most of the good bits ended up reminding her of all the things that were crap in her life.

Take traditions: family lunch on Christmas day for one. What family did she have? Just her mum. She was an only child and her four cousins, who had been like brothers and sisters once, had emigrated to Australia in the early nineties, a year or so after her

father had died, when uncle John lost his job and decided to pack up and start again 'down under'.

Ever since, she'd spent Christmas Day either alone with her mum or round at her neighbour Frances's. On the whole Jo preferred the smaller gathering since Frances's son Robert always tried to catch her under some mistletoe for a kiss. Then he'd slobber over her disgustingly on the grounds that it was unlucky not to. Yuk.

This year, the Frances option was almost definitely out, because Robert had gone too far last year. As everyone opened their token presents, sitting round the TV waiting for the Queen, Jo had been horrified to find that Robert's offering was not a small novelty handkerchief, as she first thought. Instead it turned out to be a pair of red novelty Christmas knickers.

"Robert. You cheeky boy!" his mother had said, nervously.

"Oh. Err, thank you, Robert." Jo had said, politely but clearly embarrassed.

Robert just grinned, which was at least better than saying "Aren't you going to try them on then?" as most of those in attendance feared.

Jo's mother had said nothing, until afterwards when they got home. From her silence Jo was worried that her mum might think she'd done something to encourage Robert. But before she could start putting the record straight her mum simply said "That Robert's a complete prat, isn't he?"

"I think we'll have Christmas on our own next year." she added, smiling.

So, at least she wouldn't have to face Robert this year. Apart

from if he brought her a present round, as he inevitably would. That was OK though, because she could say she'd open it later and then just bung it straight in the bin when he was gone.

People she couldn't avoid, and didn't want to in most respects, were the old school friends who always came 'back home' for Christmas. There were fewer of them every year now: some of them were married, some had kids too and all of them just had more friends, and presumably more fun, in the places where they'd made their own homes.

All those friends had changed. They weren't the same people she'd spent a year with in the sixth-form, having a wail of a time. They'd all finished their A-levels, gone off to various universities around the country, and then come back every Christmas with the express purpose of telling her what a great time they were having.

Jo enjoyed hearing about 'Uni'. Anne Lawson had gone to Cambridge and could talk for hours about the history of the place, even if she did always end up slagging off Oxford, unless Adam Forrester was there, in which case they'd have to have a 'debate' about why theirs was the finest seat of learning in the country.

One thing she didn't enjoy hearing about though, and it always came up, was how bloody poor all the students were. Great. She'd had to leave school early and get a job when Mum's arthritis stopped her working. She'd put her dreams on hold to earn money so her family could survive. She paid taxes. She paid for universities. And all they could do was moan about running up massive debts to fund the essentials, like going out drinking every night!

It didn't pay to be bitter though. Once, when James Early had

been boasting about how he'd got so drunk at the Union's Drambuie promotion night that he missed the whole next day's lectures, Jo had asked "Don't they make you catch up later?"

To which the unanimous and incredulous response was simply "No?"

Jo wanted to scream at them all "Well they should! I pay for those lectures you miss! You don't think I can just skip off work when I feel like it do you?" but thought better of it and instead quietly just said "Oh."

Maybe one day she could still go to university, and if she did, she would make the most of it. Although all her friends seem to have done rather well for themselves despite their apparently casual approach.

"Penny for 'em?"

"What?" said Jo, startled.

"Penny for your thoughts. You looked miles away." it was Henry Wilks, leaning on his broom, at a loose end.

"Oh Henry. I was just thinking about Christmas, you know."

"Yeah, great innit? Mind you, with 11 grandchildren it's all a bit noisy for me sometimes. As I was telling you and Mr B in that pub with the music..."

Henry kept talking. The gentle tones and his seasoned, well worn, repertoire of facial expressions were entertaining enough, without having to listen to any of the actual words. An occasional nod and a smile would keep him going. Jo nodded, and smiled.

"Mr B" made her smile. Not just the name, which Henry Wilks always sprinkled liberally throughout his conversations at the cin-

ema, as if he were a figure of some great authority who's name alone leant weight to any argument. No, Eddie made Jo smile: even if he never seemed to really notice her.

Eddie was the reason she'd taken this job. OK, maybe not THE reason, but one of the reasons. He'd interviewed her, and made an instant impression. He was older and seemed very confident, talking knowledgeably about the cinema even though, it transpired, he'd only been there a few months himself.

There was something about him. Not looks particularly: he was only moderately handsome, though he did have very nice eyes, brown and motley, and wore exactly the same sort of glasses that she did. No, it was his manner she liked most: Eddie was kind and sort of quiet like her, but he was more confident and self-assured.

A few weeks into the job Eddie had asked her out for a drink to celebrate his birthday. Flattered, she'd even gone out and bought a special outfit for the date: only to find, on the day, that half a dozen other people were coming along too.

Her friend Sarah had said that Eddie was probably just a slow mover, that he needed time to get to know her better before he was ready to go 'one on one'. Jo had given him every chance, without being pushy of course. The years had passed and he still hadn't made a move. Obviously he didn't fancy her.

Then, after George Thompson walked out, or was it retired, she'd decided to leave. Eddie was busy being the acting manager and didn't seem to have any time for her at all. Not that they'd ever spent hours chatting or anything, just the odd word here and a friendly smile there. As her final attempt to be noticed, she'd copied the

younger girls (she was only 24 herself) and shortened her T-shirt, though not nearly as much as Jennifer Pierce.

If Eddie had noticed the new look he didn't let it show, and to make things worse, when the new manager arrived she got into trouble over the top.

Yes, the new manager. No-one liked him at all: and everyone was surprised that Eddie hadn't simply been promoted to manager. By then though things had got more complicated. Jo, sure that Eddie was going to be manager, that she wouldn't even be considered for an assistantship, that all her hopes were misplaced, and that she needed to move on, had decided to make Eddie's birthday a farewell drink too.

She wasn't going to be mean and ruin his birthday or anything. It wasn't his fault that he didn't find her attractive. Somehow though it seemed appropriate to tell him that she was leaving on the anniversary of her first disappointment.

Well, that was the plan. The first surprise was that there was only a handful of people there, which was strange since being a 30th she'd expected quite a big turnout. Mike was there, as usual, and after Henry went home citing impending deafness, the only other person in the party was Bob Jones. She knew Bob fairly well, having been out with his brother when they were at school, but was a bit suspicious of him: he had shifty eyes and almost always wore combat trousers of some description.

The phrase Jo most closely associated with Bob was 'potential lunatic', so she always tried to keep a safe distance away. On Eddie's birthday, with only two other bodies present, this could have been

difficult. Luckily Eddie didn't seem to know Bob very well so, armed with the phrase "mustn't ignore the birthday boy", she had managed to steer clear.

Eddie had seemed a bit uneasy at first. Jo assumed that he was upset because his 'real date' hadn't turned up or something, leaving him lumbered with her. In turn this had made her feel a bit down, but Eddie was so down that she felt sorry for him, it being his birthday, and resolved not to make things worse by announcing her leaving until later.

Later, much later, a few drinks after quite a few drinks already later, Jo had mustered enough Dutch courage to ask Eddie a few direct questions for a change.

"Eddie, do you want to dance?"

"Err, we are dancing aren't we?"

"No, do you want to dance with me?"

"Err, yeah, sure." said Eddie, turning to completely face her. Eddie smiled and danced. For the first time he was looking right at her, it was just the two of them.

"You're a good dancer." she said, mostly meaning it.

"Thanks, so are you." replied Eddie thoughtfully, not just echoing her compliment.

At this point Jo wanted to say "Look, Eddie, I'm leaving town and wont ever be coming back", no that wasn't it, "I've got a new job, we can still see each other can't we?", worse. To fill the gap while she was trying to figure out what to say, she'd just smiled and looked at him. He seemed much happier now than he had been all evening. Words didn't seem to matter anymore. Neither of them

spoke for ages, they just drifted gradually towards the edge of the dance-floor.

Finally it was Eddie who spoke, "Shall we sit down for a while?"

She'd just smiled and nodded and, taking his hand, they'd bagged a spot on one of the large sofas.

They kissed for what seemed like hours. Both, despite the drink, remembered to remove their glasses, skilfully avoiding any awkward clashes. At last, almost in a daze, or a haze, or a blaze, Jo had said "I'd like to go home now."

If it had been a warm August night, and not a cold one, then how different things could have been. Eddie stood with Jo in the queue at the cloakroom for ages. Neither of them spoke, they were wrapped in a sort of warm glow which would have served Jo a lot better than the fateful, if quite expensive, coat for which she'd waited.

Bob and Mike were long forgotten, and would have remained so if some stupid bean-pole of a tart hadn't spewed up her whole evening's vodka and limes down Mike's back, about a dozen people ahead of them in the queue. On seeing Mike's distress, Eddie stepped out of the queue for a better look. He seemed rather amused; a fact not lost on the girl's apparent boyfriend, who was something of a gorilla.

From somewhere behind them, Bob Jones appeared and pushed himself between the large ape-monster and Eddie, who was still completely oblivious to the possible impending danger. Bob threw the first punch, Jo thought, but it was hard to tell because every other bloke there seemed to pile in at once.

Jo was pushed away from the epicentre by the other girls, leaving Eddie on the other side. Escorted outside by one of the smaller

doormen, she waited in the cold as the trouble-makers were marched out in ones and twos and told to shove off, after the army of bouncers had roughed them up a bit for good measure.

She waited for an age. Then, when they were all allowed back in to get their coats, she'd spent another age or two looking for Eddie inside. No sign of him. Eventually she'd gone home, following the last remnants of a hen night which seemed to be staggering her way.

The next day she was working and Eddie wasn't. On the Sunday he was working and she wasn't. The whole weekend she wondered if he would call, or manufacture some excuse to pop-in to work and see her. After no sign of him on the Saturday, Jo was all set to go to work on the Sunday, under some weak pretext, just to see him. But Sarah didn't think it was a good idea: maybe she was right, maybe it was all a big drunken mistake.

Monday was the crunch, both of them worked. She was so nervous and excited going in to work, but scared too. What if he just came straight out and said "Hey Jo, Friday night, big drunken mistake OK. We can still be friends right?"

Nothing happened though. He didn't exactly ignore her any more than usual. He didn't speak to her any more, or less, or differently from before. That was the problem. It was like nothing had happened.

She was upset and would probably have left the stupid job that very day if, later on in the afternoon, he hadn't noticed her looking miserable and come over. Yes, he was very nice to her then, but it was too late in the day and she'd already given him so many chances.

Three months later and she was still here. Why? There were

plenty of other jobs she could do. Somehow though, nothing much appealed. She'd given herself lots of excuses, "not a good time of year" was the latest, and just done nothing.

Whatever Sarah said, she was adamant that in no way was she just hanging round hoping Eddie would do something, somehow remember that night, feel the glow. The more she told herself and Sarah this the closer she got to believing it, until last week she'd finally gone and signed up with an agency. Using her mum's house move as cover, she'd even been to an interview: it was for a dead-loss job but she'd made a start, that was what counted.

That damn ticket printer though. The way Eddie looked at her yesterday when she went to see him about it. The same way he'd looked at her on his birthday, except he seemed a bit more confused this time. What should she do now? What would Sarah say?

"I'd say stuff it!"

"What?" said Jo, surprised.

"Yes, stuff it." repeated Henry Wilks, "You can't have a proper turkey without stuffing, no. My Mrs always used to make the best chestnut stuffing. Always..."

"Henry?" interrupted Jo.

"Yes my dear?"

"Is a bird in the hand really worth two in the bush?"

Chapter 16

Later shifts suited Eddie nicely. He'd never been a morning person, not even in his fit days. Running before breakfast had seemed like a major achievement, mainly for the getting up an hour early rather than for the exercise content. The incentive was significant though. He was clearly the least fit member of the 6-a-side team and, as the second worst player too, something had to be done.

So, for nearly two months, Eddie had got up early, run about 3 miles round the block and then embarked upon his normal day. The sense of heightened awareness, the sheer extra awakeness, was fantastic ... until about 11am when a wave of tiredness hit him and usually lasted until the end of the day. The only way to survive was by drinking plenty of coffee, which stopped him sleeping properly and made the situation worse the next day.

Fortunately the situation was remedied when the team folded. Getting six players every week was becoming harder and harder, and their captain Tim Woods had had enough. Eddie had even persuaded Jo to play one week, but enthusiasm for the game amongst the staff had reached an all time low. Four successive seasons at the bottom

of the league didn't help as "it's the taking part that counts" had given way to "not getting thrashed every week would be nice".

Whilst a couple of their players had been invited to play for other teams as 'guests', most noticeably Tim by the current champions, Eddie had received no offers. There was mention of a new team rising from the ashes of their Film Stars and a few guys from a nearby small catering firm. Apart from the proposed name of Clingfilm Stars, nothing ever came of it though.

Today, a stone heavier but still "a fine figure of a man for my weight", Eddie strolled casually towards work, not thinking about football at all. He had plenty of time. He was carrying a plastic bag which contained the box of acetate sheets. Three of the sheets had a number of dots drawn on them, one in red, one in yellow and one in blue. In his pocket he had the well-travelled piece of the OHP. His plan was on-track, and he didn't need to think about it right now. He wasn't even thinking about the fact that his carrier bag said Dorothy Perkins on it and he was getting the odd look.

Eddie was thinking about Jo. He'd been thinking about Jo since he woke up that morning. He may even have dreamt about her too, but he couldn't remember. She totally filled his mind, the other half of which was busy basking in the glory of his decision. Eddie had decided, definitely, without doubt, to do it. He would do it today. As soon as he saw her he would. Even if he had to go and look for her specially he was going to. No cop-outs. No doubts. No worries, no fear, just go up to her and ask her out.

It had been an easy decision to make, at home. So far, about half way to work, his resolve was holding up; he was still going to do

it. What helped to divert him a bit was wondering how this sudden change had come about.

Casting his mind back over the years he'd known Jo, Eddie struggled to recall how he'd felt about her before. All he could remember about their first meeting, the interview, was that she came across as quite bright, if a little quiet: oh yes, and she had exactly the same glasses as him.

Eddie smiled as he remembered the glasses, wondering if she'd noticed too. Those weren't great times for him though and, as other memories lined up to spoil his day, Eddie did well to reflect instead on how confident and professional he thought he'd managed to be on that occasion.

No other events came to mind. He definitely thought of her as a friend: not the sort you chat to all the time or go out and have a laugh with, but the sort you always smile at, feel comfortable around, don't feel you have to say something to.

"She was always there and never tried to push in." thought Eddie.

That was it. She hadn't tried to break through his defences, she'd just slipped in underneath, very very slowly.

"What, over 4 years? Don't flatter yourself. She could have been out with half a dozen men in that time and I'd never have noticed. She could have been engaged and I'd never have spotted the ring..."

Eddie reflected calmly for a moment, as if his subconscious might suddenly conjure up an image of Jo's hand bearing a diamond. It didn't, there was no evidence. Actually, Eddie knew very well that Jo couldn't be engaged: news like that always bounced around the cinema for days, the gossips loved it "Have you seen her ring? Nice

init. My Dave always says that when we're ready to get spliced..."

The mystery remained. Except that it wasn't a mystery. Eddie knew full well that for the whole time he'd known Jo, he'd been afraid of women. If she'd even hinted once that she was interested in him then he would have run a mile. That's why he liked her, she wasn't a threat.

And then there was his 30th, the disaster. Maybe it had just been a false start? Whatever, it was bloody confusing. Everything about that night was a let-down, until right near the end. Looking back, Jo had been the only one making an effort on his behalf all evening. Mike had kept teasing him about the turn-out and he just wasn't in the mood for getting pally with Bob What's-his-name at all. Bob and Jo seemed to know each other from school, but to her credit, every time Bob tried to get her talking she'd manage to get Eddie involved too.

Eddie hadn't really noticed, or cared. He was too busy being grumpy about the surprise party, the surprise being that there wasn't one. It was only when they hit the night club that he'd relaxed and lightened up a bit. He was drunk, she was drunk. Eddie knew that he was drunk because he'd danced willingly: when sober he refused to dance unless it was absolutely necessary, since he knew that his all of his joints could only work at the same time if properly lubricated.

Jo being drunk was an assumption that fitted nicely with his current train of thought, so he decided not to question it and pressed on.

Drunk or not, that was some kiss. It must have been 20 minutes if it was a second. Eddie stopped walking and contemplated the

kiss. He was by the Post Office and, for the first time in almost two years, he wasn't thinking about Amanda Charles or her sister. Rather carelessly Eddie's impulse to stop had left him between a pay phone and the entrance to the Post Office. This wouldn't have been a problem if Eddie wasn't being closely followed by a woman with a heavily loaded pram.

Oblivious to the obstruction he was causing, Eddie stood as if he were waiting for the pay phone and thought about Jo and the kiss some more. He felt warm inside, even though it was a particularly cold day, the frost barely having lifted. Yes, it was a real kiss: a kiss with feeling. There was more to it than a drunken snog.

Just as he was about to get under way again, Eddie heard a bold voice behind him.

"Excuse me. Are you going to stand there all day?"

It was the woman with the pram. The only warmth she felt inside at present was anger at Eddie holding her up and a stream of people in the other direction not letting her overtake.

"Not quite all day, madam." said Eddie, turning and smiling.

"In fact, for your convenience I shall cut short my stay and move over here instead." he continued, stepping round to the kerb-side of the pay phone.

The woman said nothing, she just went on her way; slightly quicker than she had been before, not to make up time but because she was ever so slightly worried that Eddie might be an escaped lunatic, who might follow her. Eddie stood and watched the woman wheel the pram away from him. He didn't want her thinking he was an escaped lunatic who might follow her or something.

Distraction gone, Eddie started walking again. If the kiss was for real then why had it all gone wrong afterwards? When Jo said she wanted to go home, he'd assumed that she meant she wanted him to come too. She must have realised that he had got the wrong end of the stick in the queue and then used that *mêlée* as a convenient way to escape off home on her own. He'd looked for her for ages after everything had calmed down: no sign anywhere. He'd even, somehow, remembered the number on her cloakroom ticket and gone back to see if her coat had been collected: it had.

Slightly confused, he'd staggered off home, not before overcoming the temptation to follow what looked like a hen-night crew half-way up the road, just to see what might happen.

The next day he had mixed feelings. He was sick firstly, which didn't help his mood for the morning. After lunch he found himself dwelling on how stupid he'd been to think that someone else would actually go to the trouble of organising a surprise birthday bash for him.

"Pah. Now I know who my friends are." he'd thought.

Only later did he remember the kiss and the disappointing conclusion. Unsure about what to do, unsure about his feelings and Jo's feelings, and not wanting to embarrass himself or her, he'd decided to play it cool. This meant, basically, do nothing and see what happens.

At work on the Sunday he'd been disappointed to find that Jo had the day off. The fact that he felt disappointment told him he had to do something. This was a problem. Eddie had come to be a master at avoiding doing something wherever women were concerned. It was a massive struggle for him to avoid not getting her phone number

from the personnel file. Having got it though, somehow he managed to fail to use it: later, he even managed to not take it home with him, just in case.

By the Monday he was convinced that he'd done the right thing. The way Jo looked at him when he first saw her confirmed everything. It wasn't the usual smile. She must have been nervous, embarrassed about what had happened, hoping it would all blow over and be forgotten. Eddie was more relieved than disappointed now. He even did his best to cheer her up later in the day, even though she didn't seem to appreciate it.

Approaching the cinema, none of this negative baggage worried Eddie in the slightest. It was all a bit puzzling, yes; but he'd finally figured out that he didn't need to figure it out. Not yet anyway. All he had to do was ask her out. If she said yes then great. If she said no then, well, not so great but at least he'd know.

Eddie's confidence was still holding up, 20 yards from the main doors. Behind him there was a loud bang as a car backfired. Eddie half turned round, just in time to not see the offending brown mini-metro.

"Jesus!" said Eddie.

His heart was pounding now, and not because of the car. Suddenly a whole host of thoughts entered his head, 10 yards from the main doors. Typically they weren't very helpful thoughts, particularly the ones that he couldn't do much about now like "should I have taken more care over my appearance today?" He wanted to stop but his legs just kept going.

A calamity was imminent, 5 yards from the main doors. He'd

carefully worked out exactly what he was going to say, down to the exact word. He'd practiced it over and over in his head. He'd practiced it out loud in the shower. He'd practiced it in the back of his mind all the way to work. All but the last 3 yards that is: it was gone.

Eddie's mind went blank, then various degrees of panic lined up to fill the space. To save time the worst shade of panic went in first. It felt like someone had actually taken out his brain for a moment and replaced it with some special panic-retaining goo to stop his head from flapping about in the breeze.

Still moving involuntarily, Eddie reached the main doors. Two of them were wedged open. As he passed in Eddie took a deep breath. Reminding himself of his plan might have helped at this instant. Remembering what else he had to do today would have been a good idea. Seeing the bigger picture would have calmed him down. Instead, Eddie clung to his panic and leapt in with both feet.

To the right of the doorway was the ticket counter. The counter that would be selling tickets at this time. The counter where Jo would probably be. The counter where Eddie was now.

Eddie's eyes focused through the panic and he looked straight into the eyes of ... Henry Wilks. Eddie's mouth opened but no sound came out. After a short pause, Henry explained,

“Err, Jo had to pop to the loo.”

Chapter 17

Jeff Stevenson had a problem. This was a new, specific, problem that had just arisen, not anything to do with his numerous serious character flaws. It was a serious problem. So serious in fact, that he was nearly minded to regard it as a crisis. Nearly, but not quite.

“Mustn’t turn a mole-hill into a drama.” chuckled Jeff to himself.

He’d been working on a new line in amusing repartee for some time now. Sadly, it seemed to consist solely of mixing metaphors all over the place. Jeff was blissfully unaware of the limited comedy value of this technique, encouraged as he had been by Jennifer Pierce’s reaction to his comment that his wife could “spend money like a fish.”

Jennifer Pierce would laugh at anything she didn’t understand, in self defence. That didn’t leave a lot that she wouldn’t laugh at. Behind her back most of the lads at work called her ‘J’, the joke being that she probably couldn’t cope with any words longer than that. To her face they all called her Jenni and would help her out whenever they could, because she was a babe and they all wanted to sleep with her.

Jeff wanted to sleep with her too. He even had a photo of her tucked into the back of a book, inside a folder, under a pile of other folders, locked in the bottom drawer of his desk. A photo he'd stolen from the personnel files. A photo he snuck out and drooled over occasionally, when he was very very sure that no-one would come in and catch him. A photo that he wanted to scan into his laptop so he could look at it more often in private.

The photo wasn't Jeff's current problem, and neither was his infatuation with Jennifer Pierce or his doomed new line of smalltalk. No; the problem was Eddie Bridget. Not the man per-se but the position in which he'd put himself.

"I just have no choice." thought Jeff, "I can't put any of the others in charge. They are all too junior. He's the obvious choice. If I don't put him in charge then people will ask questions. And what if something goes wrong? People will say it was my fault for not leaving Bridget in charge..."

"Ah. But what if something goes wrong when he is in charge? Then I might be rid of him."

Jeff was suddenly excited at the prospect, but couldn't think of any way to engineer a suitable situation.

"No. No choice. Maybe I'll just get lucky."

As he stepped out of his office and headed down the short narrow corridor to Eddie's, he saw Jo just ahead of him.

"Ah, Jade. Were you going to see Eddie?"

"Yes Mr Stevenson." replied Jo in a tone which did its best to convey, tall order that it was, both that he'd got her name wrong (again) and that, since Eddie's office was the only possible destina-

tion given the direction she was walking, he must either think she was some sort of moron or be a moron himself.

Brave attempt that it was, none of it made any impact on JS.

“Great. I’m afraid that I have something rather important to discuss with him right now. Not that your issues aren’t important too. Can you come back later though please Jade.”

With that he walked past her and on to Eddie’s office, not giving her a chance to answer back, not even to say “by the way, my name’s Jo.”

Jo turned and headed back the way she’d come, saying under her breath, “Jade? What a wanker!”

Jeff paused in Eddie’s doorway and would have carried on in if he hadn’t been slightly puzzled by what he saw. Eddie was sitting on his chair, with his coat on, staring at a pink Dorothy Perkins bag.

“You shouldn’t have.” said Jeff, jovially.

“Ugh?”

Eddie turned his head, “Oh, Syl... silly me!” he said, suddenly snapping his attention back into sharp focus.

“And it was going to be a surprise.” he added, smiling and standing up.

“I’ve just this minute walked in.” he explained, rather superfluously, as he removed his coat and shuffled round Sylvia to hang it on the back of the door.

“Oh, where’s the hook gone?” said Eddie, feigning surprise.

“Don’t you have one in here?” enquired Sylvia, actually taking the trouble to inspect the back of the door himself.

“There certainly has been a hook here at one time. You can see

screw holes, look!” he added triumphantly.

“I’d have a talk to Wilks about that.” concluded Jeff finally, happy that he’d sorted out yet another problem.

“Err, yes.” said Eddie, hanging his coat on the back of his chair and gesturing to Sylvia to sit down on the other one. He didn’t want to go over the coat-hook saga again, obviously Sylvia had forgotten all about it so why drag it up again.

Eddie wanted Sylvia out of the way as soon as possible. He had a lot on his mind and none of it had to do with work. The only reason he’d encouraged him sit to down was that Sylvia was one of those people who had a keen sense of when they weren’t wanted. He’d had a lot of practice at it. The best way to keep him hanging round for hours was to let him know that you wanted him gone.

“What can I do for you boss?” asked Eddie.

Jeff fidgeted in his chair ever so slightly before replying.

“I have some great news Eddie.” he began, before pausing for effect.

“My application for the Las Vegas conference has been accepted.” he continued, barely containing his smug self-satisfaction.

Eddie forced a smile but didn’t speak.

“What do you want, a medal?” he thought.

As the silence extended, Eddie’s mind started to drift. Hadn’t he heard Jo’s voice outside just before Sylvia came in?

“And so…” continued Jeff at last, “I need you to stand in as acting manager over Christmas.”

“OK.” said Eddie positively, then adding “I hope you have a great time. I hear it’s a great opportunity.”

There was a fine line between being too terse, encouraging Sylvia to launch into a long space-filling speech, and being too verbose, giving Sylvia something to reply to with a long speech. Eddie feared that he'd fallen off the line.

"Yes it is." said Jeff.

Both men were struggling with their own, separate and completely non-overlapping problems; and yet both also seemed intent on assuming that the other was somehow plotting against them too. Silence descended again, pulled up a chair, found a cushion and settled down for a long wait.

"Why isn't he rabbiting on about networking and leveraging and stuff?" thought Eddie.

"Opportunity for whom?" thought Sylvia.

Both of them finally decided it was time to kick the chair out from underneath Silence before it got too damn comfortable. Both of them opened their mouth at the same time. Both spotted the other about to speak and paused, giving Silence an extra moment to itself.

Eventually Sylvia broke the impasse: he stood up and said, "Right. I'll brief you with the details later. We can sort out any questions arising and possible issues ... later."

"OK, fine. Good." said Eddie, standing too as Sylvia turned to leave.

Jeff Stevenson left Eddie's office without another word. He returned to his own office and sat down, more troubled than ever. He unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk and took out the bottom folder. He took a book out of the folder and, opening it near the

back, pretended to read.

Eddie forgot about Sylvia as soon as he was gone. Another day and he could have occupied himself for the rest of the afternoon wondering why he'd acted so oddly, even for him. Today though he was all a quiver, and with Sylvia gone, he got back to his quivering.

Panic had subsided into a sort of numb dread. Jo not being there had to be a bad sign. He'd built himself up and built himself up, and when he got here she was in the one place that he couldn't go.

"Shit!" he said quietly out loud, for the umpteenth time.

"It's not too late. Do it now."

Eddie was staring at the Dot Perkins bag again. For the first time in hours he considered what was in the bag. The plan flashed through his mind. It didn't stop, just one flash and then off back to where it had been hanging around all day. What did stick was a feeling of obstruction; a conflict that needed to be resolved before he could continue, before he could do anything else at all.

A distinct, crystal clear, impression formed. Not so much 'last chance saloon' as 'last chance saloon, hotel, street, town and most of the surrounding county too'. Perhaps a little overdramatic, perhaps overstating the criticality of what, for most people, would be a nervous but not life-threatening situation. Nevertheless, at this moment Eddie believed it. He had to believe it.

"Now or never!" might have been a good thing to say, but instead Eddie got up, took a deep breath and strode purposefully out of the room. It was a short journey, since two steps later he crashed into Jo as she was about to turn into his office.

"Sorry." they both said together.

There was a brief pause as they regrouped and then both of them in unison started, "I was just..."

"No, no." thought Eddie, "Now or never. Now or never."

He half raised his left hand, opened it, and half closed it again. Silence thought it was on again and started casting round for a chair, but before it could find one Eddie spoke. His voice trembled slightly and his script was long forgotten.

"I was looking for you Jo. I wondered if you'd like to come out to dinner with me."

"I thought we weren't having a Christmas meal this year." replied Jo, not quite sure if that's what he meant, but past hoping.

The word 'Exit' on the fire-door behind her suddenly caught Eddie's eye. He realised that she had misunderstood him, or was it deliberate. She had given him an escape route, should he take it, did she want him to take it?

If Eddie was thinking now then it was a non-verbal, almost spiritual, kind of thinking. Emotion welled up inside him. His heart was beating faster than it ever had. He was slightly blushing. His palms were sweating and his stomach felt so tightly knotted that it seemed to be in danger of causing some serious internal damage.

When words came, an instant later, they completely bypassed Eddie's consciousness and Jo was the first to hear them,

"No, we're not. I meant just you and me."

Silence missed its chance to jump in again, preoccupied as it was with whether Jo or Eddie was the most surprised by what had been said.

"Oh." said Jo. She was surprised, very surprised, and a bit

confused.

“Yes.” said Eddie. He was surprised, and relieved, and scared. This was it, there was no turning back now, he’d done it. His life was in her hands. He felt vulnerable and excited, but mostly scared.

“Yes, I’d love to.” answered Jo. “When?”

“Great. I..” started Eddie. He was unbelievably happy, excited and relieved all at the same time. A big smile appeared on his face, which was nice because Jo had one too. They beamed at each other for a few moments, then Eddie remembered the question.

“When?” he repeated, wondering what the answer was. After all the agonising over every other aspect of this event, the one thing he hadn’t given any thought to was the date, as in the date of the date, or even the venue.

“I don’t know...” ventured Eddie.

Jo’s smile was encouraging, she was still with him. “How sweet” she thought, guessing that Eddie was struggling a bit, but not knowing the half of it.

“...can you make it on Friday night?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Good. Great.” brief pause, deep breath, “Why don’t I try and book something first, then get back to you; might be busy this near to Christmas?”

“Urgh.” thought Eddie. “Not very romantic. Not very...”

“Sure; that would be lovely.” said Jo softly, still smiling.

The full impact of what had happened was still waiting patiently to hit Eddie as hard as it could. For the moment though, Eddie could only think of one word, ‘Yes’, as in “Jo said yes”.

Both of them seemed to become aware that saying anything else could only risk spoiling the moment. Jo turned to leave, almost waving but instead whispering “Bye for now.”

Eddie watched her go, and when she was out of sight he went back into his office and fell into his chair.

Out in the corridor, Silence wiped away its tears of joy and got back to work.

Chapter 18

Late evenings at the cinema were almost always quiet. When they weren't they usually involved the police and a mild dose of excitement. Tonight was definitely a quiet one, but Eddie was very very excited too.

Jo had said "Yes" and his first choice of restaurant, Cafe de Paris, had one free table for two from 9pm. Another good omen. As was Jo's reaction to the news, "lovely" she'd said: not "OK" or "fine" or "nice", but "lovely". Wow, she was impressed.

Before she'd gone home, Eddie had managed to need to pass her or ask her something about five times. Each time she'd greeted him with a smile ever so slightly more lovely than the last. This was, thought Eddie, an amazing achievement since any mortal man would have assumed that the smile when she said "lovely" the first time must have been a peak.

Perhaps as well then that Jo had finished early today, and that he had to stay late. If things had continued how they were going much longer, then Eddie was in danger of actually dribbling at the sight of the soon to be infinitely lovely Jo.

Several Jo-less hours had now passed and Eddie was still excited, but his feet were a bit closer to the ground and at least he was orbiting the right planet now. Jo still dominated his thoughts, but the practicalities of his job distracted him enough from time to time to let a few others in.

“I wonder where Sylvia went?” he thought suddenly on passing his office, checking the door to make sure it was indeed locked.

“Or rather, when? He was going to come back and tell me how to do his job... Never mind, only would have taken five minutes.”

Before Eddie could laugh at his own joke, a wave of serious came over him.

“But why didn’t he? Why did he sneak out?”

Eddie pondered Jeff Stevenson’s uncharacteristic behaviour earlier that day. In fact, decided Eddie, he’d been acting a bit odd the previous day too. On both days he’d left without seeing Eddie, without checking that Eddie was still there to be more precise.

“Well, something’s going on. If Jeff Stevenson has better things to do than make sure that I’m doing what I’m supposed to be, then he must be up to something. But I’m buggered if I care.”

Actually he did care, just not very much, and not for Jeff Stevenson. If Jeff did the same as George Thompson and disappeared himself, then Eddie could apply for the job and fix his mistake.

“Maybe the job’s cursed! Maybe not going for it was a blessing in disguise?” he considered, semi-seriously for an instant before reaching his own office.

On Eddie’s desk, under a note, was still the pink Dorothy Perkins bag. The note read ‘C de P. 9pm Fri 7 Dec’ as if he’d forget.

Eddie sat down and picked up the note. Since he didn't have anything else to do for a while he stared at the note, smiling occasionally, for about five minutes. When he did finally notice the bag, and twig what was inside it, he was slightly shocked; mainly because his plan, now the second most important thing in his life, had almost completely slipped his mind for most of the day.

He took out the box of acetates and the star finder book.

"I wonder if this matters anymore?"

"Maybe it was a metaphor or a distraction, something to keep me from thinking about Jo for long enough to... to what? Get brave enough?"

His line of thought crashed hopelessly.

"Anyway, I was thinking about the plan before I was thinking about Jo wasn't I?"

At this point Eddie had the idea that a campaign diary would have been a good idea, seeing as the sequence of events over the last week was now a little vague. The inside back cover of his star finder book was blank, so he took a pen and wrote "4th Dec : asked Jo out" at the top.

"Better late than never." he said, quietly to himself.

A few more moments of quiet reflection, and a bit of flicking through the book, convinced Eddie that his plan was as important as ever. Jo was a part of the plan, a pretty big part, a lovely part, a very lovely part, a... part non the less. He had to press on. If he didn't then, and this bit sent a sudden shiver down his spine, maybe things wouldn't work out with Jo.

The euphoria of Eddie's day had just about evaporated off now.

At last the dark thought had hit him: what if it didn't work out?

"It will work." stated Eddie out loud, "It will work."

Picking up his book and box, off he strode to the store room. Nothing could go wrong, he continued to tell himself over and over, until he got to the store room and found the OHP hood-less. A short detour back to his office to recover the missing part from his coat pocket, and he was in full stride again.

"Right." said Eddie, placing the red-dotted sheet on the lens and switching the lamp on.

A set of fuzzy red blotches appeared on the wall behind him.

"Focus!" he whispered, "Kill the projectionist..."

Eddie opened the star finder book and flicked to August.

"Right. August, that's when it started so let's start there. Looking North... Hmmm, The Plough, part of Ursa Major. That sounds familiar."

He didn't know why, so he checked in the notes at the back. It said that Ursa Major was the third largest constellation and the best time to see it was in April.

"Oh. Maybe they've been planning this for a while." thought Eddie, flicking to the April pages.

"Nuts." he whispered as he realised that 'best to see' meant almost overhead and therefore split across the spine of his book, which had north-looking views on the left-hand pages and south-looking views on the right.

Eddie went back to the notes, still having a finger in that page.

"Ah, the Plough stars are brighter. Hmmm, that bottom one's called Merak."

The name seemed significant but Eddie's thoughts were rudely interrupted by the door handle suddenly creaking. Eddie froze, which wasn't difficult since it was actually very cold in the store-room anyway. He'd taken the precaution of locking the door but never the less he was worried that this someone might get in. The someone released the door handle and it creaked back up. In the near silence Eddie could hear someone walking away.

"Who was that?" he wondered.

It was his job to check that the right doors were locked at night. Eddie unlocked the door, slipped out and locked it again, leaving all his stuff behind. He set off in the same direction that he thought that the someone had gone, very curious now as to their identity.

He was disappointed to reach the lobby without seeing anyone. The only people in the lobby were Jeremy Fischer and Jane Turner, who were chatting as Jane cleared up the ice-cream parlour. Neither of them noticed Eddie, and he didn't attempt to catch their attention either.

Eddie's mind was just drifting back to the name Merak when the doors to screen 3 flew open and a moderately orderly stampede occurred. A few dozen bleary eyed punters trudged past him uttering great insights such as "I thought it was OK, apart from the ending" and "What was that other film he was in?"

Some of the faces in the crowd were quite familiar; not people Eddie knew, just folks who came here a lot. One of them was a man who always wore a tweed suit and, as far as Eddie could tell, a different bow tie every day. He was quite short and mostly bald apart from a wrap of fine white hair. The intriguing thing about

him was that his face suggested he was quite young, no older than forty at most. Eddie called him ‘The Professor’ and wondered what devilish potions or fiendish machines he’d tested on himself to make his hair go white and fall out like that.

As the punters drifted away, Eddie suddenly felt a bit anxious about leaving his secret equipment safely locked away in the store room all by itself. Had he remembered that it had spent most of the day sitting in his unlocked office guarded only by a Dorothy Perkins bag, then he might have been a bit more relaxed. As it was though, he sped off back to the store room, trying not to look like he was hurrying, in case anyone was watching, which they weren’t.

Locking the door behind him he started to think about the stars again. Merak, what was that? Eddie racked his brains but the thing he kept coming back to was that it sounded like the name of a baddie from Dr Who or something.

“Oh no, it’s the evil Merak, trying to take over the universe again.”

Eddie smiled wryly and checked the names of the other stars in The Plough.

“Dubhe, Phad, Megrez, Alioth, Mizar and Alkaid.”

Eddie laughed, “Alk Aid, please give generously to save the Alks.”

He wasn’t getting anywhere so he decided to just try projecting the dots randomly onto the book. Before he’d managed to focus the dots onto the book though, it occurred to him that Merak was an anagram of Maker. Eddie paused for a moment, trying to assess the significance of his discovery. There didn’t seem to be a lot.

“OK, I have to start somewhere, so lets try putting Guildford on

Merak and see where we get.” he concluded as optimistically as he could.

None of Eddie’s dots were labelled but Guildford had a slightly bigger dot than all the other places, representing as it did several attacks.

Eddie manoeuvred his book so that the biggest red dot fell on the bottom of The Plough. After a few minutes of careful rotating, sliding and constant refocusing, Eddie got the book in just the right place. The big red dot was on Merak, two of the other red dots were exactly on other stars in The Plough and a further red dot was on the knee of Ursa Major’s back leg.

“Fantastic.” thought Eddie, until he noticed that the fifth red dot was nowhere near any of the stars. It fell right under the bear’s tummy.

“Bollocks.”

Dropping the Merak principle and trying Guildford on the other stars didn’t help either.

Deciding that there was no point in trying the other coloured dots on Ursa Major if the red ones didn’t fit, Eddie moved on to Draco as the next nearest, apart from Canes Venatici which seemed a bit of a waste of space with only two stars.

After about twenty minutes of zero progress Eddie’s mood was getting a bit grim. He was bored and frustrated. It took ages messing about with the focusing to test each constellation and he was fed up with it. Another hour and he would have to go home anyway. He decided to go off on his rounds again, hoping for some inspiration.

Another screen was emptying as he passed through the lobby. At

first he didn't recognise anybody, but then spotted an unwelcome face. It was the fat gorilla man from the night-club on his birthday: the one who'd apparently started the fight but got knocked out by Bob Jones. Eddie turned away quickly and started to deal with the poster board which he'd decided needed some pretty urgent attention.

A couple of seconds ticked by and Eddie wondered if the gorilla had gone. If his situation hadn't been quite so scary then it would have been funny. Here he was, having given the posters about as much attention as they could handle, facing a wall with his back to the monster of a man who might be approaching his rear with malice.

Before he'd told himself not to look over his shoulder, he had. To his relief the brute had gone.

"Eddie?"

"Wha..." said Eddie, startled.

It was Jane Turner.

"I'm off now. Is that OK?" she finished quizzically, wondering if Eddie's strange behaviour was due to a real problem or just the lateness of the hour combined with the mindless tedium.

"Yes, fine Jane. Goodnight." said Eddie, regaining his composure as quickly as he could. He smiled for good measure, which was good enough for Jane since the last thing she wanted to do was stick around there.

The close shave had completely destroyed Eddie's concentration on the star problem, which was a good thing. Incidentally, the gorilla man was so stoned on Eddie's birthday that he wouldn't be able to recognise Eddie now if he was in a line up with the seven dwarfs:

so there was actually no danger, over and above his nasty habit of picking on anyone he happened to not like the look of.

Eddie returned to the store room for what was probably going to be the last time that night. He'd soon have other things to do, and after everyone else had left it would look suspicious if he hung around for too long.

“Ursa Major. The Great Bear. My first thought...”

“...is probably right. But the extra red dot? If it was a blue dot, or even a yellow one, then I could maybe overlook it, but not a red one.”

Since time was getting short he decided to resolve the Ursa Major problem by projecting all the coloured dots and then to have another go, with a fresh mind, the next day. Carefully lining up the red, yellow and blue acetates, Eddie manoeuvred his book again so that Guildford was over Merak and all but one of the red dots was on its star.

Eddie wanted to reassure himself that the yellow and blue dots didn't fall on stars in Ursa Major; except they did... every one. All seven yellow dots. The six blue dots. Each had its own star. Every one was a direct hit, as near as Eddie could tell given that he could only hold the book so still.

There were two stars left uncovered by dots. Eddie tried to think of this pair, rather than the stray red dot, as he packed away all his things, switched off the OHP and tried to get the room back exactly as he'd found it. On his final tour of the complex before locking up, he wondered which places those stars represented, where it was that he was going to have to avoid. He even visualised himself measuring

up and drawing the circles that would reveal the mystery locations.

Halfway home, as he crossed Haydon Place, Eddie noticed the sign for the snooker club. The night was cold and very dark, so the bright colours couldn't help but catch his eye. Red circles burned into him. The loose red dot suddenly made him mad.

"Arse!" he said out loud, after carefully checking that there was no-one about.

"One dot. One bloody dot. All the others are nice and orderly but this bloody dot has to go and spoil it." he raged.

Sufficiently calmed by his angry release he continued on his way, wondering how he might resolve the problem without the shouting.

"Maybe it's the moon or something." he mused, looking up for a moment at the clear night sky.

He couldn't see any stars near the moon, it was too bright.

"Or a comet? A meteorite? A planet?"

Nothing was convincing but plenty of things seemed at least feasible. He could even have drawn the dot in the wrong place.

The closer Eddie got to home the more confident he became that he would be able to account for the rogue dot somehow.

"Seventeen other dots can't all be wrong." was his final thought on the matter.

His house was cold. Adjusting the timer for the central heating to fit his erratic working timetable was just too much hassle. Anyway, he was tired and wanted to go straight to bed. He would have done too, except there were two messages on the answering machine.

"Two?" he asked the machine, which didn't reply.

"Either Mum left a PS or we have an actual information bearing

message here.” reasoned Eddie sarcastically.

The first message was from his mother: some nonsense about someone he didn’t remember from his childhood who was getting married again and had invited her to the wedding; did he want to go too as her escort?

“No. But you’ll probably make me.” replied Eddie.

The second message started with a brief pause. Eddie was intrigued, expectant.

“Hi Eddie, it’s Jo. I know you’re working now.”

Another pause. Eddie’s heart had gone from 70 to 180 in 4.1 seconds. It could only be one thing. It had happened before. Usually girls didn’t bother to ring and tell him though, certainly not this quickly.

“At least she’s letting me down promptly.” he was about to think.

Eddie’s heart was getting tired of going this fast, especially since it had spent much of the day racing already. It’s only comfort was the certainty that the impending disappointment would soon slow things down a bit, perhaps assisted by the bottle of malt whisky in the kitchen cupboard.

“I just wanted to say that I can’t come to work tomorrow, or Thursday, because my mum’s ill and there’s so much stuff that needs sorting here.”

“And?” prompted Eddie.

“And I know it’s your day off on Friday.”

“So?”

“So...”

“Here it comes.” thought Eddie.

“...can we meet at the restaurant on Friday night?”

Eddie’s heart, which had slowly been making it’s way down into the low 100’s, actually skipped a few beats and then shot up to 180 again.

“It was 9pm wasn’t it?” she continued, but Eddie’s heart and mind were too busy singing for him to hear.

After ten minutes and a small glass of the good stuff from the kitchen cupboard, Eddie was just about calm enough to play the message again. He hadn’t missed much, she just wanted him to call her back the next day, if he could, to confirm the details of their rendezvous.

Eddie was busy looking for a pen to write down Jo’s mum’s number when the message finished. He went to press the play button again, and for a split-second thought he’d pressed the delete button by mistake.

As Jo’s voice started for the third time, Eddie sighed heavily with relief and his heart started again, insisting that 90 was the absolute best it could do for a while.

Chapter 19

Eddie awoke refreshed after a good night's sleep. He wasn't any less excited or any more composed than on previous recent mornings, but his head was a lot less fuzzy. A few restless nights had done nothing to help unscramble his brain until, last night, he'd just flaked out as soon as he'd closed his eyes.

It was 7:09am. Eddie lay still and quiet for the six minutes until his clock-radio launched into Atomic Kitten. If he'd been thinking about something, instead of staring casually at the ceiling, then he might have been thrown off course by the music. As it was, he simply thought "Nice tune." and got up.

Socks were his biggest problem for the moment, which tells you just how relaxed Eddie was compared to previous days. However much he tried, pairing up socks and putting them away neatly in a draw was just too much trouble. Of course, he hadn't actually tried very hard; he'd tried a tiny bit, then a tiny bit more and then just extrapolated his pathetic efforts to the conclusion that it was never worth it.

With a dark grey sock in one hand, Eddie was now searching

the drawer for a similarly grey sock. Quite a few were quite similar, which suggests that he was really looking for one which was exactly the same grey. After a few seconds he spotted two matching black socks right next to each other and, deciding that the grey ones had missed their chance, he went with those instead.

Stripping off his pyjamas Eddie picked up his collection of clothes and socks and headed off, naked, for the shower. He paused briefly in front of the map-wall, but there was a cold draft so he continued on quite swiftly.

However brief the stop, it was enough to remind him of the identity of the rogue red dot south of Guildford.

“Hmmm. Godalming.” thought Eddie, placing his clothes on a chair.

As he showered he tried to remember what the Godalming attack was. It was one of the first ones. Not long after his birthday in fact, and just before September 11th, probably the 5th or 6th.

The day had started off badly. For once he was trying to catch a specific train to an actual place, London Waterloo. The Odeon in Leicester Square had just got some new high-tech projection equipment and Eddie had been invited to go and have a look at it. He was running a bit late, ironically after being delayed by Henry Wilks telling him at length how important it was for Eddie to make a good impression with “those up there”.

Fortunately the Waterloo train was running even later, but unfortunately another, slightly late running, train arrived at the neighbouring platform just as Eddie was hurrying up the tunnel. Since the train was at a stop when he emerged, was there at the right time, and

looked set to leave at any instant, Eddie hopped on without checking the screens.

Fifteen seconds later, as the train started to pull away, Eddie's heart sank as he realised that he was heading in the wrong direction.

"Fuck!" he'd thought.

Actually, he probably said it out loud, because he vaguely remembered the elderly lady sitting opposite him tutting and raising her newspaper slightly, to completely obscure him.

The train had stopped at Godalming, only five minutes down the line, and Eddie had jumped off. There was another train standing at the other platform. Eddie knew, as he sprinted along the subway, that the other train must go back to Guildford, and may even be the actual Waterloo train.

Pushing himself up the stairs two and three at a time, he heard a whistle and knew he was too late. As the train pulled away before him, a breathless Eddie confirmed that it was indeed the Waterloo train. Seconds later the same display told him that he would have to wait another half an hour for the next one.

"Oh well," he'd thought philosophically, "never mind."

The London-bound platform was a bit bleak so he'd crossed back to the other side to have a look around the rather quaint old station building. There wasn't much there to see, but he did notice a phone box outside.

"Better ring and let them know I might be late." he thought suddenly, taking a mobile phone out of his pocket.

Eddie didn't like mobile phones, but he had one anyway, just for emergencies. He switched the phone on, for the first time in ages.

It had just enough power left to tell him that it didn't have enough power to do anything but tell him that he should have remembered to charge the battery.

"Oh well, it's not a real emergency anyway." he thought, leaving aside the issue of how much of a pickle he would be in if it had been.

Having decided that he would call, he now had to, especially since he was still facing a call box. Venturing outside he quickly discovered that the phone was out of order. Next to it was another box, but it was a phonecard-only one. Eddie was annoyed. He trudged back into the station, which was still deserted. Approaching the ticket window, his original intention was to ask the attendant where the next nearest phone box was, but as he got to the window he could see a phone on the desk.

"Hi." said Eddie.

The man didn't reply. He looked up and forced his face into the nearest he could get to a positive expression, waiting for Eddie to ask for a ticket.

"Err, the phone box isn't working." continued Eddie after a pause, "Do you mind if I use your phone?"

"It's quite important." he added, for good measure.

"There's a card-phone sir. That's working." said the man flatly.

Eddie regarded the man for an instant or two. He was wearing a smart blue uniform, with a white shirt and a smart blue tie. His face seemed completely emotionless and wasn't helped by the shadows cast over it by the man's hat, which seemed a little on the large side, unless he had a very large mass of hair stuffed into it.

"I don't have a phone-card." stated Eddie, trying unsuccessfully

to match the attendant's tone.

"I can sell you one sir. They are 10 pounds or 20 pounds."

Eddie wasn't sure if the attendant was taking the piss or not. Maybe he was just trying to draw out the conversation a bit; he was probably just bored. Even though he had plenty of time on his hands, Eddie didn't care much for the sour man in the big hat and tried to hurry the encounter to a swifter close.

"I don't have 10 pounds. I just need to make a quick call to London. I'll pay you 50 pence!" said Eddie calmly and deliberately, setting out his final offer.

"I'm afraid I can't let you in here sir." replied the attendant, still as dead-pan as ever.

"Why..." started Eddie, but changed his mind. There was no point, he was fairly sure that the man was enjoying himself being this unhelpful.

"Uh. Where's the next nearest pay phone then, please?" asked Eddie instead, returning to his original plan.

"There are several in the town sir."

Eddie turned and walked out of the station without another word. The attendant was obviously a complete master at not helping at all, without actually being technically obstructive or offensive.

"More chance of getting blood out of a stone." thought Eddie, imagining a very large stone falling onto the man and a few small streams of blood trickling out along the floor.

The train was due in less than twenty minutes now, which didn't leave him as much time as he'd have liked. Ignoring a sign for the High Street, he instead turned left, resolving to look for five minutes

and then turn back. About two minutes later, on Church Street, outside the church, he found his way blocked by an ambulance and a small crowd of people.

He couldn't see what had happened, and since there was an ambulance present he assumed that everything was under control. Veering left he ducked into the church-yard, heading along the footpath which he assumed came out somewhere on The Burys or one of the roads off the High Street.

Eddie had been to Godalming many times before, and quite recently too since John had bought a flat there. Even so, he wasn't very familiar with its geography, apart from shortest routes between certain pubs, which was why his legs had initially carried him towards The Star.

The church-yard didn't offer any better view of what the ambulance was up to, especially since Eddie was too busy checking his watch to see how much further he could get before heading back to the station. Suddenly someone seemed to jump out of nowhere, and Eddie walked right into him.

"Oops, sorry." said Eddie, looking up.

"That's alright." said the man, which confused Eddie because by now he'd decided that she was a woman.

She was wearing burgundy high-heeled shoes, sheer black tights and a knee-length brown skirt. She was carrying a small black patent leather handbag and was wearing a matching belt. Under a short dark-brown leather jacket she wore a burgundy top of some description.

Eddie didn't really notice the top, because it was immediately fol-

lowed by her face. There was something immediately obvious about her face, something that a rather heavy make-up job did very little to hide. Her face matched her voice rather than her clothes. It was a man's face.

The face was smiling at Eddie. He was smiling at Eddie, the man, she was a man. His first instinct was to just mumble something and speed on his way, but time was getting on and he really needed to be getting back to the station.

How to get away without looking like he was running away? He found himself starting to say "I was just looking for a phone box." but thought better of it and stopped short, leaving off the 'phone box' bit.

The man smiled more broadly and said softly, "Looking for a what?" Then he winked and started to open his handbag.

"Woah!" thought Eddie, turning and running towards the station.

He didn't look back. When he got within eyesight of the ticket office he lapsed into a walk again, but a brisk one. He didn't speak to the attendant, or even look at him. He went straight to the platform, to the far end, and counted down the seconds until his train arrived. All the time fearing that the she-man might turn up and follow him to London.

The water started to run cold as Eddie pictured the he-woman's face again. Yes; that was definitely an attack. He'd never seen a transvestite in Surrey, before or since. It was a plant, a planned attack alright. As he dried himself off he wondered about the misplaced dot some more.

“If it’s not a mistake, or a star, then there must be another reason.” was the best he could do.

Still, his spirits were high. The other reason would come to him soon enough, he was sure of it.

With the plan wrapped up, as best as it was going to be for now, Eddie got round to thinking about Jo again. Brilliant. Everything was working out great. At first he was disappointed that he wouldn’t see her again until Friday, but in a way, not seeing her until the big date was probably a good thing: less chance to screw things up.

Ah. But he had to phone her today.

“No problem!” he quipped out loud, pretending not to be worried.

All of a sudden he was worried. Phones were for short “see you at 9 in The George Abbott then” type communications, in Eddie’s view, not for chatting. There was something wrong about talking to someone you couldn’t see; something he’d never liked and never got used to.

At the back of his mind Eddie hoped that Jo would be out when he called, so he could leave a message like she’d done for him. The front of Eddie’s mind got wind of this idea and started wondering when the best time to call would be ... to make sure Jo was out.

“Don’t be silly.” interrupted the left side of Eddie’s mind, chastising the front and back bits.

The right side was busy getting him dressed so it didn’t join in, deciding instead to wait until there was some dialling to be done before bothering with the whole phone thing.

Chapter 20

Two days to buy a dress would have seemed like massive overkill to Eddie, but Jo was wondering if it would be enough. Sure, Guildford had a good selection of shops, but what if there was nothing quite right and she had to go up to London or over to Kingston?

And she'd gone and made things worse by concocting such a weak cover story. Eddie could call at any time, so how could she go out this morning? She couldn't even call him because a) she would start looking pushy or desperate and b) she would start feeling pushy and desperate. No; she'd loused up her shopping plans and now the best she could do was hope that he didn't call so late as to wipe out a whole day's searching.

"Jo?" from in the kitchen.

"Yeah?"

"I'm just popping out to the shops. Is there anything you want?"

"No; see you later."

"Unless you can find me a knockout outfit in Sainsbury's." she added quietly to herself.

As the back-door closed, Jo felt her day descending into a disaster,

or at best a complete washout. The phone rang.

“Yes!” thought Jo, picking up the rather ancient, some might say quaint, receiver which was actually attached by a wire to the other bit of the phone thingy.

“Hello.” said Jo brightly.

“Oh. Is Marjorie there dear?” replied a voice which Jo only vaguely recognised.

“No, I’m afraid she’s just gone out...”

“Alright, I’ll see her later anyway. Bye dear.”

“Err” started Jo, but the woman hung up before she could ask who she was.

“I guess it’s not important then, dear.” she added instead.

Putting the phone down, she was already wondering what to do again. Should she go out and hope Eddie didn’t call until later? Her mum didn’t have an answering machine so that didn’t seem like a good idea. Wait until Mum comes back and then go out? Hmmm, let Mum take a message? That seemed like an even worse idea; what if she dropped her right in it somehow!

Jo sat down on her mum’s sofa. It was brown, that was the most positive thing you could say about it. As sofas went it wasn’t the most uncomfortable in the world; unfortunately, all the more uncomfortable ones were either rotting in landfill sites or had been recycled into non-loadbearing furniture items. Even the cushions were uncomfortable, the one immediately behind Jo providing a sharp pin-prick in her back.

Leaning forward she pulled the cushion out from behind her. The quill of a small feather was sticking out. Jo pulled at it with the tips

of her fingernails and out it came. It was actually a bigger feather than she expected. Somehow she had a terrible feeling that this was the most exciting discovery she was going to make that day.

Hours of daytime TV beckoned, but sitting back against the newly slightly less uncomfortable cushion, Jo faced a blank screen. She didn't have the remote, probably because there wasn't one, and since she knew there was nothing worth watching anyway, she decided to save herself the trouble of getting up and instead try and switch it on with her telekinetic powers.

After about 10 minutes Jo decided she didn't have any telekinetic powers, which was probably not a bad thing since she'd only have kicked herself for not discovering them sooner. Next she managed to waste another 10 minutes thinking about all the things she could do if any telekinetic powers should happen to suddenly appear in the future.

Jo's boredom was relieved at last by the sound of her mum returning.

"I'm back." she shouted, somewhat redundantly.

"Get anything nice?" enquired Jo, sauntering into the kitchen.

"Some gammon steaks... they were on offer."

"Mmmm." said Jo, almost sarcastically but not quite.

"Someone rang for you. I didn't catch her name but she said she'd see you later."

"Oh. I wonder who that could be." said Jo's mum, pausing momentarily from unloading the first of three heavily laden carrier bags.

"You could try 1471." offered Jo.

“No, that’s alright. By the way, you did get your message didn’t you?”

“What message?” asked Jo urgently.

“The one from your young man, Eddie.”

“Mum!” was the best Jo could do for the moment.

Marjorie was a bit puzzled. First her daughter gets herself invited on a date by a nice young man, and doesn’t tell her anything about it, and then she goes all funny when she doesn’t notice the message carefully tucked under the phone.

Abandoning the shopping for a moment, Marjorie lead Jo into the living room and pointed to the not at all tiny piece of paper sticking out from under the telephone. Clearly visible at the top, in bold capitals, was the word ‘JO’.

Jo grabbed the note clumsily, almost knocking the phone to the floor.

“JO: will meet you at 9pm in Cafe de Paris, love Eddie.” she read out loud.

“He called this morning while you were in the bath. Sounded ever so nice. Are you going to tell me about him then?”

“Err” started Jo. She had very mixed feelings. On the one hand she was disappointed at not having spoken to Eddie herself, and pissed off at wasting half the morning waiting for a phone call that had already happened. On the other hand she was exited about the date again and couldn’t wait to get out outfit hunting.

If she’d had a third hand, then it would have been a bit suspicious about the text of the note and whatever her mum might have said to Eddie on the phone.

“Is that what he really said? Love Eddie.” she asked finally.

“Maybe not those exact words...” admitted Marjorie, smiling.

“I did think it was a bit odd that he was calling for you here...” she added.

“...so I thought it best to just take a message and not say too much?”

“Thanks Mum.” said Jo, smiling with relief at last.

“He’s a guy from work. I’ve wanted him to ask me out for ages and he finally has so I want to make a special effort and...”

“From the cinema? Oh.” interrupted Jo’s mum, slightly disappointed.

“He’s the assistant manager Mum.” stressed Jo, very deliberately, as if it shouldn’t matter but knowing that it did.

“Maybe he’ll be the manager soon.” she added, now going overboard and trying to soup up his prospects.

There was a slightly awkward silence. Jo and her mum had never really communicated much on the subject of men. Since she was only 12 when her father died, and her mother had never had a boyfriend since, as far as Jo knew, there just hadn’t been many actual men around in their lives for them to discuss in much detail.

In fact, if anything, Jo felt that her mum had actively avoided the subject. She was always happy to talk about her father, but always in a romantic rose-tinted nostalgic way, uninhibited by the unfortunate downsides that accompany men who are actually still around or who left of their own accord.

Now wasn’t the time to start fixing any major flaws in their mother-daughter relationship. Marjorie had groceries to unpack and

Jo had clothes to buy.

“I’ll tell you all about him later.” offered Jo.

“I hope your date goes well, dear.” replied Marjorie, softly and sincerely.

Both of them smiled and went off to their respective shopping.

Chapter 21

Sylvia was staring at his bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich. Actually, half of it, or one of them, depending on how you count bits of bread that are cut into triangles.

He hated cold tomatoes with a vengeance, something that went way back into his childhood. He hated wet lettuce too, because “how hard is it to dry a lettuce leaf?”

Sylvia did love his bacon though. The sandwich he was staring at did have very nice bacon in; assuming it was the same as in the other half, which he’d already eaten.

On balance though, this was a crap sandwich he was staring at. He tugged at one of the pieces of bacon. It came out easily enough, but was accompanied by a piece of tomato underneath, which promptly fell into his lap.

“Shit!” he exclaimed out loud, picking off the tomato and dropping it into the otherwise empty bin under his desk.

There was a round mark left on his trousers. He rubbed at it a bit and it turned into a bigger less-round mark.

“Tuh.”

Hoping the mark would just dry away to nothing, Jeff Stevenson turned his attention back to the piece of bacon. There were clearly bits of tomato goo stuck to it. He threw it into the bin too, closely followed by the rest of the sandwich.

“Well that was a crap lunch.” he thought.

His eyes wandered towards the bottom desk drawer. He wished he could have lunch with Jennifer. As he imagined it, the picture in his mind’s eye was of a nice little romantic spot outdoors. There was a tartan rug laid out on the grass. On it was a picnic hamper, as yet unopened. Inside the hamper there weren’t any sandwiches with tomatoes and wet lettuce. There probably weren’t any sandwiches at all in fact, but it’s hard to say because, as I said before, the hamper was unopened. All in all, the romantic lunch scene was suspiciously devoid of all food and drink, and rather heavily concentrated on Jeff and Jennifer shagging against a nearby tree.

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in.” said Jeff routinely.

As the door opened Jeff pulled his chair closer to the desk, not to hide the soft squashy mark left by the tomato on his trousers, but to hide the hard firm erection trying to protrude from inside them.

“Ah, you’re here.” said Eddie Shore entering the room.

As openers go it wasn’t a classic, but what else could he say, “Hey, are you avoiding me you bastard?” was a bit too direct.

“Hello Eddie.” said Jeff confidently, any potential flusterment avoided by the shielding desk between them, “What can I do you for?”

“Tit.” thought Eddie. “Every time he says that I just want to

punch him. Still, I guess he thinks it's funny, like the other million morons who churn it out again and again and..."

"Eddie?" enquired Jeff, a bit less confident now.

Eddie didn't notice the effect his pause had had on Sylvia, he just pressed on.

"The conference. You were going to brief me on it."

"Yes I was", adding "am" quickly in correction as he rummaged through some papers on his rather uncharacteristically untidy desk.

"I have the details here somewhere." he added hopefully as he searched, rather than let Eddie butt in with some wise remark.

"It's all a bit last-minute I'm afraid..." he continued, starting on another pile.

"...I was lucky to get in as a late replacement. Someone died I think."

"Not so lucky for him then." snuck in Eddie.

"Exactly."

By now Jeff had flicked through all of the most likely piles without finding what he was after.

"Hmmm. I need a bit of a sort out here." he conceded.

"I'll have to get back to you I think. There's not much to say really, I just want to give you the dates and all my contact details in case anyone needs to get to me directly. I'll, err, copy it all up for you by... tomorrow. OK?"

"Sure." replied Eddie, nodding slightly.

He paused briefly, slightly taken aback by Sylvia's sudden loss of control. Usually he would be completely on the ball and organised with something as plainly self-serving as this.

“The plot thickens.” thought Eddie as he turned to leave.

“Oh, Eddie?” started Jeff.

“Yes?” said Eddie, turning back.

“Have you had lunch yet?”

“Yes I have...”

“OK. Never mind then.” finished Jeff, smiling and looking again towards one of his piles.

Eddie walked out of the room puzzled. Did Sylvia just try and ask to have lunch with him? Mixing with the underlings wasn't normally his style. A high degree of professional separation was his style and that's the way the rest of the staff liked it, because they all thought he was a tit too.

This was one of the reasons that Eddie hadn't pushed himself forward for the vacant managership after George Thompson left. He feared professional separation. He'd always been, or thought of himself, as one of the gang. Every job he'd ever done had been the same; there was a bunch of people who did the work, a couple of people who helped organise things and did the work too, and one or two people who got paid more than everyone else for doing no work. What the people who did no work did all day was always something of a mystery. The only obvious thing they ever did was to try and make everyone else work harder, usually by making it harder to do what they were already doing quite well.

Eddie hated managers, as much as anyone else who wasn't a manager, and quite a few who were, did. Now that he was an assistant one though he tried to refrain from using the term manager, in case he ended up tarring himself with his own brush. Instead he had

a generic term for all pointless, idiotic, nincompoops: PIN-heads. Sylvia was a pinhead of the highest order, and Eddie didn't ever want to be regarded in the same way as he was.

The respect of his colleagues was too important to him. He liked to think that this was simply a result of the long hours he spent with them, the nature of work at the turn of the century, new communities centred on the workplace. But this was retrospective crap; the real reason that he needed the respect, and friendship, of his colleagues was that he didn't have that many friends outside of work. Often the ones he did have didn't seem to have much time for him (actually this was merely an illusion, on the whole they were simply just very badly organised and easily as paranoid about Eddie's friendship as he was about theirs).

George Thompson may have been a good manager, everything always seemed to run smoothly during his time, and had the respect of the staff. But how had he achieved that? By being virtually invisible?

Eddie's daydreamy contemplation of the management ladder and his choice of rung was suddenly interrupted by a slightly angry looking Henry Wilks.

"Ah, Mr B, I've been looking for you."

"And you found me Henry." replied Eddie with a semi-mock stern tone.

Eddie was assuming that the cause of Henry's fumes was a toilet deliberately blocked by "young tearaways", or some lewd graffiti, or maybe even, at the top end of the bad scale, a cracked window.

"Have you seen Mr Stevenson today?" inquired Henry.

“Yes. Just now in fact.”

“And...” started Henry. He wasn’t quite sure what he wanted to say. There was probably a proper way to do this sort of thing but he wasn’t au fait with any of that fancy stuff. He was just an ordinary hard-working fellow who should just be allowed to get on with his job like everyone else was. He decided to get straight to the point.

“Well, he was very rude to me earlier.”

Eddie frowned. Sylvia was obviously having a bad day, some kind of mid-life crisis or something, and now it looked like he was going to have to clear up some of the mess.

“Why don’t you tell me about it over a cup of tea.” offered Eddie at last, after a suitably respectful pause.

“Alright.” said Henry, still not smiling but a bit brighter.

A few minutes later they were in the lobby, perched on a couple of bar chairs that attempted to make the place look like it would be a good place to meet your friends, on the off chance that you’d not noticed the pub and restaurant next door. They were drinking tea. Actually, Henry was drinking tea, Eddie had got coffee with sugar by mistake but thought it wasn’t important enough to change it, even though it tasted horrible.

“So, Henry. What did Mr Stevenson say to you?” asked Eddie in a fairly low voice.

“Well...” started Henry, in a similar tone and glancing at a couple of students who were milling around waiting for their friends and wishing they’d agreed to meet in the pub.

“...I’d just been fixing that tap in the ladies, the leaky one, when I bumped into him, Mr Stevenson. I had this spanner in me hand,

and he said ‘I hope you’re not going to throw that in the works’ ... but not joking like, he was quite stern about it, I think. So I said ‘What works?’ and he just sort of scowled at me.”

Henry paused, as if the scowl needed some more dramatic emphasis. Eddie was quite relieved that this seemed to be a minor incident, and Henry continued.

“I was just going to walk off but he said ‘What were you doing in there?’ all official like, and I just said ‘Fixing a tap’ like I was.”

At this point Eddie’s interest was starting to fade. Any worries that this might be something of any importance had gone, and his thoughts were turning to how to speed up Henry’s already overly long story of mild managerial unfriendliness.

“... and then I was all set to just take him in and show him when Jen Pierce turns up and wants to use it, the ladies, so I can’t. And he just says ‘Look, just get back to work you stupid man’ and storms off.”

Henry paused again and Eddie took his chance to force a conclusion.

“Oh dear, that’s not very nice.” he offered sympathetically.

“Mr Stevenson’s under a bit of pressure at the moment.” he guessed.

“And I think that’s made him a bit defensive.” now he was just making stuff up.

“Defensive?” asked Henry quizzically.

“Oh, it’s just stuff they tell you on these bloody courses. When you jump down someone’s throat for asking a perfectly ordinary question, just because you know you’ve probably done something wrong,

that's being defensive."

Henry seemed to have just about got it.

"So it just means that Sylvia has a problem, nothing to do with you at all Henry." added Eddie for good measure.

"Don't worry about it. I bet he'll even apologise next time he sees you."

"Oh." said Henry, starting to feel that maybe he should be feeling sorry for Sylvia, but not getting far before turning back.

"Well he should apologise. No excuse for being rude."

"Indeed Henry." agreed Eddie, nodding.

They both climbed down from their chairs and headed off in their own directions. Nothing had changed really, but Henry felt a bit better for having told Eddie about Sylvia's insult.

Eddie didn't get far before the word 'defensive' popped back into his head. It wasn't the right word to describe Sylvia's behaviour. Something more akin to 'odd' would have been more accurate but probably less convincing. He didn't need a word to describe the behaviour, he'd experienced it and had no desire to go discussing it with anyone else.

Still the word defensive hung around. He arrived back at his office and sat down.

"Defensive" he thought.

That was all he thought. Somehow the word defensive was holding his attention and blocking everything else out. Then, in a flash, he got a mental picture of a red dot on a map. Next to the dot was the word defensive in clear bold letters.

Had Eddie ever been interested in Greek blokes jumping naked

in and out of baths, then he might have thought “Eureka!” at this point. As it was his slightly less classical response was “Fuck me!”

It was so obvious now. The Godalming dot wasn’t an offensive attack like all the others, it was a defensive attack. Why was it defensive? Because he’d got too close to the truth without knowing it. Somewhere near that dot was something they didn’t want him to find. A base, or a training camp or a stash of something.

Eddie’s imagination ran wild for a few moments before he realised the chilling consequence of his discovery: he had to go back. He rested his chin on his hand as he remembered the she-man incident again.

“This time I’ll be ready.” he said quietly out loud, leaning his chair back on two legs and very nearly tipping over backwards.

Chapter 22

By the middle of Thursday morning Eddie was grateful that it was a work-day. His best idea so far, for Counter Operation Godalming (COG), was to go to Godalming, by himself, immediately and tackle whatever he happened to find there, on the fly as it were.

Although scoring well for mindless optimism, there was a certain lack of finesse about it; as plans go. To say it was his best idea was also a slight exaggeration, it was his only idea, unless you count variations such as “wait a bit, and then go to Godalming...” as actual other ideas.

Meticulous as his previous plan had been, there was always a bit of an open end to it. Now, like an empty bag of crisps, there didn't seem to be much left to do with it except throw it away. Timing. Timing was what bugged Eddie now. Just as he knew the mystery of the rogue red dot would be resolved at the right time, he knew somehow that as long as he went to Godalming at the right time he would know what to do. But what was the right time?

Eddie had spent most of the previous evening with the calendar on his lap, trying to spot a date that stood out. He'd drawn a blank.

Nothing caught his eye. The only thing he'd been able to conclude was that he didn't really like Monet very much after all, far too wishy washy; was the guy half blind or something?

The only upcoming dates of any significance to him at all were the big date with Jo on Friday, which was also his day off, Mike returning from holiday late on Saturday, or maybe Sunday morning, and Christmas.

"Hmmm. I must face him, alone?"

The phone rang, it was an internal call, which was surprising.

"Hello?"

The only sound Eddie could hear was the one that phones do when they are trying to convey silence and not quite getting enough co-operation from the background to achieve it. After a second or two, and just before Eddie could say hello again, the other person hung up.

"Odd." thought Eddie.

Before he could start speculating about moles and insiders, or put down the phone, it occurred to him that he ought to call Jo.

"Leaving a message with her mum was a bit of a cheat."

He'd been relieved about it at the time, but soon after it felt bad. At the back of his mind he was coming round to the notion that Friday would be the day for COG. If it was, and if things went wrong, then he didn't want to go out without talking to her again. This was all subconscious. What Eddie felt was "I need to talk to Jo", so he started to dial. That was as far as he'd got the previous evening, but this time he actually dialled all the numbers and let it ring.

It rang four times, then it rang another five times, then it kept ringing and Eddie lost count. He listened to it ringing for a while just for the novelty value of hearing a phone ring and ring without being interrupted by a “hello ... this is me speaking ... you probably never encountered an answering machine before so let me explain exactly what you have to do after I stop talking and the thing goes beep.”

“Oh.” thought Eddie, “I’m not having a good phone day here, am I.”

Having never had a good phone day in his life, this shouldn’t have been surprising. It was though perhaps a slightly less good phone day than the normally bad ones that he was accustomed to.

Eddie dialled the number again. It rang a dozen times again. He hung up again.

“She must be out.” he thought, not exactly making the deduction of the century.

It still hadn’t occurred to him that Jo might have fibbed about her mum being ill. He was so concerned about saying the right thing when he’d called the previous day that her almost obvious wellness had completely passed him by. Even now, as Jo scoured the shoe shops for something to match her new frock, he suspected nothing.

There was enough weird shit going on at the cinema to keep his suspicions busy enough. No sooner had he put the phone down than it rang again, internal again. This time the person hung up before he could even lift the receiver to his ear.

“What is going on?” he said out loud.

There were only a handful of phones in the building. In an instant Eddie decided to go and check them all. He’d only got half-way to

the lobby when he saw Jane Turner. She looked a bit worried, since she was wringing her hands as she walked and frowning.

Jane was the oldest of the women who worked at the cinema, and something of a mother figure. When people had personal problems they often went to her first, and since they rarely got as far as Eddie or Sylvia, he guessed she was very good at sorting them out.

In fact, the only time Eddie could remember Jane coming to see him was when two members of staff who'd been dating had broken up badly. She had asked him to try and adjust their shifts so that they didn't have to work together. He did, and praised Jane's people skills to encourage her to keep up the good work.

"Ah, Eddie." said Jane sheepishly.

"Oh no." thought Eddie, "She's not said anything yet and I can tell it's going to be bad, all bad."

"What's wrong Jane?" asked Eddie, getting straight to the point.

"Well; have you seen Mr Stevenson today?" replied Jane.

"Err, actually no. Why? Has he grown an extra head or something?"

Jane smiled, but it was more a smile of relief that Sylvia hadn't gotten to him first than an appreciation of Eddie's effort to inject a bit of humour into the situation.

"It's a bit delicate. Can we go to your office?"

"Sure." said Eddie, turning.

Jane followed and when they were both comfortably seated, with the door closed, she began without any prompt from Eddie.

"It's about Mr Stevenson, and Las Vegas, and ... Jennifer Pierce."

At this point she paused to give Eddie a chance to react, so he

did.

“Jennifer Pierce?”

“Yes.” replied Jane, convinced now that Eddie really knew nothing about this already.

“Well, I assume you know that Mr Stevenson is going on some business trip to Las Vegas next week?”

Eddie nodded.

“Right, well, apparently Mr Stevenson asked Jennifer, yesterday, to go to Las Vegas with him.”

Eddie didn't take up the pause, sensing, quite correctly, that whatever he might add would be contradicted by the evidence to come. Instead he just frowned, raised his eyebrows and frowned again.

“He said he would pay for everything.” added Jane, in case Eddie was still unclear as to what she was suggesting Sylvia was suggesting.

Eddie sighed. “And what did Jennifer...”

He was hoping Jane would jump in, but she didn't, which threw him a little bit.

“I mean, obviously we wouldn't be talking now if Jennifer hadn't taken that to mean that the offer wasn't purely, err...” he struggled.

“Above board?” offered Jane.

“Yes. Above board.” agreed Eddie gratefully.

“Of course not. She's very upset.” confirmed Jane, adding gravely, “This is sexual harassment.”

Eddie knew what he thought, but having just asked a female staff member out on a date himself, he decided it was best to keep his opinions to himself for now.

“Thanks for coming to me with this Jane. I think I’ll have to talk with Jennifer herself before I can do anything though.”

“You can’t today, she’s gone.” stated Jane flatly.

“Gone?”

“I told her she should tell you. I saw her a few minutes ago and she said she’d tried but couldn’t do it. She went home I think.”

“Ah, the internal calls.” mumbled Eddie.

Jane looked at Eddie. He guessed she was waiting for some action from him. One of her babies was being preyed upon and she wanted him to do something about it. Eddie could tell that “leave it with me” wasn’t going to be enough this time; and yet he didn’t know what to do.

“I don’t know exactly what to do Jane.” he said, opting for honesty.

“But I know someone who will.” he added, lying.

“Let me talk to him and find out how to proceed.”

Jane smiled weakly. She trusted Eddie. He was a decent bloke, and he reminded her of her son; admittedly mainly by virtue of them both being male and approximately thirty years old. There was something else though. Eddie wasn’t self-important, unlike Jeff Stevenson, or an over-confident, smug, slimy, scheming, freeloading pervert.

Standing up, Jane asked casually “And if I see Jennifer?”

“Er, let me know, and I’ll come and see her.”

Jane nodded to confirm that Eddie had said exactly the right thing, and without another word she opened the door and left.

“Woah!” whispered Eddie to himself.

“Sylvia, what have you done?”

He was both surprised and indignant, and of course, quite excited too.

“You’re going down mate. There ain’t no coming back from this one. Out, out, out!”

So, what was he going to do? “Mustn’t drop the ball.”

He had to do everything properly, “Can’t let him get off the hook.”

The first hurdle was confirming Jennifer Pierce’s side of the story. He couldn’t go off accusing Sylvia of something that he’d only heard about second hand. Still, that gave him time. Eddie decided to wait until he’d seen Jennifer before he did anything. For now he would just enjoy the thought of Sylvia’s impending sacking.

Eddie went round to Sylvia’s office anyway, just to see if he was there. He wasn’t. Eddie had a quick look around. There were no signs that he’d been there at all today. No coat, no briefcase, no laptop. One of the drawers was open though. Eddie looked in guiltily, but there was just a pile of folders; the top one was labelled ‘Misc’.

Nothing else looked out of place. On the desk there was a book, “101 Steps To Being The Best Manager You Can Be”, read Eddie from the cover.

“My God, I bet he studies that every morning when he comes in.” he thought.

Only now did one of the more obvious implications of Jeff Stevenson’s absence occur to our hero, who to be fair had quite a few other things on his mind.

“Hey. I wonder if he’s done a runner?”

For a brief moment Eddie got a picture of a body hanging lifelessly from a tree in the middle of a lonely wood. He was a bit shocked at the darkness of this thought but, despite the protestations of the more liberal parts of his mind, and several attempts to replace it with images of men rushing to catch planes to Rio, or hiding out in remote Highland villages, the vision persisted.

As a concession to the milk of human kindness, Eddie decided to go off and find out if anyone had seen or heard from Sylvia. One by one he casually chatted to all the staff and tried to ask them if they’d seen their master today, without looking like that was the reason he was talking to them. On the whole he thought he did this pretty well. One or two of the girls did look at him a bit suspiciously when he mentioned “Mr Stevenson”, which made Eddie wonder if they’d been gossiping.

“Shit” thought Eddie, “I didn’t ask Jane who else knows...”

“Well, it’ll all be out soon.” he concluded.

Either way, no-one appeared to have seen Sylvia since the previous evening, “Bugger.”

Little as Eddie cared about Jeff Stevenson’s fate, his present absence did have one serious impact on Eddie’s immediate plans. If the manager was ‘unavailable’ then Eddie would have to cover, or arrange cover, for him; and that meant it was unlikely that he could take his day off tomorrow.

Strangely, this thought didn’t result in a “Nuts”, or an “Arse”, or a repetition of any of the other expletives that often popped into his head. One thing was suddenly very clear.

“He’s in on it. He must be in on it!”

And that could only mean one thing; Friday. Friday had to be the day. If Sylvia was forced to go to such lengths to try and keep him here on Friday, then he absolutely had to go on Friday.

Friday it was then.

He would go early, before work, and surprise them.

Conveniently, it was just about lunchtime. Eddie set off for the station, to check out the early train times. Much as the prospect of a pre-dawn raid excited and terrified him, his thoughts as he walked were much more grave: dare he also buy, and even more daringly eat, some food in the station cafe?

Chapter 23

Jo was happy with her new purchases. Almost as happy as the credit card company which would be collecting interest on them for the next six months. Still, she hadn't gone too mad. OK, a new watch to match her dress might have been a bit over the top but her old one was, well, too old and just didn't go.

She was excited now, and wondering how quickly she'd be able to dash home from work tomorrow night, to give the maximum getting-ready time. Two hours maybe, but she had to get to the restaurant too, ah, maybe only an hour and a half then...

For the first time in two weeks she was home alone. Her flatmate Sarah was on holiday, so she'd been round at her mum's a lot, or out with other friends; it was the build up to Christmas after all.

The room seemed a bit too big for one person, especially with the hall light on, since it looked like someone else was just about to come in and fill up some of the excess space. There were two sofas and two armchairs, arranged in a 'C', or a 'U' if you like, with a large coffee table in the middle, which I guess makes it an 'A' really. The TV at the end was only a little one, too small to fill the gap for an

‘8’.

Jo was curled up in her favourite armchair, which was identical to the other one, wrapped only in a very large white towelling dressing gown. Her hair was wet; fortunately as a result of having a rather nice long soak in the bath, rather than getting caught in the rain, which was impossible anyway because it wasn’t raining. It was cold though, outside; inside it was very warm indeed, since Jo had the heating on full-blast, a luxury she only accorded herself when Sarah was out, on account of her constant moaning about “spiralling heating bills.”

“God, she’s an old woman some times!” Jo didn’t think, because she was too busy thinking about something else.

Sipping from a glass of the finest vintage orange juice, Jo looked at one particular set of numbers in her address book. By the numbers it simply said ‘Eddie’. She knew, by the power of 1471, that he’d phoned her mum’s today while she was out shopping. That was twice she’d missed him, and with her mum being out too the illness fib was looking about as believable as a party political broadcast (or a “partly political” as her mum called them).

“I’ll just call him.” she thought.

On past form there would have ensued a vigorous debate between Jo and herself, or Jo and Sarah, or both, about the rights and wrongs of calling and not calling. Partly down to a new strength that was emerging in her, but mostly down to Sarah’s absence, there was no discussion at all. Jo dialled the number.

The engaged tone. Undeterred, Jo immediately dialled again, more carefully this time in case she’d misdialled before. She hadn’t, but the phone rang through this time anyway.

“Hello.” said Eddie’s voice, sounding amused.

“Hi, it’s me.” said Jo tentatively, adding “Jo.” just in case she didn’t merit me-status yet.

“Oh Jo. I thought it was my friend Alex again.”

“Alex?” she said, but thought “Alex girl or Alex boy?”

“Yeah, he’s some kid who’s girlfriend’s number is one out from mine. Somehow he manages to call me all the time. I think he’s doing it on purpose sometimes...”

“Oh.” said Jo, because she couldn’t think of anything else to say to such an unusual statement.

Eddie sensed that “Oh” probably meant “What the hell are you on about?” and that the conversation was not therefore going well. He tried to fix it,

“Anyway, I’m glad you phoned. I tried to call you earlier but you were out.”

“Yeah; actually I was in the bath.”

Now they were both confused. Jo realised what she’d said. Eddie imagined that Jo was talking to him dressed only in a towel, which was almost true. There was a brief pause.

“I’m looking forward to our date too, but I thought I’d actually leave it until tomorrow night to start getting ready.” he joked.

Jo laughed. It wasn’t much of a joke, but it did the trick.

“Actually” added Eddie, “I will see you at work tomorrow after all.”

“Oh, why’s that?” asked Jo brightly, relaxing.

“Well, a bit of a crisis in some ways.” offered Eddie intriguingly.

“A crisis? Don’t tell me, Sylvia declared war on litter again and

all leave is cancelled.”

“Ha, almost. Actually; Sylvia has disappeared.”

“Under the litter?” laughed Jo.

“Hmmm, maybe,” joined Eddie, “I didn’t actually look there.”

“So you mean he’s really disappeared?” asked Jo a bit more seriously.

“Yeah really. He’s gone. I’ve been calling his home number all day and there’s no answer there either.”

“Maybe he just went off for a meeting without telling you?” suggested Jo.

It was a fiendishly good suggestion, something that Eddie hadn’t in truth considered, keen as he was to believe that Sylvia had run away from the terrible consequences of his failed advances toward Jennifer Pierce.

“Maybe...” started Eddie “...but there is a reason why it may be more serious than that.”

“Really? Do tell?” pleaded Jo.

This was brilliant thought Eddie; they were having a chat on the phone and he was enjoying it. He thought Jo sounded like she was enjoying it too. Great. Better not dwell on it too much though in case he put himself under too much pressure to be funny or something.

“Well I probably shouldn’t say anything...”

“...but you’re going to anyway?” she chuckled.

“Since it’s you. But don’t tell anyone else.”

“I promise.” said Jo.

“Cross your heart and hope to die?”

“Yes.”

Eddie was distracted momentarily by the thought that Jo might accidentally dislodge her bath towel whilst crossing her heart and may therefore be standing there naked. As a single man he felt that this image required a second moment's thought but Jo interrupted.

"Eddie?"

"Oh, sorry, yes, well, Jane Turner told me that he might have been making, err, improper advances to a certain member of staff."

Eddie was trying to be vague, to draw out the story a bit, so he was rather surprised when Jo said, "Jenny Pierce?"

"How did you know that?" asked Eddie, part amazed and part wondering if there was something going on that only he was unaware of.

"Just a guess really. I've seen the way he looks at her."

Eddie paused, not ashamed of the falling towel images that still seemed to be kicking around at the back of his mind, but aware that his desires were probably not quite as secret as he would like. There were a few things he'd like to ask Jo right now, but he didn't know her well enough yet. Later.

"And once..." she continued "...I saw him really leering at her, for ages. I'm sure he didn't know there was anyone else around."

"So you were spying on him spying on her?" laughed Eddie.

"Yes." admitted Jo matter-of-factly.

"So is this common knowledge then?"

"About Jenny? No, apart from the fact that every bloke at work fancies her."

Eddie thought about saying "I don't" but quickly decided that it might sound a bit ridiculous, being a blatant lie, unless you define

fancy as ‘want to share a rounded and fulfilling relationship with’ rather than ‘would like to shag’.

“So what did he do? Pinch her bum or something?” asked Jo.

“Oh no. He offered to pay to take her to Las Vegas with him next week.” blurted Eddie.

“Oooh. Gossip-tastic. I’m surprised she said no though; I mean, Las Vegas!”

“Really?” puzzled Eddie, a bit shocked too.

“No, only joking.” laughed Jo.

Eddie could be a bit naive at times, and Jo liked that. She was enjoying the conversation, even if they were talking about work stuff. They both seemed relaxed. It was fun.

“Yeah.” said Eddie, “So, anyway Jennifer is upset and Jeff has jumped ship... allegedly. Which means I’ll be at work tomorrow, covering.”

“Good.” said Jo, “I’ve missed seeing you.”

Every fear, insecurity and foible in Eddie’s mind suddenly woke up and hit the panic button. Normally this would route some gobbledegook from the darkest recesses of his brain directly to his mouth, or, if he did manage to start saying something coherent, stop his mouth working either partly or all together.

“I’ve missed seeing you too.” said Eddie sincerely.

He wasn’t amazed, or even surprised, at getting the words out. The subtle rewiring of his mind by the secret agents of his new-found confidence had fixed that, as well as disconnecting all of the panic buttons. All but one that is, and that was harmlessly re-routed to one of his big-toes, which was feeling slightly uncomfortable at the

moment.

There was a comfortable silence.

Both of them should probably have decided to quit while they were ahead. They'd had a nice chat. They'd been comfortable with each other. They'd got over the odd potential hurdle with ease. They were going to see each other in a few hours anyway (probably). It would have been nice to finish on a note of genuine and sincere affection.

Fortunately, even though Eddie was inclined to blunder on, Jo did decide to take the money and run.

"I'll see you tomorrow then." she said softly.

"Yes. Tomorrow. Good night." managed Eddie.

He was trying for the same sort of soft tone, but he worried that it had come out a bit wet, a bit "Oh, this is the end is it, err, yes, well, goodbye then". His fears were unfounded again, all Jo heard was "good night" and it had been as far as she was concerned.

"Good night." repeated Jo, hanging up.

Eddie put down the phone slowly. He couldn't quite believe how well it had gone. So natural. Nearly like talking for real, face to face. He felt warm inside, and strong. Ready for anything.

Tomorrow was going to be a big day. COG was on for before dawn. After that he would fix Sylvia's fate. Then, in the evening, there was the big date with Jo. Maybe the next day he'd take over the world.

By now it was gone 10pm and he had to be up early. But he wasn't tired, and he was too excited to sleep anyway. Instead he sat down on the sofa and looked again over the small collection of

equipment that he'd gathered up for the operation. A torch, mobile phone, his Swiss Army knife and a black woolly hat. The hat would have been a Balaclava if he'd had one, but he didn't. It wasn't much, but it looked quite professional the way he'd laid out all the kit on the floor.

Whether Eddie really believed that he could just hop on the train to Godalming, wearing a woolly hat and armed with a Swiss Army knife, and tackle whatever terrible forces that were plotting against him, I don't know. He was very careful not to think about it too much. In that spirit, rather than go over his plan again and again, Eddie decided to watch a video instead.

The personal video collection of Mr Eddie Shore was, perhaps surprising for a committed employee of the cinema industry, rather bare. He didn't often record from the TV, and when he did he usually ended up recording over it with something more important before he'd watched it. And he only owned five pre-recorded tapes. Three of those tapes were a boxed set, from 1997. Eddie took out the first tape and pushed it into his video.

Before the tape could start playing, Eddie hit fast-forward. He knew exactly how long to wind it to skip the piracy warnings and the not overly interesting 'making of' mini-doc. Eddie pressed play and swung his feet up onto the sofa. The music started. It was the most familiar tune of his life. This was definitely the best preparation for the task ahead.

The only question in Eddie's mind was "shall I watch the Special Edition episodes V and VI too?"

Chapter 24

6am at Guildford Station. Mission time: 1 hour and counting.

The station was much quieter than he'd expected. Somehow Eddie had this notion that 'city people' got up before dawn, donned their pinstripe suits and headed for London before the plebs got up; thus avoiding the unpleasantness of having to mingle with them, at the cost of being squashed in together of course (which Eddie imagined they secretly liked).

Eddie's first foray out of the house before 7am, for as long as he could remember, had revealed something quite different. There was hardly anyone about at all, which was good because Eddie was feeling a bit of a plank in his black woolly hat, black coat, black gloves, black trousers and black DMs. If it hadn't been so cold he would have taken the hat and gloves off ages ago. Now, since it was so quiet, he was slightly less worried about being fingered as a wannabe secret agent.

Standing alone on platform 2 he put his gloved hands in his coat pockets and looked out across the other platforms. Opposite him on platform 3 there were two people, standing about 20 feet apart

and doing their best to ignore each other. One was a man, all in denim, with greying hair and the greyest, grimmest, face Eddie had ever seen. He could have been made of stone, and Eddie might have believed he was if he hadn't been constantly shifting his weight from one foot to the other. There was no other movement though, especially from his face, so maybe he was a statue, tottering after being nudged by a passing porter. Porter?

“Do they still have porters?” Eddie wondered aimlessly.

Over on platform 4 there was someone sitting with their back to him, probably a woman because she had long hair, but you never know. Platform 5 was positively crowded, with four people. Eddie speculated about each of them in turn: one was a banker, another a surgeon, an accountant and finally a chiropodist. Pure fantasy of course, guesswork, idle conjecture and all very, very, accidentally correct on this particular occasion.

There was an empty train standing at platform 6 so Eddie couldn't see any further. Before he could confirm that the train was indeed empty, it was 0610 and his own train arrived, on time. Actually, since it was due to depart at 0610, maintaining its on-timeness would seem to depend on the speediness of the passengers. No-one got off the train. Eddie got on, there was a whistle, blown by someone who must have been hiding somewhere until now, and the train left. Eddie noted the time on the station clock, 06:11:04. One of the other clocks said 06:10:57 and another 06:10:58 but Eddie couldn't see them, or the one that said 06:11:11. The train might have been running on time, or it might have been a bit late, no-one around cared too much, it was about ten past six in the morning.

The journey was an uneventful 7 minutes. It was dark, the train was mostly empty, it wasn't raining. As Eddie stepped out onto the platform at Godalming it did start to rain.

"Shit." thought Eddie.

He didn't have an umbrella and his black coat was designed more for keeping out the cold than the wet. Heading into the ticket office Eddie hoped as hard as he could that the little window wouldn't be occupied by the same git who'd, in one way, started this whole complicated episode. It wasn't.

"Phew. At least I can wait here for a while."

Eddie peered out of the station front door for several minutes, watching the rain. In the dark all he could see were cones of rain beneath the lonely street lamps. For a while Eddie imagined that it wasn't raining at all, and that the street lamps were actually giant shower-heads. A sudden gust of wind blowing spray into his face put an end to that. The rain was light though, only a shower really, and soon stopped.

"Right. Go."

As he strode out past the empty taxi rank, Eddie fumbled in his pockets for the torch. He didn't need it just yet, but he had no intention of getting caught out later. Eddie wasn't afraid of the dark, much, but by now he was starting to feel a bit tense about what may lie ahead.

The veterinary surgery looked out of place at the foot of Station Road, all by itself. Almost as if it was the last remnant of some bigger complex of buildings long since past. Eddie walked around it on the road, the long way, rather than using the short, but very

dark, footpath at the side.

Thirty seconds from the station and he could see the church. He approached it cautiously whilst trying to look like he wasn't, which didn't work really, leaving him looking like a lone lost prat wobbling round the streets in the dark. A couple of times he thought he felt someone watching him from the long terrace on his right, but he didn't look round to check.

As he approached the church, Eddie switched on his torch briefly to examine the notice board.

"The Parish Church of St Peter and St Paul." he read quietly.

At the foot of the board there was an internet address,
www.godalming.org.uk

Eddie smiled to himself and thought, "On the eighth day God made the internet."

He was also a tad amused by the fact that two saints had to share a church. Obviously Surrey property prices were a problem for everyone.

Eddie felt nervous as he made his way through the gateway and onto the path by the graveyard. He could make out the shapes of the gravestones, which was scary. For one moment he thought that seeing the names on the stones might settle him a bit but, before he could flick on the torch, he changed his mind, worried about waking the dead or something. It was probably for the best that Eddie didn't try to inspect the gravestones; not for of any supernatural reason, but simply because the stones were so worn that he wouldn't have been able to read them anyway.

Walking slowly in the dark, clutching his torch very tightly in

his left hand and gently patting the wall beside him with his right for comfort, Eddie reached the spot where he'd encountered the she-man. Just ahead of him the path split into three. One arced round the graveyard to the left, one went vaguely straight on but leftish to, from memory, Godalming Bowling Club, and the third bore right beside the wall which Eddie was clinging to.

Since the wall had been quite supportive so far, Eddie pressed on down the right-hand path, maintaining his snail's pace. Soon there was a bit more light, from ahead mostly, and Eddie could see that he was in a short alleyway. To his right was the trusty wall of course, but on the left there was a wire fence, over which appeared to be some kind of allotment. Eddie peered into the gloom, not knowing what he was looking for and not finding it anyway.

At the end of the alleyway there was a road. A well-lit road. Ahead of him on the other side there was another large wall, this time with a big arched wooden door in the middle and a big expensive house behind it. Eddie slipped the torch back into his pocket, conscious of the fact that he may bear some resemblance to a stereotypical burglar for some overly-suspicious members of the public.

Another choice. The road to the left had a footpath, the road to the right didn't. Eddie went right and as the road swung round to the right fifty yards later, he found a path, and a school and a curious row of flats.

"Hmmm." thought Eddie, not sure why he was curious.

The flats were one long box with a roof, not so odd, but all the doors were right in the middle under a single porch. There were five doors, all white except the middle one, which was yellowy white. A

light above each door clearly illuminated its bold brass number, 1, 2, 2a, 3, 4.

After a few minutes of staring Eddie was uncomfortable. He was worried that someone might come by or, even worse, come out of the flats. Mostly though he was troubled by this building and, specifically, by its possible contents.

“Is this the place?” he murmured, knowing it was.

Regardless, he decided to press on a bit and see what else he could find. You may think Eddie was just scared, but fundamentally his problem was this: he still didn’t have the faintest idea what he was going to do when faced with his attackers, so it was the best he could do to dodge around a bit until some inspiration, or a crisis, hit him.

After the school the road swung to the left and became cobbled. Eddie ventured a short way along but he could see that ahead of him was the High Street.

“No point.” he mused, stopping.

The image of five doors was stuck in his mind. Somehow the yellow door was glowing, as if to say “it’s me!”

Eddie turned round and headed back towards the doors. As the road bent round the sign in front of the school caught his eye,

“Moss Lane County Primary School.”

The entrance was guarded by a hefty metal fence. The hefty metal gate was accompanied by an intercom with a numeric entry-code keypad.

“Is that to keep the kids in or out?” he wondered, seriously.

Approaching the flats from the other direction, there were a row

of garage doors ahead of him. There were six doors. In front of one of them was parked an old brown mini metro. Eddie might have recognised it, but didn't. Instead he noticed that this door and the next were exactly the same colour. Not unusual in itself, but since each door was itself multi-coloured, quite an achievement. Both doors had originally, Eddie assumed, been pale blue and faded to various shades of grey over the years, leaving a series of horizontal stripes.

Eddie crossed the road to get a closer look at the garage doors. He was intrigued to find that the door blocked by the parked car was nailed shut. Half a dozen long, and now rusty, nails had been hammered into either side of the wooden frame to stop the faded metal door from opening.

“Curiouser and curiouser.”

Out of the corner of his eye Eddie thought he saw a light switching on inside the flats. He ducked down behind the old car. There was a light, second window from the left on the top floor. Squatting here, Eddie found himself staring at the middle door again.

“2a my arse.” he whispered to himself.

The flats had obviously all been built in one go, in the 70's probably, so why not 1-5? How could you blissfully set up a row of four flats and then suddenly, at the last minute, notice that you had an extra one in the middle?

“No. Something's not right here. This is the place. This is THE place.”

Crouched behind a car, in the cold and dark, confronted with his enemy's base of operations and armed only with a six-inch torch

and a shorter pen-knife, Eddie was surprisingly confident. It was obvious that he wasn't their target per se. They'd only gone after him because he was close to finding this, their base. There had to be much more serious shit going down here, in those flats and probably shut in that garage. So it was clear that he didn't have to tackle them himself. Whatever they were up to, they were desperate to keep it quiet, willing to do anything to keep observant people like him away.

"Tell it to the jury." whispered Eddie, standing up and heading back across the road to the school, only almost pausing to wonder which film he was quoting from.

As soon as he was out of sight of the flats Eddie stopped by a sign post. Luckily, even though the sign read 'Caution Lorries Turning', there weren't any lorries about so it seemed safe. He took out his mobile phone and pressed 9 twice, but stopped. Maybe the call would be traced, intercepted, or decrypted or something. The pay phone by the station beckoned, but he hadn't checked to see if it was working when he arrived.

"Hmmm. The High Street." thought Eddie, heading for it.

At the end of Moss Lane, Eddie instinctively turned left onto the High Street. This was taking him away from the station, something Eddie realised after a few yards. He didn't even think about slowing down.

"This way."

Eventually, at the far end of the High Street, Eddie found a pay phone by a bus stop.

"And home by another route." he announced, quietly, as if it was

part of the plan all along; which it was, he'd just only just realised it that's all.

As Eddie dialled 999 and prepared to tell the police, rather cryptically but hopefully not too hoax-like, that they ought to be rather interested in the goings on at 2a Cherry Court, Moss Lane... an old woman opened the kitchen curtains at that address and looked out. She was expecting it to be light by now so, finding that it wasn't, she sighed and closed the curtains again.

Chapter 25

Bob Freeman wasn't surprised to find two policemen on his doorstep. In fact, he was rather disappointed that it had taken them this long to track him down: did he matter so little?

"Hello. Found me then." he said grumpily, maybe slightly relieved.

The two police officers, who happened to both be men, were surprised. As far as they were concerned they'd most likely been dragged out of their nice warm police station, on this cold dark December morning, by some hoax call. So, to find someone apparently expecting them was a bit unexpected, to say the least.

"Yes sir. And your name is?" asked PC Davis, bluffing.

"Freeman. Bob Freeman." replied Bob in a not very convincing 007.

"Right." said PC Davis, glancing at PC Barnes and wondering what to do next.

PC Barnes had his notebook out and was writing 'Bob Freeman' quite slowly so as not to have his eye caught by his semi-floundering colleague.

“We had a call. Said you might be here. Can we come inside, sir?”

“Yes.” replied Bob, turning round and wandering off down the hallway.

“Get on the radio and find out who he is.” whispered PC Davis sharply before following.

In the kitchen, Bob was waiting.

“It’s not like I’ve been hiding really. This is my mother’s place. She’ll be getting up soon by the way, in case you hear any bumping... walks with a stick you see. Anyway, what with our bereavement, I just didn’t feel up to the trial... so I’ve just been staying here. Waiting I suppose.”

Just then PC Barnes came in and confirmed, via a swift whisper to the left ear, that a Robert Freeman had recently skipped bail. Davis didn’t need to be told that it was a minor crime, petty theft as it happens, because he could tell just by looking that Bob was small-time. Real villains didn’t wear tartan carpet slippers and brown dressing-gowns.

“If you’ll just get dressed sir, we’ll have to take you down the station.”

Bob didn’t say anything; he marched himself to the living room and started rummaging through a pile of clothes by the sofa, which had an old red duvet rolled up at one end.

The two policemen looked at each other. This had been the easiest arrest they’d ever made. It was also PC Barnes’s first arrest; he smiled broadly, hoping every day would be like this, and not regretting quite so much the two previous years he’d spent having a

really bad time in the army.

Meanwhile, Eddie Shore was sitting on a nice warm bus in the beginnings of a nasty traffic jam on the A3100 coming into Guildford. He felt good. There was plenty of time to get to work, especially as it should really be his day off. Everything that mattered was proceeding to plan.

By now he'd finished speculating about the nature of the criminal gang that he'd just foiled. Drugs, armed robbery, terrorists, all three? He didn't know and didn't expect to find out: the authorities would probably hush it all up to avoid panicking the public, given the huge scale of the affair. This sort of thing probably went on all the time, right under the noses of the blissfully unaware masses.

There was one area of uncertainty left. Was Jeff Stevenson involved in the conspiracy? If he was then maybe he'd got wind of Eddie's retaliation somehow and decided to bail out, using Las Vegas and Jennifer Pierce as cover.

"Nah." thought Eddie. "Sylvia's just a dirty old man. A paper-pushing, procedure-obsessed, nuisance. Nothing more and nothing less."

The image of Jeff Stevenson's lifeless body swinging on the end of a rope popped into Eddie's head again. Much as he would be happy to never see Sylvia again, Eddie hoped he wasn't dead. Somehow that would be too tragic; not for Jeff particularly, but for everyone else, especially Jenny. Suicide, Eddie had always believed, was an easy way out, leaving those behind to suffer the consequences.

Eddie halted his near slide into a grim mood by imagining Jeff Stevenson writing a memo to himself, in an old cinema, far far away:

“Total staff: 1. Average performance: 9. Comments: well done.”

The bus moved forward twelve feet and then stopped again.

“Should be home in time for Christmas.” said Eddie brightly to one of the bus’s other occupants.

The woman didn’t look across at Eddie, or speak, she pulled her camel-coloured sheep-skin coat around her a bit tighter and hoped he wouldn’t say anything else. The other four people in earshot were grateful he hadn’t spoken to them. All of them thought Eddie looked a bit like a terrorist, and one of them was genuinely afraid that he might really be one.

The blissfully ignorant masses weren’t going to get Eddie down now. His confidence was up and staying there. Within the hour he would see Jo again, even if he had to get off this damn bus and walk. By lunchtime he would have established a firm grip on the cinema manager’s job. Tonight he was going on a date that would mark the start of the rest of his life.

Not to mention the fact that he’d probably just saved the country, if not the whole world, from disaster.

As Eddie’s daydreaming turned firmly to Jo, he was himself blissfully unaware of what he’d really done. The sum criminal activity of the gang-of-one now sitting in Godalming police station, as a result of Eddie’s operation, ran to half a dozen burglaries. The total value of goods stolen was about 750 pounds but Bob only got about a quarter of that from ‘his man’.

No damage was done to property, apart from a dirty footprint on a stupidly pale cream carpet. Four people claimed on their insurance, pushing premiums up a bit for everyone. Two of those people became

paranoid about security and lived in fear for the rest of their lives. A lad in Comet made his sales quota for the first and only time when, bizarrely, all the victims replaced their electrical goods from the same shop and during his shifts.

Life is a bit more complicated than that though. Under the surface there's plenty of stuff that no-one sees. A murky, fuzzy, stuff. Yes, Eddie had fingered a small-time burglar using the power of his intuition alone. So what? Well, as it happens, Bob Freeman was getting a bit bored. That evening he would probably have just popped out for a drink. Maybe on the way back he wouldn't have been able to resist "doing one little job" and lifted a video or something from that invitingly big house round the corner.

If Bob did 'do' the house then the present owner would be shocked. His present state of blind over-confidence would be rocked and he might undergo a thorough rethink of his intended course of action. He may even re-plan enough to avoid getting caught out at the first hurdle. Who knows, maybe then he might actually get as far as completing the assassination.

What would be the long-term consequences?

Who knows? No-one. These things just happen. Maybe Eddie did just save the world, maybe not. Most of us just get on with our lives blissfully unaware of just how finely balanced the normal things we cling to are. Some people though, people like Eddie Shore, have a deep mistrust of normal things. They see things that other people don't see, usually because they aren't there. They think differently and they act differently.

Eddie knew about the murky, fuzzy, stuff and now he was doing

something about it. For completely the wrong reasons, he was getting the right results. He had awoken his power. He was using The Moss.