

# DON'T GO THERE

by

Andrew Payne

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ROBERT CAN BE BETWEEN THIRTY AND FORTY-FIVE.

HE SHOULD BE IMPECCABLY DRESSED: DARK SUIT,  
WHITE SHIRT, DARK BLUE TIE, WHITE POCKET  
HANDKERCHIEF. BLACK SHOES.

THERE'S A TABLE AND TWO CHAIRS.

ON THE TABLE: A THICK PAPERBACK, A BOTTLE OF  
VODKA, A GLASS AND A PHONE, ALL NEATLY ALIGNED.

ROBERT WILL FASTIDIOUSLY RE-ARRANGE THEM NOW  
AND THEN, PARTICULARLY IN MOMENTS OF STRESS.

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ROBERT IS CHECKING HIS PHONE. HE PUTS IT DOWN.

I'm waiting for my darling wife.

She's late.

I love my darling wife to bits, obviously, but sometimes she drives me mad.

Like when she's late.

On the whole I'm a very patient person. I have to be, it's part of my job.

I'll explain later.

But now and then my patience runs out.

It's when I'm being made to wait for the wrong reasons.

Look, there are people who are always late, we all know them.

Maybe you're sitting next to one.

You know why they're always late? Because they're controlling you. Making you wait is a way of controlling you.

And I hate being controlled.

By the way, my wife doesn't control me, that is not what I'm implying, don't go there, alright?

The truth is, I've always had a problem with authority. And I've always had good taste, right from the word go. And my theory is, they're the same thing.

First time I realised this? I was shopping with my mum, I needed a pair of black shoes for school, and she chose a pair and I knew, even as a little kid, I knew they were crap, and it wasn't because I knew the prices, because I didn't, I just knew from looking at them they were crap, it was obvious to me. So I pointed at the shoes I liked and said 'I want those' and my mum exploded because they were the most expensive in the shop, she acted like I was being a bad boy – 'What's the matter with you? Stop

making trouble, you're always making trouble. You do it on purpose, to wind me up'. So my mum bought the crap shoes and she said 'You'll have these and like it, they look exactly the same anyway'. And it pissed me off when she said that because I thought No, they don't look exactly the same, why are you saying that? What you're saying is a lie, you're lying to make me think the crap shoes are the same as the good shoes which is obviously not true. But when I was a bit older, I realised she wasn't lying, they really did look the same to her, two pairs of black shoes, no difference except the price and the expensive ones were just a con, they were for idiots.

She was blind to the quality, you see.

My Dad was waiting for us in the car. He never went shopping with us. He didn't like to be seen in public with a wife and child. My Mum told him about me wanting the expensive shoes. I was in the back of the car. He turned round and whacked me. Quite hard, actually. Then he did it again.

So I was a trouble-maker. Because I had taste.

I don't know where I got it from. My Mum and Dad had no taste, none whatsoever. I didn't learn it, it was just in me, from the word go. It's 'innate'.

'Innate': existing in a person from birth, in case you're interested.

Same with authority. I always knew, from the word go, when people were talking bullshit. I always knew, when someone was telling me to do something, whether it was bullshit or not. 'Don't do that'. 'Why not?' 'Because I say so'. Bullshit. And when you're a kid, people never stop telling you what to do. 'Be quiet! Shut up! All this chatter, you're driving me mad!'. Then, five minutes later, it's 'You're very quiet. What have you done? Tell me what you've done and don't lie!' Bullshit.

But you think to yourself, it's okay, one day I'm not going to be a kid anymore and then people will stop telling me what to do. Only they don't. They carry right on, and it's not just your mum and dad now, it's everybody. Bosses. Women.

Cops.

All the idiots and fuckwits who think they know best.

ROBERT POURS HIMSELF A DRINK, RAISES HIS GLASS.

*Sante.*

... AND DRINKS.

My wife and I, we work for the same company. It's called Largesse. It's the French word for 'generosity'. It's a shit name. It actually embarrasses me to say it. 'Generosity'? Very droll. It's actually a concierge company for ultra high net-worth individuals. We cater to their every need. Private jet to the Caribbean? Sorted. Royal box at Wimbledon? No problem. Chauffeur-driven Mercedes? That's me. Or one of my colleagues. My wife's in the office, I'm in the Merc.

Actually I spend more time waiting than driving. Outside hotels. Outside shops. At the airport. But I don't mind. Like I said, I'm very patient in these situations. I read my book. I've always got a book on the go. I freely confess, I'm a reader. Unlike my wife.

But she is brilliant, my wife. She takes my breath away sometimes.

Last week, this client wanted a Muslim crew to sail his boat from St. Tropez to the Straits of Hormuz. And they had to speak Mandarin. Something like that. Anyway, it took my wife an hour, hour and a half tops. Job done. Brilliant.

We lead a very quiet life. We don't socialise much. I have a drink with my mate Lee now and then, he's one of the other drivers. He's never read a book either. My wife has to network with clients. She's good at that. She can get a table anywhere. So we don't need a social life. We've got each other.

My wife and I working for the same company, you're probably thinking, how convenient. Well, actually it's not. It's actually very inconvenient. Nobody knows we're married. It has to remain a secret.

And it's not just because she's in the office and I am a mere driver. It's more complicated than that. I'll explain later.

First I want to tell you about Mr Johnson.

I got a call from the office, it was my wife who called as it happens, telling me to pick up this new client called Mr Johnson.

My wife informed me, ever so politely, that I was to pick up Mr Johnson at his hotel and take him to a restaurant. She said 'I think you're going to like him'. When she said that, I was intrigued, because she doesn't usually say things like that. To be honest, I was the tiniest bit excited. Anyway, when I got to the hotel, there were actually two gentlemen waiting for me. One was a fat gentleman in a crap suit, I knew that wasn't Mr Johnson because the other gentleman, well, there was something about him, I immediately knew what my wife was talking about. He was fiftyish, tall, well-built. Bit of a tan, dark hair, touch of silver here and there. He was wearing this fantastic suit, dark blue, a linen-cotton mix I reckon, with maybe a little silk thrown in for fun. Delightful pair of suede semi-brogues. And a white shirt, soft collar, no tie. The suit was unlined but beautifully cut.

You have to go to Naples to get a decent unlined suit. Savile Row, you want unlined, they can't handle it, they're lost without their shoulder pads, their canvases, all that shit they stuff in a jacket. Those Savile Row suits, it's like wearing a suit of fucking armour.

Anyway, the man had taste, what can I say, so I jumped out the car, ignored the fat bloke who was talking non-stop and said to the other 'Mr Johnson?' He smiled me at me, nice smile, and said 'You must be Robert'. So that was alright then. But when I got the car door open, the fat bloke, Mr Mouth, still talking, jumped straight in. Mr Johnson gave me a little shrug, 'What can you do?' sort of thing, and got in after him. So we set off, Mr. Mouth mouthing off about capital growth or something, I couldn't really hear, he kept his voice low, his mouth was inches from Mr Johnson's ear, the sweat was pouring off him. He was practically sitting in Mr Johnson's lap.

I looked in the mirror at one point, I could see Mr Johnson's face and our eyes met. He was looking at me and he was laughing, but only in his eyes, does that make sense? His face was blank but his eyes were laughing, he was saying to me 'Can you believe this guy?'

I wanted to stop the car, go round and open the door and say to Mr Mouth, shut the fuck up, can't you see Mr Johnson wants some peace and quiet? And then, if he didn't shut up, give him a little prod, remind him of his manners.

But I drove on, obviously, I'm not a complete idiot.

When we got to the restaurant. I pulled up and hurried round to open Mr Johnson's door. He got out and Mr Mouth was still talking. Mr Mouth started to get out of the car too but Mr Johnson held up his hand and said 'You stay in the car'. And Mr Mouth started to protest, one leg half out of the car, so I shut the door on him, he had to move his leg back in sharpish, and that finally shut him up. Mr Johnson gave a little sigh and said 'It's been one of those days'. And I said 'Anything I can do to make it better, Mr Johnson?'

'Yes' he said. 'You can take this gentleman wherever he wants to go. As long as you're back here to pick me up at ten'. 'Of course, Mr Johnson' I said and I was about to get back in the car when he put his hand on my arm. 'Wait' he said. 'Would you do me a favour?' 'Of course' I said. Mr Johnson turned his back on Mr Mouth who was peering at us from the back seat of the Merc and said, very quietly, 'I'm curious to know where he goes, who he meets. I don't expect names or anything like that, I'd just like the general picture, does that make sense?'

'Perfect sense' I said, and it did, I understood exactly what he meant, that was the thing with Mr Johnson, I think I can honestly say that I totally understood him, right from start.

I know I said earlier that I had a problem with authority, but if you were listening, I also said I knew when people were talking bullshit. That's what I have a problem with: bullshit authority. Not authority *per se*.

You could say that all authority is bullshit, and you might have a point, but all I'm saying is, there was Mr Johnson in his gorgeous suit, on this lovely spring evening, outside one of the finest restaurants in town, looking at me with this smile in his eyes, and I could detect absolutely no bullshit about him at all.

So Mr Johnson went into the restaurant and I got in the car. 'Where to, Sir?' I said to Mr Mouth who had about three phones out and was prodding them like a very important person.

Fat bastard.

Anyway, he gave me an address in Chelsea, just off the King's Road and off we went.

Hold on ...

### ROBERT CHECKS HIS PHONE.

Alright, here's a story about bullshit authority. My first job, after I left school, was in a carpet showroom. The manager was a friend of my mum's. When I say 'friend', what I mean is he was my mum's boyfriend. When I say 'boyfriend', I mean this was a man in his forties with a paunch, a pony tail and a Black Sabbath tattoo. You'll recall what I said about my mum having no taste. And the carpets were crap too. But it was indoors, it was warm and dry, and I had to wear a suit. I borrowed some money off mum, bought a dark blue worsted at M & S, took it to the dry cleaners up the road. The woman there, Mrs Angelopolous, she took the jacket in, got the trouser length right, shortened the sleeves so I could flash a bit of shirt cuff. You will find, generally speaking, that the sleeves on off-the-peg suits are too long. If you can't afford bespoke, find a good alterations tailor, it'll change your life. People would come in the showroom and head straight for me. They assumed I was the manager. Because of the suit. Taste, right? It annoyed Black Sabbath, but who gives a shit.

So it was alright for a bit, except sometimes I'd go home and Black Sabbath would be there, on the sofa with my mum, watching TV, fiddling with his fucking pony-tail. Loving the fact that he was the boss of both of us.

But I did alright at the carpet business, I'm a quick learner, it didn't take me long to learn the stock, the pricing, the deals, all the carpet chat. The thing is, I'm basically a very positive person. Whatever I do, I see a future in it, I can picture the way things could go for me, the kind of life I could be living. A successful life. A life with a bit of taste. Even when I was selling shit carpets, I could see a future for myself. I could see myself as a specialist carpet dealer. With premises in Mayfair. Dealing with connoisseurs, travelling abroad.



So there I was, selling shit carpets, planning my future, and having the odd laugh with Crystal who worked in the office. Crystal was a very interesting girl. Very intelligent, actually.

#### ROBERT REARRANGES THE ITEMS ON THE TABLE.

We went out now and then, me and Crystal, for a few drinks after work.

Black Sabbath found out about this and became quite agitated. One day I was selling some carpet to a young couple, they wanted this rustic loop pile, about thirty-six square metres, it was over a grand, and I'd get commission. They were umming and aahing, but I wasn't bothered, I knew they'd buy it in the end, but Black Sabbath came over and said 'It's alright, Robert, I'll take it from here'. Then he turned to the young couple and said 'Robert hasn't been with us long, he's still feeling his way'.

I thought about giving him a prod there and then, remind him of his manners, but I didn't. I waited till the lunch break, caught him in the toilet, and gave him a sharp one in the kidney. He doubled up, went white in the face. 'Just feeling my way' I said. When he'd got his breath back, he said 'You're sacked, you little prick. Get out now'. I told him, if he sacked me, I'd tell mum I caught him shagging Crystal, I'd tell mum I caught him shagging Crystal up the arse on the twist pile. Then his face went from white to red. His mouth opened and shut like a fish.

The thing I hadn't factored in was, can you believe it, he really was shagging Crystal.

And he thought she'd told me. So he sacked Crystal as well. And Crystal went out the night he sacked her, got hammered, then came round to our place. Banging on the door, shouting and screaming, looking for Black Sabbath. Who was in bed with my mum.

And that was the end of my career in the retail carpet business. Which was a pity, because I could have done very well.

Because I've got taste, haven't I?

If you've been listening.

So. Back to Mr Mouth, sweating over the upholstery in the back of the Merc, poking at his phones. I turned into this street off the King's Road, drove about fifty yards until Mr Mouth shouted 'Stop here!'. Which I did, and he was out of the car like a shot. No word of thanks, needless to say, no tip. I got out of the car and made a show of cleaning the windscreen so I could see which house he was heading for. The front door was glossy black, there were shrubs in big pots either side. CCTV camera needless to say. Mr Mouth rang the entryphone and the door was opened almost immediately by a big bloke in a black suit, cropped hair, dark tie. The kind of lump who calls himself a 'security consultant'. The Lump let Mr Mouth in, and had a quick look up and down the street. Probably didn't register me at all. Just another underling polishing a windscreen.

So all I had was an address, and a big bloke in a black suit. Not much, in other words. It wasn't enough, in my view, to impress Mr. Johnson. I was trying to work out a way of finding out more when I noticed that Mr Mouth had left one of his phones on the back seat. Sometimes you get these little breaks. Fortune favours the bold and so on.

So I picked up Mr Mouth's phone, crossed the street, and rang the bell. The Lump answered the door, scowled at me. Face fat with steroids. Eyes too close together. I said 'The gentleman I drove here, he left his phone in the car'. The Lump pondered this information, then held out a big paw and said 'Give'. I don't know what his accent was, it wasn't Russian, I know that pretty well by now. Let's say Serbian, something like that. I said 'I'm sorry, I can't do that, I have to hand it back to the gentleman personally, it's in the code of conduct'. He obviously didn't have a clue what I was talking about – neither did I for that matter – and while he was puzzling it out, I pushed past him into the hall. Which pissed him off big-time. He put one big paw on my shoulder and said 'Stop!', held out the other paw and said 'Give!'.

My dad always used to say to me 'Never get in fights. They're messy, you'll only get hurt'. 'Make the first move, do it quick' he used to say. 'Hit 'em once, hit 'em hard, it's over. No fight'.

Do the deed.

I gave the Lump a prod in the bollocks, a sharpish one.

His little piggy eyes went a bit sad, then he went down on his knees in the hall. He took an occasional table and lamp with him, it made a bit of a

racket. I decided not to exacerbate matters by hitting him again, though to be honest I was tempted.

‘Exacerbate’: to embitter, aggravate; to increase in severity, in case you’re paying attention.

So there was the Serb Lump, on his hands and knees, and - I swear to God - making little squeaky noises, when two things happened one after the other. First, a door opened down the hall, and a woman came out - fortyish, fake tan, lots of make-up, tight jeans with sequins, need I say more - she looked down at the Serb Lump, but before she could say anything, the second thing happened which was the front doorbell ringing. There was a CCTV monitor and intercom in the hall and the monitor showed this lanky bloke outside, lot of piercings, track suit, and he was carrying pizza cartons with coffees balanced on top. So Mrs Fake Tan hurried to the intercom, shouted ‘Not now!’ into it and killed the picture.

Meanwhile the Lump was getting to his feet, trying to untangle himself from the table and the lamp. ‘Maurice’ she said ‘What’s going on?’

Maurice? You’ve got to be kidding.

Anyway, Maurice still wasn’t up to talking so I said ‘Maurice took a bit of a tumble’. Mrs Tan looked me up and down, very beady, and said ‘And who the fuck are you?’ Charming. ‘Oh, I’m just the driver’ I said. ‘The gentleman I brought here left his phone in the car’ and I held up Mr Mouth’s phone. I thought for a moment she was going to ask for it and I’d have to repeat my bollocks about the code of conduct, but who should come out of another room but Mr Mouth himself. ‘Sir’, I said, ‘You left your phone in the car’. Mr Mouth looked at Mrs Tan, rather apprehensively I thought, she gave him a nod, so he grabbed it from me, no word of thanks needless to say, and scooted back where he came from. By now Maurice was almost upright, still clutching his balls, looking at me with killer eyes. Mrs Tan was still trying to suss me out. I could tell right away she was one of those women who likes nothing more than finding fault, but she couldn’t decide whether to reprimand me or Maurice. So she gave me a look of complete and utter contempt and said ‘That will be all’. I gave her a little half-bow, said to Maurice ‘Nice to have met you, Maurice’ and split.

The lanky bloke with the piercings and pizza was loitering at the end of the road. I got in the car, drove down the the road a bit and pulled up. In

the rear-view mirror I saw the lanky bloke ring the doorbell. Maurice opened the door. I shot off before Maurice clocked me.

Anyway, I was outside the restaurant at 10, ready for Mr Johnson. He came out at ten past, I jumped out, opened a rear door, but he wanted to sit in the front with me. 'What's the story regarding our friend?' he said. 'Give me the general picture, Robert'. So I told Mr Johnson about driving Mr Mouth to Chelsea, I told him about Mr Mouth leaving his phone in the car. I told him about Mrs Fake Tan who, it turns out, is actually Mrs Mouth. And I told him about Maurice the Lump. This got Mr Johnson's attention. 'A security guard?' he said. His voice sounded different. 'So that's how it's going to be'.

He went a bit quiet, looking out the window. I could tell he was thinking so I shut up and drove.

When we got to the hotel, he said 'Thank you for your help, Robert. You've exceeded my expectations'. He handed me an envelope. Then he said 'I'd like you to be available all day tomorrow, if that's alright. I've cleared it with the office'. 'That's more than alright' I said. 'It'll be a pleasure, Mr Johnson'. And he got out the car and went into the hotel.

I didn't open the envelope there and then. I waited until I got home. Ten fifty pound notes. Mint. That's what I call a tip.

And I was excited about the next day. As I said, I had a feeling about Mr Johnson. He was the kind of person who makes things happen. And he had plans. I didn't know what they were, and to be honest, I didn't care. I just wanted to be part of them.

#### ROBERT CHECKS HIS PHONE.

After the carpet debacle, I moved into the furniture business. It seemed a logical step.

'Debacle': French. A sudden deluge or violent rush of water which carries before it blocks of stone and other debris. Figuratively, a confused rout. I'm using the word figuratively here, if you're paying any attention.

So. Going back to my dear mother, and this is the last time, I promise.

Not long after she gave Black Sabbath the elbow, she took up with this surprisingly tweedy chap who was an antiques dealer. Turned out he was an expert in the Arts and Crafts Movement, and quite well educated. God knows what he saw in my Mum.

Actually, I do know what he saw in my Mum and it wasn't her take on William Morris. I heard her say to him once 'William Morris, did he invent the dancing then?'

Anyway, the Professor – he wasn't really a professor, I called him that because of the tweed – the Professor had me helping out now and then, mostly driving the van, but I liked it, I liked the look of the stuff I was humping around, all this lovely furniture, this was the first time I'd been this close to things of quality. You know, able to touch them. Able to smell them. You open a chest of drawers that's a hundred and fifty years old, have a good sniff. That smell. Old but in a good way. The smell of quality. Smell's the wrong word. 'Aroma'. The aroma of quality.

Apart from the driving, I'd help out in the showroom now and then. It was mostly making tea and humping furniture, but I showed an interest, asked the Professor questions, made sure he noticed I was taking it all in. Then one day, this friend of the Professor's came in, this friend was more the Art Deco side of things, but they did a bit of business now and then, did each other little favours. He was a joker, this friend of the professor's, fancied himself a bit of a character, and there are a lot of those in the antiques game, believe me. Mostly tossers, it goes without saying.

So one day the Joker came in with this Glasgow School sideboard, circa 1902 or so he claimed. Anyway, I was hanging around and the Professor was peering at this sideboard saying things like 'Lovely piece, lovely piece'. Then he said 'Robert, come and have a look at this lovely piece'. So I did, and it was a lovely piece, it really was. Except for one thing.

The handles on the drawers. Look, I'd never seen a Glasgow School sideboard before in my life, are you kidding, but those handles were wrong, I just knew it. I tell you, those handles were screaming at me. Like my mum and the crap shoes. I just knew. So I said, very low-key, very humble 'No offense, only asking, but don't those handles look a bit dubious?'

The Joker laughed, but not in a very pleasant way. 'Dubious?' he said. 'Dubious? "No offense"' he said, very sarcastic, 'but what the flying fuck would you know about it?'

But the Professor was bending down, he swapped his glasses, he had two pairs on chains round his neck, you know the look, his nose was inches from one of the handles, and he peered at this handle, saying nothing for a long time. Then he said ‘Sorry Hugo’ – that was the Joker’s name – ‘Sorry Hugo but the boy’s got a point. They don’t look quite right to me’.

Well, then the Joker has to make a big show of putting his glasses on – they’re all blind as bats these old fuckers - and now he’s peering at the handles too, and eventually he says ‘Well, this isn’t my area as you know, but if you think there’s a problem, fine, let’s discuss’.

No word of an apology to me, you notice, having practically called me a liar. Or pig-ignorant at the very least.

So off they went to the office, this glassed-in room at the end of the showroom, and there was a lot of hand-waving, voices raised and so on, then finally the Joker got out a bundle of notes and ever so slowly peeled off a few, and handed them to the Professor. The Professor had obviously coughed up for the sideboard, and now he was getting some money back.

After the Joker had gone, the Prof called me in the office. ‘Robert’, he said, ‘you have what we call an ‘eye’. In fact, I think you are a natural. This is very rare. What you lack, of course, is expertise, but that can be learnt. If you are interested in learning, if you are prepared to make that commitment, I will do everything I can to help you. Would you be interested in learning?’.

‘I would be delighted’ I said, or words to that effect.

So we shook on it.

After that I put my suit on and I was in the showroom more and more. I was still driving the van, humping stuff, making tea, but the Prof would show me books, photographs, take me to Antique Fairs, tell me stuff. Like I said, long as I’m interested, I’m a quick learner. I soaked this stuff up like a sponge. And pretty soon I’m talking to customers, I’m talking chamfering and dovetails, inlays and veneers, you name it. I’m talking up a storm on the Decorative Arts.

It was all good. And I found I was very drawn to Art Nouveau, particularly the metalwork. I had a feeling for it, I’d get a funny feeling

in my gut when I looked at the real thing. I decided that would be my area of expertise. I could see a future for myself.

Couple more years with the Prof, then start dealing on my own behalf. Get some premises, get some kid to help out. Get a girl in the office. Like Crystal.

Of course, the Prof was paying me nothing, the minimum wage wasn't in it but it was an apprenticeship, it was fair enough, I was learning my trade. But clearly I had overheads, so I was doing a little business of my own.

Let's be fair, shall we, because frankly I don't think you should judge me on this one. It was a misunderstanding, that's all, a misunderstanding about a pair of candlesticks. It was a failure of communication, I admit I was a tad remiss in that respect. But they were silver plate for fuck's sake! 1930's!

Mere trinkets!

But the Prof over-reacted. We had words. I tell you, I very nearly gave him a prod, remind him of the harsh realities. But I am not the sort who prods a tweedy old geezer with half an opticians hanging round his neck. That is not who I am. The Prof wanted to call the police.

Mum managed to talk him out of it.

The thing that really pissed me off was that even after all this, my Mum, would you believe, carried on seeing the Prof. I mean, this was a man who robbed me of my future in the antiques business. Over a trinket!

I was very, very hurt. So I went to my dear mother and I said 'It's me or the Prof. Your choice'.

ROBERT VERY CAREFULLY RE-ARRANGES THE OBJECTS  
ON THE TABLE.

So. My big day with Mr Johnson.

It was a lovely spring morning, I was parked up outside his hotel and I was excited, I admit it. Because, as I said, Mr Johnson was one of those people who make things happen.

When he came out of the hotel he was wearing a grey linen suit, white shirt, no tie, and lovely shoes, chestnut double monks, a bit bashed up. Just the right amount. Effortless.

Taste, you see.

He got in the front of the Merc again, and he had to pick up the book I'd left on the passenger seat. I apologised and shoved it in the glove compartment. It was 'The Heart of the Matter' by Graham Greene. Mr Johnson said 'So you're a reader'. I told him yes, I was a reader, and Greene was a bit of a gap so I was catching up on him. Mr Johnson said 'He can write, I'll grant you that, but I can't be doing with all that Catholic guilt'.

I told him I was finding Greene a bit dry.

So we talked about books. Hemingway. J G Ballard. William Burroughs. Doris Lessing. The usual.

It turned out Mr Johnson was very well read.

By the way, if you're thinking 'Oh he left his book out on purpose, in a pathetic attempt to impress the man', well, you can fuck off. Don't go there, okay? Don't presume.

Alright, about the reading. To explain the reading, I have to go back to when I was in the catering business. The catering was where it all got just a tad fraught. We catered big events – corporate stuff. Conferences, media events, the usual bullshit. Bankers, Freemasons. Footballers. Dentists. The food was good – sushi, caviare, gourmet burgers, whatever. Oysters. Lovely old chap in a straw hat to open them for you. Chocolate fountain for the less discriminating.

I started off driving mostly, humping crockery and glasses around, shifting chairs and tables. There's always problems at these things but I could talk to people, I was good at calming people down. The clients liked me. Let's face it, I'm personable. So the manager, Igor, sent me out to buy a tux. It was shit but I got Mrs Angelopoulus on the case and



it didn't look too bad. I could flash some cuff, the trousers fit, and I had some good shoes.

You want some advice? You want to know the secret? I'm talking to the men now, women know this stuff already. It's the shoes, okay? You walk in a restaurant, any maitre d' worth his wages, he's not looking at your suit, he's looking at your shoes. Same with antique shops, same with art galleries. Idiots go out, spend two grand on a designer suit, then put turds on their feet. Because men, on the whole, are tasteless fuckwits.

Yes, you know who you are.

So now I was managing events, the smaller ones admittedly, but it was the usual story, I was a quick learner. I took an interest. French cheese, English beef, Scottish salmon. I tasted everything. I talked to chefs. I took it all in. I could talk the talk.

I had a bit of a thing with one of the waitresses, this Slovakian girl called Marcella.

She was a bit weird to be frank but very interesting.

Very intelligent, actually.

A friend of hers worked in this bar in Shoreditch. We used to go there after work, get drinks on the house. One night I got chatting to the owner, Giles. I know, I know, Giles. A posh twat, obviously, but he had a bit of taste. Clothes, food. Books.

He was a fascinating bloke, actually. He knew his way around. He was a sophisticate, he knew stuff. Lunch in Nice? There's a place just off the Flower Market apparently, only seats six. Formica tables, lace curtains kippered in fag smoke. You can't book, there's no sign outside, if *le patron* likes the look of you, you're in. Order the stuffed zucchini.

Giles had a pair of shoes made from Russian leather. This leather was on a ship that sank in the Channel in eighteen-something. When they yanked it out, it had been in the mud a couple of hundred years. It's highly sought after. They were fabulous shoes. Leather that had been at the bottom of the sea for two hundred years. Not a trace of mud on 'em.

So me and Marcella would go to Giles's bar after work and if he was there, if he had a moment, we'd chat about this and that. About tailoring. Irish tweed versus Scottish. About art, Cubism, the usual stuff.

One night I was talking about wastage. The food we had to chuck away down to Health and Safety. Giles was very interested. He was shocked at the wastage, as was I. We agreed it was criminal. Maybe we could do something about that, he said. Yes, I said, maybe we could. So we did.

Anything that was due to be binned, the head chef would give me the nod and I would chuck it one of the vans, run it down to Shoreditch.

Smoked salmon. Cheese. The odd leg of lamb. The odd side of beef.

Alright, I admit, sometimes demand exceeded supply. Sometimes the food wasn't actually due for binning that actual day. But it was heading that way, I can assure you.

So I was very busy, it was all good.

Then one day Marcella went off the radar. She just disappeared.

We were catering this awards ceremony, cosmetic surgeon of the year or something, and she didn't turn up.

I was quite upset, to tell you the truth.

Quite disappointed.

Even though she was a bit weird. She had this cancer blog. Used to shave her head for chemo photographs. Wore a wig to work. I found the shaved head quite erotic, actually. Her head was a lovely shape. Brain cancer, according to her blog. I frankly found it very distasteful. She was making money off it. I mean, come on, there's a limit, right? There was something wrong with her brain alright, she was mad as a snake, but it wasn't cancer.

Alright, so one night I'm in the cold store, everyone's gone home, I've got the place to myself and I'm bagging up these frozen prawns to run down to Shoreditch and I'm not in the best of moods because this happened to be the night Marcella didn't show up for work. Then I hear something. It turns out I'm not the only one there.

It was Igor. Mr Fucking Manager.

There I was, big sack of prawns in my hand, what could I do? Well, I wasn't going to try and talk myself out of it, that would be undignified.

Be a man, I say. Own it.

Do the deed.

The thing that really irked me? He was so pleased with himself. You'd think he'd be upset. I mean, he promoted me, bought me a tux. I was his 'protégé' and I'd let him down. But he wasn't upset, he was loving it.

Human psychology, it never ceases to amaze me.

If he'd just said 'Alright Robert, game over. Empty your locker, return your keys, piss off out of here', everything might have been alright. But he didn't. He had to point out the error of my ways. At great length. With great relish.

In fact, he was extremely disrespectful.

So I gave him a prod, a fairly severe one actually. I should've left it at that, grabbed the prawns and split. Bye bye, best of luck, no hard feelings.

But I didn't. While he was on his knees I whacked him with a squid.

Yes, I know what you're thinking: a squid?

Well, it was frozen, alright? A big one, frozen stiff, rock hard, I caught him on the side of the head with it.

One of his eyes popped out.

He was sprawling there, on the frozen seafood, all these fisheyes staring at me.

Plus his, halfway down his face.

Apparently he came to after an hour or so, the eye had started to freeze. That's what saved it, apparently.

So it wasn't all bad news.

Okay, Marcella doesn't turn up for work one night, she disappears off the face of the earth, and that very same night, Igor, for the first fucking time ever, turns up in the coldstore and catches me with a sackful of frozen prawns.

I know what you're thinking but I'm not buying it.

Marcella was ... she was ... she wouldn't do that, that's all I'm saying.

Maybe she really did have cancer. I never knew for a fact one way or the other. Maybe she died.

Which is tragic, actually.

You can think what you like, but I know what I think.

So I started the reading inside. When I was in prison.

Because after the catering, that's where I ended up.

Because there had been one or two problems in the past and these were held against me. And the squid incident didn't go down well either. So they locked me up.

My Dad used to say 'If you end up inside, never take a backward step'.

Correction. My Dad used to say 'When you end up inside'. Which tells you all you need to know about my Dad. 'When you end up inside, never take a backward step'. And he was right. Because if we're discussing bullshit authority, well, prison is the promised land. It's bullshit wall to wall, everyone is at it, and I'm not just talking about the powers that be. I'm talking about the low-life scum you're forced to live with. Never roll over for these people or you end up just like them. Never take a

backward step. So I didn't. I stood my ground. I earned a reputation. People were afraid of me. The upside? They leave you alone. The downside? They lock you up longer. But I discovered reading. I was saved. I'd been living in darkness, then someone flipped a switch and ....

You ever been in a football stadium at night? In the dark? And suddenly they switch the floodlights on? Well, I have. And that's what it was like, inside my head.

Solitary? I loved it. I was left in peace and I read. I read everything. Shakespeare. Dickens. George Eliot, and yes, I do know he's a woman. I even read the Bible. Listen, I've read War and Peace, Moby Dick and Don Quixote. Anyone here read all three?

Anyone even read one of the bastards?

I'm up to my neck in Philistines here. It's worse than fucking prison.

But best of all I read the Russians. I love the Russians. And best of all the Russians is Dostoyevsky. Now there's a writer. There's guts. There's a life for you. Sentenced to death. Reprieved at the last minute. Eight years hard labour in Siberia. In chains, living like an animal. Plus he was only five foot three. And he had fits. And when he got out, there was the gambling, the debts. But still writing books, books that make your head spin. All that, and the man was an epileptic midget. Major respect.

By the way, back in the Merc, I didn't discuss any of this with Mr Johnson. About being in prison and so on.

I kept it light, a bit of banter about Jane Austen, that's all, I'm not a complete cunt.

Anyway, Mr Johnson said 'Robert, I find myself on the horns of a dilemma and I want your advice how best to deal with it'. I said 'I'd be happy to help in whatever way I can'.

I said this very matter-of-factly. I didn't show any surprise that a man like Mr Johnson was seeking my advice. I was pleased, I admit, but not surprised because, as I said earlier, I felt there was an immediate understanding between me and Mr Johnson. I saw something in him and

he saw something in me. I think when Mr Johnson looked at me, he saw beyond the mere driver.

So it turned out Mr Johnson was a sort of financial advisor. He helps people invest their money. He was particularly good, he said, at helping people with a cash problem. And he wasn't talking about a shortage of cash problem, he was talking about the opposite.

'Take our friend Mr Mouth', he said. Ah, I thought. Now I'm going to get the backstory on that fat bastard. Well, it turns out Mr Mouth's cash problem is just shy of five million quid. I said 'Five million? That's a nice problem to have'. Mr Johnson shrugged. 'Robert' he said, 'Five million is not a life-changer these days'. It would change my life alright, but I don't think I'm the yardstick here so I kept quiet. 'Mr Mouth has sold his share in a gym franchise', said Mr Johnson. 'For cash. Or so he claims. I can't say Mr Mouth looks like a gym-owner to me, but how Mr Mouth made his money is of no interest to us. Our only concern is what happens to it next'.

He said our concern. I liked that.

Mr Johnson said 'I've set up a shell company for Mr Mouth. We'll buy some property, move the balance offshore, the usual, it's just a question of paperwork. In no time at all, Mr Mouth's money, minus my commission of course, will be legit and his to spend as he pleases'. 'Where's the money now?' I asked. Mr Johnson said that the Mouths had stashed it in a service flat in Battersea. And then things got messy. 'How?' I said. I had a feeling we were getting down to the nitty-gritty.

'Where to begin?' said Mr Johnson, giving me a look. 'Difficult to believe,' he said, 'but Mr Mouth has acquired a girlfriend, a young lady from Thailand. The day after they stashed the money, Mrs Mouth found some rather explicit photographs on her husband's phone. Let's not dwell on the psychology of the timing but the fact remains that Mrs Mouth is somewhat upset'.

A thought occurred. I said 'So Mrs Mouth thinks Mr Mouth is going to take off with the girlfriend and the money'.

'Exactly' he said. 'A very suspicious woman, Mrs Mouth'.

'Stupid question' I said, 'but why doesn't he just go and get it?' Mr Johnson sighed. 'Because Mr Mouth got drunk, passed out, and Mrs

Mouth stole the keys to the flat’. ‘Okay’ I said, ‘second stupid question. Why doesn’t she go and get it?’

‘Because,’ Mr Johnson said, ‘the keys are electronic fobs, one to get in the building, one to get in the flat but ...’ Mr Johnson started to giggle, no other word for it.

‘But’ he said ‘ you need a security code for them. Which Mr Mouth has still got.’ By now we were both laughing. It was quite comical actually. Like my wife always says ‘Money loves stupid’.

Anyway, Mr Johnson told me the plan was to go to the flat that night, Mrs Mouth with her fobs, Mr Mouth with his codes, get the money and divvy it up between them. But Mr Johnson had his doubts. ‘The thing is, Robert’ he said, ‘the thing is, the appearance of our friend Maurice on the scene leads me to believe that Mrs Mouth has got other ideas’.

‘Yes’ I said. ‘She’s going to help herself to the lot’.

‘Exactly’ he said. ‘It can only end in tears, which is why I’m tempted to walk away. I read balance sheets, Robert, I push paper around, not people. Dealing with the likes of Maurice, it’s outside my area of expertise’.

Mr Johnson turned to look at me, dead serious now.

‘This is what I wanted to ask you, Robert’ he said. ‘What are your thoughts? Do we walk away from this?’

Do we walk away from this? I loved that. I was buzzing. I said – very quietly, very low-key – I said ‘No. Definitely not. We can do this. We can deal with these people. This is not a problem. This’ - and I paused here for a bit of dramatic effect - ‘this is an opportunity’. Which, by the way, is another thing my wife is always saying.

Anyway, me and Mr Johnson sat there in silence, looking each other in the eye. Like I said, there was an understanding between us. Always had been. We both knew exactly what was being discussed here.

Do I have to spell it out? Of course I don’t.

Mr Johnson held his hand. We shook. He said ‘Shall we discuss terms?’

‘That won’t be necessary’ I said. ‘I know you’ll do the right thing’.

‘Robert’ he said, ‘you are a star’.

#### ROBERT CHECKS HIS PHONE.

‘Robert, you are a star’.

Funnily enough, that was what my wife said to me, the night we first met. I was helping out in Posh Twat Giles’s new place in Dalston.

While I was away, Giles had expanded, he had various places now, clubs, bars, the usual. I was helping out in this bar, I wasn’t on the books obviously, with my track record it would compromise the license, but I hung out most nights, kept an eye on the punters, kept the dealers out, at least the scummy ones Giles didn’t approve. Plus I knew the wine list, I knew the menu, I could talk the talk, frankly I could have run the place, Stefan the manager was a dickhead, thick as autumn shit, but what can you do. I got drinks and meals on the house, plus cash in my hand at the end of the day, so I felt I was still in the game.

I used to wonder what it would be like if Crystal came in the bar one night.

Or Marcella.

I’d get them a table in the VIP lounge, drinks on the house. I would be polite and respectful, whoever they were with. I wouldn’t have any expectations. I just wanted them to see me in my finery. I wanted them to see I was still in the game.

But it never happened of course, and to be frank, I was becoming increasingly dissatisfied. Giles was one of those people, if they do you a favour, they never let you forget. If Giles does you a favour, he’ll beat you over the head with it day in, day out. He’ll kill you with a favour.

Plus he was talking about me. He’d introduce me to his City Boy mates, they’d look at me in a certain way and I knew he’d been boasting about me. These posh twats, they love having a tame crim in tow.



I think you know me well enough by now to realise that I am not cut out to be anyone's tame crim.

So I was thinking it was time to move on otherwise the temptation to give old Giles a prod to remind him of the harsh realities would be irresistible. Which would be unwise, given my CV to date. The question was, move on where?

All this was going round in my head one Friday evening. It was ten o'clock and getting busy, I'd just turned away a bunch of low-lives in shorts – shorts in November, what's wrong with these people? – and I was having a quick beer. Giles was the other side of the bar, drinking champagne with a bunch of leery City Boys. Then Giles crooked his finger at me, wanting me to go over and meet these twats.

Yes, you heard me. He crooked his finger. The finger-crooking thing, that is a big no-no with me. That, my friends, is a deal-breaker. A word of advice, someone crooks their finger at you, stay put. Your wife, your husband, the Queen of fucking England, I don't care, someone crooks the finger, don't move a muscle unless it's to give them a fucking good smack.

It's the height of disrespect, that's what it is.

Actually, to be accurate, it's the nadir of disrespect.

'Nadir': from the Arabic. The lowest point of anything – oh come on, if you don't know that, I can't help you, read a book for fuck's sake.

Anyway, posh twat crooked his finger and I was pondering how to react to this latest humiliation when ... what?

Guess.

Yes, my darling wife walked in the bar. I saw her straight away.

You know that thing in a plane? When there's turbulence? And it drops a couple of hundred feet? And leaves your guts dangling in the air?

That's what it felt like when I saw her. And my first thought was 'I'm going to marry that woman'. Seriously. On my life. I may even have said it out loud.

There she stood. Just plain fabulous. Wearing Prada if I remember rightly, very understated, make-up but you wouldn't know it. A beacon of hope in a swamp of fake tan and eye-liner like tarmac. She just glowed.

I scooted over, got to her just before Stefan the Fuckwit. I put a hand on her elbow, ever so gentle. 'Allow me to find you a table, madam,' I said.

She didn't move at first. We were standing there stock still, me with my hand on her elbow, Giles watching us from the bar. She looked me up and down.

I was wearing midnight blue barathea, peak lapels, single vent two-button jacket, and a pair of burgundy Oxfords. You know what she told me later? It was the shoes she noticed. You see? Listen and learn, my friends.

Finally she said 'A table would be lovely, thank you'. So I led her to a big corner table in the VIP lounge, leather banquette, good view of the room, prime spot. 'Do you like champagne?' I said. 'It depends' she said. Carlos, one of the waiters, was passing. I nabbed him, told him to bring a bottle of pink, the 2004 Bollinger. 'With my compliments' I said to her. She sat down and said 'Are you the owner?' 'No,' I said, 'I am merely a casual observer'. 'Good,' she said. 'In that case you can join me'.

So I sat down. Carlos brought the wine, opened it. I had a sniff and a taste, nodded. We drank.

She told me she was checking out the place for this concierge company called 'Largesse'. We were discussing the gentrification of London's famed East End when Giles came over. He stood at the table. Couldn't take his eyes off her. 'Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?' he said. Before I could say anything, she pinged the bottle with a crimson nail and said 'Would you bring us something else please, this isn't very good'.

Giles didn't say anything for moment or two. First time I've seen him lost for words. Then he said to me 'Can I have a word with you' and he used my first name.

Which wasn't Robert in those days.

I'm not going to tell you what it was.

My name's Robert now, that's all you need to know.

After Giles had gone, she repeated it, my old name that is. She said it a couple of times, very thoughtfully, then said 'We're going to have to do something about that'.

When I heard those words, this weird thing happened, I got this rush, this warm rush, starting in my gut and spreading out over my entire body - my feet, my hands, all around my mouth, the top of my head, everything was tingling, like electricity going through me.

It was the most fantastic thing that ever happened to me.

I've thought about it a lot. And what I think is, I think it was pure emotion, it was pure ... love.

Pure love.

I said 'I'll do whatever you want'.

Then we left. We went to her club in the West End. We talked all night. I told her everything. I left nothing out. Full disclosure, it was the only way.

Own it.

Do the deed.

I told her everything, up to the moment she walked into Giles's bar. When I'd finished, she took my hand and said 'Robert, you are a star'.

And from that moment on, I was Robert. And I was happy for the first time in my life.

It took about six months, but she sorted it. New name, new driving license, new passport. New job. Driving the Merc. New person. New life. Like I told you, my wife is brilliant.

That's why our relationship is a secret. If the wrong person gets in the Merc and recognises me, if I bump into someone from the Bad Old Days, I don't want to compromise her. We agreed on that from the word go.

So I've been in the Merc a year. The airport. Bond Street. Park Lane. Waiting. Waiting and reading. And I'm grateful. I'm very, very grateful. But ...

... the thing is, I have seen something of the world. I know how to live. Art. Antiques. Literature. I know quality, right? I've got taste. I know where to get the best pressed duck in Paris. I've read Proust. You see my problem? I've got everything ...

... but I can't have it.

I can't. Fucking. Have it.

And my wife says 'Robert, be patient. Your time will come'. And I am patient. I have been very, very patient. But now I'm thinking, yes, thanks to Mr Johnson, maybe, finally, my time has come.

#### ROBERT CHECKS HIS PHONE.

So I picked up Mr Johnson at his hotel at eleven o'clock. He was looking good, dark grey double-breasted in something lightweight, fresco probably, the double monks again and a fedora. I'd told him, wear a hat in case there's CCTV. I was wearing driving gloves, Ray-Ban aviators and a chauffeur's peaked cap. Some of the clients like that.

I don't mind, it's all spectacle isn't it?

Mr Johnson sat in the back and off we went to the Kings Road. When we got there, I leapt out, opened the door for him. He got out the Merc, gave his fedora a tweak, and looked at me with his smiling eyes. 'All set, Robert?' he said. 'All set,' I said. 'Good man' he said. I've got to admit,

Mr Johnson was ice-cool. Style, you see. He walked up to the shiny black front door, looked up the the CCTV camera and rang the bell. Maurice opened the door, gave me the evil eye, and let Mr Johnson in.

I had to wait about half an hour. I was too hyped to read.

When they came out, Mr and Mrs Mouth were arguing. Mrs Mouth was wearing a leather mini-skirt, Mr Mouth this Hawaiian shirt, already halfway to Thailand with his ladyboy, I suppose.

I got out and opened the rear door. They were arguing about who was going to sit where, would you believe. 'I'm not sitting near him' Mrs Mouth was saying, meaning Mr Mouth. Mr Johnson, very calm, very polite, sorted out the *placement* and Mr Mouth ended up in front with me.

Maurice was still giving me the evil eye while they sorted this so I held out my hand and said 'Sorry about the other day, Maurice. No hard feelings, okay?' He didn't move for a moment or two, then took my hand in one of his big paws and said 'Okay, cool'. His grip was surprisingly gentle.

The flat was in a new development near the river, little blocks of apartments crammed together up a dead end, one bedroom flats with cardboard walls for two mill a throw, you know the story. Most of them looked empty, there was a car here and there, no-one on the street. Mr Mouth told me to pull up outside one of the blocks. I let the others out first so I could get the Browning out from under the seat.

Did I mention the Browning? It's a 9 millimetre or something like that, I know nothing about guns, I hate the things actually. I bought it off a drunk squaddie who smuggled it back from, I don't know, Iraq or Afghanistan or somewhere.

So I shoved it down the back of my trousers while the others were milling around the other side of the car.

The entrance to the block wasn't that well lit but there was a camera on the wall. Mr Johnson and me had our hats and shades on and I was keeping my face well away from the camera. I noticed Mr Johnson was doing the same.

There was a pad by the entrance, you hold the fob against it and key in the code. Mrs Mouth got the fob out of her bag and started bickering

with Mr Mouth about who was going to do what. Mr Johnson said, very firmly, 'Give it to me. You are drawing attention to us'. So Mrs Mouth gave him the fob, he held it against the pad, and Mr Mouth keyed in the code. We were in.

The flat was on the ground floor, at the back. The sitting-room was all white leather sofas and those shitty vertical blinds you get at the dentist's. There was this big chrome light fixture dangling from the ceiling and framed photos on the wall. They were black and white photos of old London Town – barefoot urchins on the cobbles sort kind of thing. Disgraceful if you ask me. The nerve of these people.

There was a glass coffee table but it had been pushed up against the wall to make room for five plastic storage boxes. Okay, a million pounds sterling in fifties weighs in at 25 kilograms and about 35 litres volume. So these storage boxes looked about right to me.

Mr Johnson said 'I want to see it'. Mr Mouth made a move to open one of the boxes but Mrs Mouth pushed him away. 'You're not touching it! Maurice, you do it'. Maurice looked at Mr Johnson who nodded. Maurice opened the box. Whatever was inside was gaffer-taped in black bin liners. Maurice ripped some gaffer-tape off, peeled back the bin-liner. Sure enough, neat stacks of fifties in bundles. Mint. Unsullied by human hand.

Mr Johnson bent down, chucked a few bundles to one side, took one from near the bottom and peered at it. He reminded me of the Prof checking out some old piece of furniture. Finally he said 'It's good. Next'. Maurice and Mr Johnson repeated this routine with four boxes and Maurice was taking the lid off the fifth when one of Mr Mouth's phones went.

He yanked it out of his trousers and answered it. Unfortunately it was on speaker. We all heard this foreign woman's voice: 'Hallo sugar! Are you alright, sugar?'. While he tried to turn it off, Mrs Mouth launched herself at him. 'Don't you dare speak to that whore while I'm in the room!' she screamed, trying to kick him in the crutch and grab the phone at the same time. Mr Mouth backed off, one hand holding the phone over his head, the other protecting his groin. Then the pair of them were thrashing around on one of the white sofas. Mr Johnson turned to me and said 'Robert, would you restore some semblance of order'. 'With pleasure' I said and started to cross the room.

'Stop!' That was Maurice piping up in this weird, squeaky voice.

And Mrs Mouth was shouting ‘Shoot him!’

I turned to look at Maurice. He was pointing a gun at me, it looked like a toy in his great pink paw which by the way was shaking like a leaf.

‘Don’t be silly, Maurice,’ I said, raising one hand. The other was behind my back, trying to get the Browning out. Can I just say, the only problem with trousers that fit? You might be able to shove a gun down the waistband but getting it out is a fucking nightmare.

Mrs Mouth had managed to get away from Mr Mouth and put a few feet between them. ‘Not him, you moron!’ she screamed. ‘Him!’ And she pointed at Mr Mouth who by now had seen the gun and scrambled to his feet. Maurice turned to point the gun at Mr Mouth but caught his foot on one of the boxes and stumbled – and the gun went off.

I’ve never been near a gun going off in real life, it wasn’t what you’d expect, it was like a stick snapping, a big stick, but not very impressive to be honest, but I swear I felt the bullet fly past my ear, there was a loud clang and the chrome light fixture hanging from the ceiling was dancing around, it was like a fairground game, well done sir, choose a cuddly toy...

Maurice got his balance back and took another shot at Mr Mouth. The snapping noise again, no clang this time. The chrome light fixture was still swinging, shadows jumping up and down the walls. Mr Mouth didn’t move for a bit, just stood there looking down at his paunch. You couldn’t see anything what with the palm trees and sunsets all over his shirt. Then he put his hands on his paunch, said ‘Ooh’ like someone getting under a cold shower, took a step or two backwards until he was up against the wall. Then he sat down.

By now I’d finally got the Browning out, though it was going to be fuck-all use, I haven’t got any bullets, I don’t even know if it works, I was three sheets to the wind when I bought it. But it didn’t matter, nobody was paying any attention because Mrs Mouth was slowly sinking to her knees beside Mr Mouth.

Well, well, I thought. She loved him after all.

Then she keeled over, right across him, face down.

Everything was quiet for a moment, apart from this little foreign voice coming out of Mr Mouth's phone. 'Sugar? Are you there, Sugar?' It was Mr Johnson who worked it out first. 'It was the first bullet', he said. 'She caught the ricochet'.

I was pointing the Browning at Maurice but it wasn't necessary. He chucked his little gun away like it was redhot. 'No, no, no' he said, and started walking over to Mrs Mouth. 'No, no, no. Baby,' he said 'Baby, get up. Please get up'. 'Sugar?' squawked the phone. 'Sugarpie?'

Well, what do you know, I thought, the human heart, unpredictable to the last, and tucked the Browning back in my trousers. 'Don't touch her' said Mr Johnson because Maurice was about to pick her up. Maurice said 'Baby' again but he didn't touch her. Mr Johnson took charge. 'Maurice' he said, 'pick up your gun, put it in his hand. Go on'. Maurice was crying now, the big lump, but did as he was told, wiped his gun down and put it in Mr Mouth's hand, pressing Mr Mouth's hand round it like they do in the movies. Mr Johnson got him to take out some of the money, chuck it over Mr and Mrs Mouth.

A marital fight over money that went tragically wrong. Well, I suppose it might convince someone for about five seconds.

Me and Maurice loaded the boxes of money into the boot of the Merc. There was nobody around outside but I noticed a black BMW that hadn't been there when we arrived, parked about fifty yards away. I couldn't see if there was anyone in it.

Before we put the last box in the car, Mr Johnson and I had a quiet word about Maurice who was still weeping on and off. I went in the kitchen and found a binliner. I stuffed some money from the last box into it, I don't know, fifty or sixty grand. I said 'Maurice old sock, we ever see or hear from you again, you're dead'. 'She was a lovely lady' he snuffled. 'Get a grip, man' I said and shoved the binliner in his hands. 'Now fuck off back to Belgrade and buy yourself a coffee shop'. 'I am from Albania' he said, somewhat indignantly. 'So buy a hotel,' I said. 'Now fuck off'. And he did.

There was no sign of him when Mr Johnson and I got in the Merc, Mr Johnson in the back, me in the front with my chauffeur's hat on. I started the Merc, put it in reverse, had a look over my shoulder – then I saw the BMW moving, lights still off. I put my foot down but it was too late, the



BMW screeched up behind, blocking me off. 'What is it?' said Mr Johnson. 'I don't know yet' I said, watching in the wing mirror.

Two cops got out of the BMW. They stood there putting their caps on, adjusting their stab vests, checking out the Merc.

'It's the police' I said. Mr Johnson sank down deeper in the back seat and said 'Robert, I cannot afford to have any dealings with the police, do you understand?'

It was the first time the whole evening he'd sounded rattled.

'Don't worry' I said. 'I'll sort it'. I had no idea how. My wife always says 'Sound like you know what you're doing and the rest will follow'. The cops were walking slowly towards the Merc. I got out, and grabbed the Browning which I'd put back under the seat, held it behind my back.

'Good evening, officers' I said. One of them was a tall bloke, the other was very young.

There was something about the tall bloke.

'Is this your vehicle, Sir?' he said. A variety of facetious remarks came to mind, but I played it straight, pointed at my cap, and said 'I am the mere driver'. 'Would you open the boot, please Sir?'. 'Happy to cooperate, officer,' I said, 'but can you tell me what this is about?'

'Just open the boot, please Sir' he said, an edge to his voice now. I glanced over at the young one who was hanging back. I caught his eye. He looked very, very nervous. Well, well, I thought. So I opened the boot, the useless gun behind my back. The light in the boot came on, and I got a good look at the tall bloke as he leant in to check it out. He had holes all round his ear where it had been pierced.

So I whacked him across the back of the head with the Browning. He yelped, straightened up and – ha ha – banged his head on the boot lid. I hit him again across the ear.

Alright, a lanky guy? With piercings?

Were you paying attention?

The pizza delivery man in Chelsea, for fuck's sake!

He was on his knees now, gagging, and the kid had panicked and was already scrambling to get in the BMW. The BMW took off. Lanky struggled to his feet and tottered after it, legs wobbling, holding his head in both hands. I thought for a moment the kid was going to leave him behind but he pulled up and Lanky clambered in and off they screeched, door flapping.

Very poor show, I thought. Nil points for style.

I got back in the Merc. Mr Johnson was huddled up on the rear seat. It was as if he'd shrunk to half his size. 'What happened?' he said. 'I'll tell you when we're out of here' I said. I drove back over the river, observing the speed limit all the way.

We pulled up in a side street near Cheyne Walk. Mr Johnson came and sat in the front next to me.

'You'll have to forgive me,' he said. 'That's the first time I've witnessed a shooting, I'm a little shaken-up'. 'It was my first as well,' I said cheerfully, 'but they say it gets easier'. To be honest, the evening so far had perked me up no end.

Then I told Mr Johnson about recognising Lanky the Pizza Man. Mr Johnson shook his head. 'My God, Robert,' he said. 'Good work, very good work'. Then he said 'My main worry at the moment is your car which presumably features on every CCTV camera between Chelsea and Battersea'. 'This isn't my car' I said. 'I know it isn't,' he said. 'What I mean is - '. 'It's alright', I said. 'It's not my regular car, it's Lee's. It's his night off, so I took his car. And his hat. And his Ray-bans actually. We're a similar build, as it happens'. Mr Johnson sat up a bit straighter, gave his fedora a jaunty tilt. He was getting his mojo back. 'Brilliant', he said. 'Brilliant'.

Far be it from me and so on, but I have to say I agree.

So I was thinking about what to do next.

I was thinking Italy first. Straight to Naples to order some suits, then a trip up the coast - Portofino, Capri, the usual - then Milan for some light shopping and the food of course, I don't care what anyone says, the food is better in the north, then Paris and the Place Vendome to get measured

up for some shirts at good old Charvet. We'll stay at the Hotel Bristol of course. Maybe Mr Johnson would join us.

I have never been to Italy, or Paris for that matter.

But I know what to do when I get there.

Unlike a lot of people. Pearls before swine, you know the story.

Anyway, Mr Johnson was talking and I'd zoned out for a moment, my mind on foreign travel.

He was saying something about my commission.

My 'commission'?

You know what? I started to feel just a little bit queasy.

I liked Mr Johnson. He was a stylish man, a man with taste. He had composure and I thought he'd got through the evening very well. But what I was hearing from him now had the unmistakable odour of rank bullshit.

I looked across at him. He was smiling at me. Very white teeth, what with his tan. Then I noticed the light was getting a bit weird. It was getting darker, then lighter. I looked out at the street. There was definitely something wrong with the the streetlights, they were pulsing on and off. There must be a power failure, I thought. I looked back at Mr Johnson. His smile was getting broader, his nostrils were flaring.

And his jaw was growing, getting longer and longer, stretching out towards me ... I heard myself say 'Oh fuck!'

It was horrible.

Mr Johnson was turning into a fucking crocodile.

ROBERT POURS ANOTHER DRINK. RE-ALIGNS THE THINGS ON THE TABLE VERY CAREFULLY.

After my run-in with the Prof and the antiques debacle, I lived with my Dad.

Total disaster.

He was living in this flat in Wood Green. Crackheads on both sides, drum n bass until dawn, it was hell. He sat around all day smoking weed, listening to his deplorable music. I was trying to get some work together, trying to keep myself clean and tidy in all this squalor.

I came home one evening, Dad was on the sofa, smoking weed as usual. 'I've got a bit of a treat for you' he said. 'Oh yes,' I said, 'what's that?' 'Some very excellent acid' he said.

You can imagine my reaction. 'Come on,' he said, 'you won't smoke with me, you won't get pissed with me, let's get fucked up on a top-notch hallucinogen, it might be a bonding experience'.

I know, I know, how stupid can you get? But look, when all's said and done, the man was my father. Perhaps I might discover an actual human being under all that bullshit. You never give up hope, do you?

So. Do the deed.

Nothing happened of course. After about half an hour, I went to the bathroom, had a piss, washed, looked at myself in the mirror. Nothing.

I sat down on the toilet. I had to make plans. I had to get out of there.

I was looking down at the bathroom floor. It was this marble-effect lino, it was filthy of course, never been cleaned, and I was thinking, I can't stand this, I'll have to clean it, then I was thinking, no, fuck that, why should I clean up after my Dad? I'm always cleaning up after him, all anyone ever does is clean up after my Dad. And obviously I'm not just talking about housework here.

Then something started to happen. I was staring at the floor and suddenly all the muck, all the grime, started to float off the surface of the lino and

hover above it, and I could see right through it, I could see the pristine lino underneath, as if it was brand new, all these bright, shining marble swirls, it was fantastic.

Hallo, I thought, this is interesting.

I don't know how long I sat looking at the floor, but after a bit, I went back into the sitting-room. Dad said 'What do you reckon? Good gear or what?' I sat down next to him. He was fiddling with his iPod. He had those little speakers. 'Not Guns N Roses', I said. 'Please'. 'Your trouble', he said ...

... I remember thinking, my father in a nutshell. 'Your trouble'. How many times have I heard sentences beginning with that?

'Your trouble,' he said, 'is you've got no taste'.

I turned and looked at him, sitting next to me on the sofa. He was grinning away. Anyone else, I would've ... you know what I'm saying.

But the truth is, I couldn't lay a hand on him.

Because, and it pains me to say this, he's the only person in the world I'm scared of.

There, I've said it.

The man, my so-called father, frightened the living shit out of me.

I sat there looking at him, the grinning bastard, fiddling with his fucking iPod which he'd probably nicked off some blind disabled eight year-old. And then ... then suddenly his face started to float off his head, suddenly his face was transparent, and I could see another face underneath. Like the dirt on the bathroom floor. I could see right through his face to this other face underneath ... and this face was truly horrible, there was hair everywhere, a dirty grinning mouth with strings of saliva and yellow teeth. 'Oh fuck' I said. 'What's up?' said my Dad. 'You're a giant fucking rat!' I said, I was scared shitless, looking at this giant rat with my Dad's transparent face floating in front of it.

Then he picked up a plate that was on the coffee table and smashed it into my face. There was pizza on it, it had been there for days.

Then he picked up a glass ashtray and smashed that into my face.

Can I just say, do not - unless absolutely necessary – do not go to A & E if you're on acid. You will learn nothing of any interest about yourself or anything else for that matter.

I spent most of the night having glass dug out of my face. And bits of pizza. They said the pizza was more of a health hazard than the glass.

No surprise there then.

Look, it doesn't happen very often. Once in a blue moon. When I'm tired. Or very stressed. I see faces.

People's faces start to float. I can see through them, like a veil. There are other faces underneath. Animals usually. Or very old people. Or monsters.

My wife knows about it. I told her.

I can deal with it. I take a valium. It passes. Nothing bad happens.

As a rule.

But in the Merc with Mr Johnson ...

#### ROBERT RE-ARRANGES THE OBJECTS ON THE TABLE.

... it was bad, this crocodile with its huge snout coming at me, the jaws going up and down, these big teeth, these horrible noises coming out of it. I was trying to get my seat belt off, trying to get the car door open, I just wanted to get the fuck away from it ... then I trod on the Browning, it was on the floor under my feet.

So I picked it up, and gave the crocodile a good whack across the snout because it was coming to get me, you'd better believe it. Then I gave it another. There was a crunching noise. There was a scream.

Mr Johnson was doubled up in the front seat, he was spitting blood, saliva. Bits of teeth. He was moaning, trying to breath. Spitting.

There was a box of tissues in the glove compartment, I got it, tore some tissues out, shoved them at him. 'I'm sorry,' I said, 'I'm so, so sorry'. He grabbed the tissues, shoved them in his mouth. I held the box out and he took some more, but he wouldn't look at me.

I wanted him to look at me, I wanted him to see how upset I was. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'You'll be alright,' I said. 'I'll look after you,' I said. He grabbed more tissues. There was a lot of blood. I started the car. 'I'm taking you to the hospital,' I said. 'I'm going to get you sorted out'. He groaned a bit, still doubled up. 'Come on,' I said. 'Buck up. Nobody died'.

Not strictly true, but you know what I mean.

We got to Hammersmith and stopped at some lights. The Browning was on the floor, getting under my feet. I bent down to shove it out of the way and Mr Johnson must have thought I was going to whack him again because he had the door open and was out of the car in a flash. I didn't try to stop him, there wasn't time, I had to get Lee's Merc back to the car pool, clean up the blood and teeth before he started his shift.

And anyway, frankly, fuck him. Mr Johnson, I'm talking about, not Lee. So he'll lose a couple of teeth, it's not the end of the world, is it? Look, I put myself out for Mr Johnson. On the briefest acquaintance, I put myself on the line for him. I gave him my absolute trust. For what? For 'commission'? Like I'm still selling shit carpet?

I got to Chiswick and pulled over. The lights were still doing that pulsing thing. It was getting better, but it was like all the cars on Chiswick High Road were flashing me.

I called my wife. She was wining and dining a client, but I needed to hear her voice.

I gave her the edited version, I didn't mention the demise of Mr and Mrs Mouth.

'Demise'? You know. Of course you do.

I told her about Mr Johnson. 'Where is he now?' she said. I told her he was roaming Hammersmith with a mouthful of blood last time I saw him.

My darling wife was very calm.

She told me to get Lee's Merc back to the car pool and clean it up.

She told me to put the money in my Merc. She told me it would be alright there until morning.

She told me to get a cab home, take some vitamin C and a valium.

She told me she'd be home later.

She told me everything was going to be alright.

She told me she loved me.

One thing I want to clear up.

I didn't finish Proust.

I got halfway through the first one.

It drove me mad.

The man can't finish a sentence.

Do the deed!

Finish the fucking sentence!

My wife said 'Robert, I love you'.

People say it all the time, don't they?

'Love you!'

Bullshit.

It devalues the currency.

My wife doesn't say it very often.



I like that.

Because when she says it, it means something.

But now her phone's off.

And she's late.

But that's okay. She's got a lot to do.

She's sorting it.

And she knows what she's doing, my darling wife.

Because she's brilliant.

I know what you're thinking.

Don't.

Don't presume.

Don't go there.

Or we'll fall out.

Alright?

END

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