

'Purlins'

or 'The secret of selling'

In the November of the year 1964 Lyndon Baines Johnson beat challenger Barry Goldwater, to remain in office as US President and official holder of the poisoned chalice during the Vietnam War. In the previous month of October, in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Alec, the fourteenth Earl of Home, was succeeded as British Prime Minister by Harold, the fourteenth Mr Wilson. Harold Wilson managed to avoid sending British troops to Vietnam, despite great pressure, but had his own poisoned chalices: a fixed exchange rate and militant trade unions. He boldly promised to forge Britain in the 'white heat of technological revolution'.

At the Wellington Purlins factory in the Black Country, near Birmingham, in the English Midlands, where the world's industrial revolution had started some two hundred years or so previously, and they knew rather a lot about forging, little appeared to change at first.

I was working there as a young trainee, a fresh-faced novice, keen as mustard and wide awake. I loved what was then to me the glamour and drama of the factory, the smells of the shop floor, the noise of the machinery and the workings of the sales office. People making

things, people selling things. Industrial capitalism in action. People earning a crust. Success and failure affecting people's lives.

I saw it all happen. Or at least I pieced it all together from what I saw and heard. Now, many years later, I feel the need to set it all down. Just to make a record - in case of need as it were. In case some people try to say that these things could not happen. Well they did happen - and you should be aware - just in case. This what I remember.

The factory workers in the Black Country were mostly 'metal bashers', as they had been for hundreds of years. At Wellington Purlins the metal was bashed into purlins, steel beams for holding up roofs. Rolls of steel strip and steel tube, of many thicknesses and widths, came in at one end, delivered from a steel maker just up the road, in an even blacker bit of the country. After rolling through dies, cutting and bending and forging and forming and welding and dipping and painting, mostly red, the purlins, about two weeks later, came out the other end, to be delivered on very large lorries to the customers who had placed the orders.

Of course the orders were actually the front end of the process, as the salesmen who worked at Wellingtons were very aware. They were made aware by the Sales Director, Sir Colin Pantype, at the regular monthly sales meetings.

Sir Colin's first mantra was, 'They don't sell themselves' His second, 'Pull your socks up'. He skilfully enjoined the two mantras together thus, 'No sales no jobs; no jobs no take home pay; no take home pay no food on the table - so pull your socks up gentlemen!' His method of encouraging the sales force to do better was to frighten them and shout at them. Good old fashioned methods he had learned in the army. Sir Colin was a Baronet. His title hereditary, but his inheritance, the ancestral estate, was meagre. He too needed his job.

This October, as the leaves are just beginning to turn yellow and brown, the monthly sales meeting is under way at Wellingtons. It is early Monday morning. No trace of the

dramatic pea soup fogs that are the norm for this time of year in the Black Country, when sometimes one literally can not see a hand held two feet in front of one's face. The day today is bright and blue, the wind from the East a little crisp.

The big sales office is set off a few yards from the main factory. Somewhat aloof from the place where they actually make things. What they make here are not things but orders: abstractions typed on bits of paper, but the very lifeblood of business. The office is crowded with salesmen and their office secretaries. The salesmen, mostly youngish chaps, well dressed in blue or grey suits, with shiny black leather shoes. They don't get paid much, but they get paid more than the men in the factory. They also get to drive a company car, a small, cheap model Ford Cortina, which puts them above the level of the average worker in the England of the time, where car ownership was uncommon, and most took the bus or bicycle to work, or walked.

The sales secretaries are mostly youngish women, demurely dressed in knee length, tight-fitting skirts, white or blue blouses, modest pieces of jewellery and with medium court heeled shoes. Eminently respectable. One or two older eccentrics in cardigans and brown shoes.

The sales office is clean and bright; white washed walls, white painted window surrounds and light grey linoleum. In here and in the other offices the staff can keep their shoes clean. Out on the shop floor they can not - so they rarely visit. The factory floor itself is composed of a strange substance, grey-black and rubbery, slightly sticky with the many decades of accumulated oils and grease from the rows of machine tools - drills, borers, presses, punches, millers. It is fairly flat but there are odd bumps and inclines. The floor has a very slight elastic spring. The smell is hard to define but instantly recognisable - a composite cloud - aromatic nuances of hot shavings of metal from the trimmings, known as swarf, hot oil from the coolant fluid, and old, cold grease, from the floor.

The secretaries bustle about in the sales office, setting up a white board and the apres meet sandwich buffet - delicious warm bacon butties, dripping with grease, as is customary in the locale. The bacon butties fill the air with the arousing smell of the bacon grease. Just the thing for a brisk, cold morning. The salesman chat to each other. War stories of victory and defeat in the never ending battle for business in a competitive world.

Pantype enters with his usual bounce. He is big and broad shouldered, with a cavalry moustache from his army days commanding a tank in the Western Desert under Montgomery. The broad shoulders made him a tight fit in a Sherman, and he was very pleased when it all ended, with him unscathed. Unscathed except for a slight deafness, caused by his necessary crouching twelve inches from the breech of his tank's main gun when the regiment went into action, which it did all too frequently; till Hitler finally did the right thing and shot himself. He delivers his opening address.

'Good morning gentlemen. This month's sales figures are poor. Too bloody poor. In fact they are terrible. You'll have to pull your socks up or there will be very little in the way of Christmas bonuses. The building industry has to be made to know that our purlins are the best and they've got to buy them - light gauge, cold rolled steel section to die for. Factory roofs love to be supported by our excellent purlins. A Wellington purlin supported roof will not fall down. Isn't that so? The order book is too thin. We're down to three months production and then it falls off a fucking cliff. Excuse me ladies.'

One by one the salesman deliver their reports, using the white board to list orders - very few - and sales leads - many hopeful signs. Despite the dearth of orders the salesman smile confidently, as befits their profession. Then the meeting adjourns for the buffet.

Blantyre, one of the senior men, buttonholes the boss. He is very keen. His suit is a light grey and his moustache also very military.

'Excellent meeting as usual Sir Colin.'

'Thank you Blantyre. At least one of you is on the ball. Selling is a serious business. No sale, no business, no jobs.'

'Yes Sir. Nice of you to say so. I've got new leads for the large purlins from Cheneys Builders.'

'Well get on it. Let's hope your lead turns into a sale. The order book is too thin. We're down to three months production.'

'Yes Sir. I'll get on it. '

Pantype spots Marlowe and summons him over with a snap of his fingers. Roger Marlowe is young, slim, tall and handsome, with dark Brylcreemed hair and a broad chalk stripe in his elegant, dark-blue worsted three piece suit. The secretaries think he looks like a young Gregory Peck.

'Ah Marlowe. The blue-eyed wonder boy.' Roger's eyes are in fact rather a dark brown, but he smiles winningly at the boss.

'We're all hoping you can save the day again. Get over to your female admirer at Truedawn and see if you can expand out business there'.

'Yes Sir Colin I'll do that.'

'You did very well indeed with that first contract but there has been no movement since then. I'm sure the steely-eyed Ms. Sew and the Truedawn company can take more of our excellent quality purlins.'

'Yes sir, indeed sir'. Roger is well aware of his entree at Truedawn. He adds some new information he has kept quiet until now. 'I hear that Ms. Sew is planning to open a new factory on the old Truedawn site. She'll be needing purlins I'm sure to hold the roof up. Might as well take ours. Ha Ha. Might as well take ours.'

The bacon butties have all been consumed. The smell of bacon grease lingers warm and rich in the rebreathed air. The meeting winds to a close. Pantype exits to his office. The

salesman leave to drive off in their Ford Cortinas to their prospects, or to a pub along the way. The secretaries drift off to their secretarial duties. Emptied of people the air becomes fresh again, and the sales office falls quiet. In the factory the smell has its usual aromatic nuance. The men and the machines work on, crunching through the existing order book, clattering, chirruping, grinding, growling and burping; men and machines both.

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Truedawn Milling Machines is also in the Black Country, but right on the edge. Not in the least black. More dark green and grassy. Roger Marlowe, mindful of his boss's commands, is making a sales visit. The factory is modern, with broad alleys of tarmac for the cars of the managers and those employees that have them. There are little stretches of grass bordering the white concrete walkways. The windows are mostly of darkened glass, which enhances the white concrete walls of the factory and office buildings.

Ms. Sew is in her office piling papers from her large executive desk into her assistant's outstretched arms, which gradually bend under the weight as the pile grows ever higher.

'One more', she states, with each new imposition.

'Yes, maam', each time from the assistant.

Finally, 'And get it right this time - I can't abide sloppiness from my staff. As you know.'

'Yes, maam', once again.

'And show my beautiful young salesman in. I've kept him waiting just long enough I think.'

'Yes, maam'. The assistant exits and closes the door.

Ms. Barbara Sew looks about forty. She is rather tall and slender with dark, grey eyes. The hair done up behind in a bun. Her complexion has a hint of delicate olive, which flatters

her perfect skin. She is dressed in a dove grey two piece suit, with black, low-heeled shoes. Sober and sensible one would think, but light nervous movements around her desk and a quick flicker of her tongue on her lips indicate today a mood rather frivolous than sober.

Roger Marlowe knocks and comes in through the office door. He is bright and cheery.

'Ah Ms. Sew. Good morning. Lovely morning today. I always look forward to coming to see you. Makes my job a pleasure.'

These words are well chosen. He knows he makes Ms. Sew's heart flutter and he is sincere in these sentiments. He is completely unaware that Ms. Sew has been taken with seriously strong sexual desires, in relation to his youthful handsome masculinity. Desires that for her are unusual and by no means light or trivial. Ms. Sew turns towards him with a gently seductive move of her body. Her white blouse has had its top two buttons undone, revealing a hint of dark pink brassiere. Her pearl necklace gleams on her throat as she lifts her chin a little.

'Good morning', she murmurs in a tone of gentle seduction.

Roger is oblivious. He replies brightly. 'It's good of you to see me. All is well with our deliveries I hope. I checked before I came and the works assured me that all is on time and up to spec.'

She moves a little closer. 'Always a pleasure my dear Roger. I've been thinking about you.'

'Oh really - good things I hope.'

'Very good things. Yes. '

'Good, excellent. I heard you berating your assistant as I came in. Has she been getting on your bad side?'

'My assistant enjoys a little berating now and then. I'm rather good at knowing what people are thinking. I have lots of empathy for my fellow creatures feelings. It's my strongest point. Believe me she wouldn't be happy without it.'

Ms. Sew does indeed know her strongest point. She does have powerfully sensitive antennae for the feelings that people have. But, somehow, at this moment, the antennae are not responding accurately. Her hormones seem to have overridden her feelings of empathy. Roger has missed the signals completely and she has missed his misapprehension. He ploughs on. 'Well I for sure wouldn't want to get on your bad side.'

'Now that's not going to happen is it? We get on so well. '

Roger is relentlessly bright and oblivious. 'Yes we do don't we. Definitely a warm feeling between us I'm glad to say.'

Ms. Sew leans in closer. Her face now mere inches from his. She can smell his breath and his faint, pleasantly masculine body odour. Her tone drops to a low purr. 'Warm yes. '

Roger inadvertently ups the ante with a compliment. 'Have you tried that hairdresser I recommended yet? Friend of a friend says its really good and I know you like to have your hair looking good. As a matter of fact its looking very good at the moment.'

The compliment has pressed the button. Ms Sew flushes and pounces, like a tiger with a little rabbit. Her voice now a growl. 'Thank you for that charming compliment.... so sweet of you..... As a matter of fact I'd like to invite you to dine with me. Just the two us. We can talk business and then get to know each other a little better don't you think? It's been a while since we met and I gave you that order, but we've hardly spent any time together.

Roger is still oblivious. 'Oh really - well that would be lovely. When were you thinking of?'

'I thought tonight or tomorrow.'

'Can't do tonight I'm afraid. I'm taking out my new girlfriend. Her name is Judy - I think I am in love. She's a secretary at Wellington. A lovely creature - young and fresh as a daisy. She's a real sweetie. Prettiest woman I've met for ages. I don't know why I didn't notice her before.'

Ms. Sew feels like she has just walked into a door. How could she have so misunderstood the situation. She is shocked that she is surprised - a very rare situation for her. She reacts with suppressed fury then sudden ice. She moves back a yard and makes no reply, letting silence hang between them.

Roger fails to notice Ms Sew's reaction- he blunders on. 'It's funny how you can see someone every day and not really notice them....'

She turns her back and still makes no reply. Another try from Roger 'Er - how about tomorrow?'

More silence from Ms Sew.

'Er - are you not feeling well? Can I get you anything?'

More silence. The freeze becomes Arctic and a deep cavern yawns in the ice. Roger hesitates. The thought that he had somehow distressed Ms. Sew now occurs to him.. He decides to make himself scarce. 'I'll come back at a better time.'

Roger hurriedly leaves the office and closes the door behind him, creeping past the sharply arched eyebrows of Ms. Sew's assistant, as he hurries back to his Ford Cortina.

Ms. Sew sits down at her desk and puts her head in her hands. She is overwhelmed by intense feelings - rage, despair, regret, desperation. One can perhaps gauge her thoughts: angry frustration with the silly, young girl that is now her rival, realisation that she has behaved foolishly, is perhaps a foolish old woman. In truth much older than the forty or so years manifest in her appearance. Perhaps Roger has realised how old she is. She recalls the hostility that has occurred before when people have realised how old she is. She has been

jilted before - many times in the past. The memories cause pain and she sobs for a few anguished moments.

Then the pain eases and she recovers herself. The emotion that remains is anger.

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The next day purports to be a nice quiet morning at Wellington Purlins Ltd. The chill breeze of the previous day has been replaced by a zephyr from the South. The sun is still shining. Judy Smithers, sales receptionist and also Roger Marlowe's secretary, early to work as usual, enters her small office cum reception area and hangs up her coat. She is a tall, slim young woman, with a beautiful complexion, intelligent dark eyes and shining brown hair. She is dressed, as befits her status of lower ranking office worker, in a floral print dress, which billows out from her slim figure. She hums happily: like Aesop's grasshopper who thinks not of winter, all is well in her little world. She picks up the phone and dials the number of her friend Tracey, who works as a hairdresser.

'Tracey? Yes it's Judy... how's the head?' Now a long giggling laugh. Apparently the previous evening had been a success. 'What do you think of Roger? Not bad eh?....He's a salesman... here at Wellington ... Yes....Look can I come in for a cut and blow dry at lunchtime? I can pay this time..... Yes really, I got paid yesterdayYes I'll tell you all about it. See ya.'

She puts phone down and begins the task of opening the post at her desk. She tosses the junk mail into a waste bin and reads the other letters briefly before putting them into the relevant tray. One letter causes her to start and mutter to herself. 'Ouch - that's terrible - how could she? We tried so hard to fulfil that last order.'

She picks up the phone again. This time to Roger in the main office. 'Roger you better get up here straight away and see this. Yes it's really really urgent I think. Sorry about last

night... No it's not your fault... Sorry sorry... Yes well I did warn you about my drink capacity...Yes well it's limited as you discovered...Well I did warn you...Oh shut up - the dry cleaner will sort that out...Look just get up here will you.'

She puts down the phone and dials another number. This time to Sir Colin Pantype in his office. Evidently Sir Colin has forgotten who she is. It is rather early in the morning and he doesn't start on the gin that lubricates his brain till the sun is well over the yardarm. 'Sir Colin it's Judy... Judy Smithers?... secretary to you and Roger Marlowe.... Marlowe? Your salesman for the Truedawn project....Yes just opened the post - Truedawn have cancelled us... No it's in the letter. I'll get Marlowe to bring it up to you right away...Yes sir... No sir....of course sir.

She puts phone down roughly and then replies to Sir Colin, who naturally does not hear a word. 'And three sodding bags full sir to you, you daft old git - thanks for nothing!'

Roger Marlowe enters the office. He is as bright and cheerful as ever. He looks admiringly at his beautiful girlfriend, tall and slim, with fascinating eyes and a flawless, pale light brown complexion. Her complexion, alas, clashes somewhat with orange tints in her dress. Ah well, nobody is perfect. He is a lucky man.

'Hello sweetheart, what's the panic?'

'Good morning Roger - take a look at that.'

She hands him the offending letter., which he quickly reads. His mood changes abruptly. A cloud has come over the sun. A hint of winter for him. He grunts, 'That's terrible!'

Judy also feels a chill. She says, 'I know.'

'Really awful!'

'I know.'

Roger goes on. 'I'm sunk - this means I'll get the sack. I'll have to move back in with my parents- and I've only just left!'

This is surprising news to Judy, who now makes a small revision in her current image of her boyfriend. 'I didn't know that - how old are you Roger?'

'Thirty two. The firm can't stand it - it's nearly half our output. It was the biggest order ever. And I made it.. Everybody thought I was marvellous. I've hardly made any others since. Now old Sir Colin will sack me. He'll have to sack half the staff. You'll probably get the sack...'

Judy contemplates this prospect. A small, almost imperceptible, stiffening manifests in her soft femininity. She says firmly. 'Unless we do something about it... you're the salesman - do some selling or something.'

Roger is accustomed to hearing this instruction. Particularly from his mother. It has never helped him. He repeats her instruction. 'Do some selling - yes - easy to say that.'

He pauses for a moment and confesses, with a weak laugh, 'I'm not a very good salesman - so my mother keeps telling me. Some people said that Ms Sew at Truedawn only gave me the order because she fancied me.'

Judy stiffens a little more. She has no problem with Ms Sew's infatuation if it helps the situation. Her voice takes on a note of command. 'Perhaps she still does. Do some selling. Get on the phone.'

'I thought she was keen on me. She asked me to dinner. I told her I couldn't do yesterday because of our date.'

'Oh dear. Did you mention me - your new girlfriend? To the woman that fancied you and asked you out to dinner? 'It dawns on Judy that Roger is singularly lacking in certain areas, which she hadn't really noticed before. She says, 'Not much thought for her feelings there. A little lacking in empathy don't you think?'

'That was the word she used - apparently she has lots of it....' He contemplates the likely fall out from the cancellation. 'Oh Judy I think I've had it! The Truedawn order was the firm's biggest order for years - it's more than half our order book. Everybody's going to be made redundant. That bitch at Truedawn Ms. Sew. What does she have to go and do that for? Our stuff was good - we deliver on time.'

Judy also contemplates the likely fall out. There is a pause while they both dwell on possible futures. She is a poor girl from a poor background. Her parents died before she knew them and she was then fostered. This time and place is indeed Britain in the middle of the twentieth century, with a welfare state provision for the unemployed: but the long, ghostly shadow of the workhouse, stretching out from previous centuries, still haunts the imagination of people like her, in the social class of those with no capital. Just a few paydays away from destitution.

'So I'm to be made redundant.' Judy is now almost ready to weep at the unfairness of fate... 'Now that I've just bought my little house and taken out a mortgage. They'll foreclose on me. I shall lose my deposit. It took me ten years to save that. Scrimping and pinching and not getting my hair done.'

Roger is sympathetic, but he was born into the class with some capital. He feels - but not so deeply. He searches for the cause of the problem. 'I'm so sorry. It must be something I've said or done to Ms. Sew. Mentioning you. Or somebody else. I can't think what. There's nothing wrong with our stuff is there? We've delivered on time and to spec for the last six months solid. Sir Colin hasn't been to see her has he? He'd upset a saint - and she's no saint - more of a devil.'

Judy doesn't like the Biblical references. 'Don't mention the devil. Talk of the devil and he appears. We need an angel. A guardian angel. I had a guardian once, after I was orphaned. She wasn't exactly an angel but she saw I was looked after.'

'I remember. You told me you never knew your parents... poor thing. '

'Long time ago.'

'Yes we need a guardian angel,... an avenging angel to hang Ms Sew by her bra strap till she changes her mind.'

'Calm down Roger. Violence won't help. Unless it's murder.' Judy now contemplates this particular solution. She spells out the possible facts that would likely follow. 'If she were somehow to die then all should be well shouldn't it? It's only her decision I suppose.'

Roger confirms the likely scenario that would follow Ms Sew's demise. 'Must be - she calls all the shots at Truedawn. So that's it - I just have to kill her.'

For a moment both have visions of violent slaughter; then Judy returns to practical reality. 'Oh do calm down. I need to think. You need to get on to her and find out what the problem is.' She dials a number and hands Roger the phone. 'Here - now do a bit of selling. You're the salesman. You can do it.'

Roger obeys and takes the phone. 'Ms. Sew? This is Roger Marlowe... Marlowe... from Wellington Purlins... Yes ... about your cancellation letter... I wonder if we could meet and discuss the ...

He jerks the phone from his ear. 'She's hung up on me! Now what do we do? '

Judy has a feeble joke for an answer. 'Murder the only option then? No I'm sorry. It's not funny is it? Not for you ... not for me. Her practical mood disappears as she stares into a probable future. 'I saved for years... and now I shall lose my little house and have to rent somewhere. I can't save up for another ten years... I just can't.'

Roger shouts angrily. 'She is a devil!'

The devil has been mentioned twice. As if on command somebody now appears. The door opens and Nicolette Diralt enters smoothly. One moment she was not there, and the next

the light has changed in intensity and she is a powerful presence in the middle of the room.

Judy and Roger start with surprise.

The revealed apparition is a tall, slim woman of about middle age, in a dark, well cut, expensive suit. She speaks in a melodious, low tone. Her dark blue eyes luminous and warm. 'Hello.'

Judy attempts to recover her composure and adopts her receptionist persona. 'Good morning. How can I help you?'

Nicolette has noticed the odd reaction and affects to ignore it. 'To see Sir Colin at ten-o'clock. Nicolette Diralt from DB Consulting.'

'Please take a seat. '

Judy phones Sir Colin. 'A Nicolette Diralt to see you sir, from DB Consulting... He won't be a moment. I'll take you up in a second. Can I get you a cup of coffee? How do you like it?'

'Sir Colin tells me you pride yourselves on your coffee. I'm looking forward to trying it. I like it hot as hell and black as the devil and sweet...'

'As an angel?' Roger has been to a public school - not a very posh one, but he did acquire a little savoir faire. He chips in to complete the saying; Talleyrand was it? And then smiles at the good looking female consultant. A true salesman once more. The consultant returns the smile. Her perfect teeth give out several megawatts of bright whiteness.

'Naturally. '

Judy exits to get coffee, giving Nicolette a backward glance. Nicolette's eyes follow Judy as she exits. There is a small pause, until Roger decides to make a little more conversation. 'What kind of consulting do you do? Not sales and marketing by any chance?'

'That is part of our offering but our speciality is general problem solving and PR. You have a public relations problem; we fix it. We're very good at it. We're a long established firm and we work at the highest level with international clients.'

Roger realises that he is on the buyers side for once. Diralt is selling her services to Wellington and he is presently the Wellington representative. He enjoys the novel situation and takes the opportunity to do a bit of the grilling of the salesperson, as he himself has so often been grilled. 'Do you have a client list?'

'Yes of course. Prominent clients you may remember. Some of them world leaders. Colonel Ogbu was a long standing client enjoying excellent public relations for years: until he unfortunately dispensed with our services. Then his public relations took a turn for the worse.'

Ogbu , notoriously, was killed and hung upside down by his rioting citizens. Diralt pauses for the laugh, which Roger dutifully delivers. She smiles again and goes on. 'Hollywood mogul G J MacBonor was another who called on us when he hit a little PR problem with his young female intern. Remember the little green dress with the stain? I'm very proud of our line there.

She speaks in an American accent. 'I did not have sex with that woman! Remember that? A masterpiece. That was my line.'

Roger is impressed. 'I did not have sex with that woman' - wow - that was a masterpiece. Yes...

He sees a possibility and plunges in. 'Well we have a general problem that needs solving. A problem in spades! I don't know if it's PR or not... You could raise the Truedawn contract with Sir Colin - if he doesn't raise it with you first. We would do anything to fix that problem.'

'Anything?'

'Oh yes. I personally would sell my soul to save that contract.'

The consultant's tongue issues from between her perfect teeth, a delicate light pink worm that passes over the upper lip and returns. 'Really? ...That is most interesting.'

Sir Colin enters via the other entrance. 'Ms Diralt? Do come on up. Both my secretaries seem to have disappeared.'

'A pleasure to meet you Sir Colin. She's just making me coffee exactly how I like it.'

'Good.'

They exit. Judy returns, having delivered the coffee, and Roger speaks excitedly. 'That consultant Diralt may be the answer to our prayers. Her client list is very impressive. Colonel Ogubu no less. Maybe she'll be tough enough to handle Ms Sew.'

'We'd better get praying some more then. Who shall we pray to?'

'Pray to the Gods of Business to uncanceled our cancelled Truedawn contract and save all our jobs.'

Judy sticks out her chin. She is a fighter. 'I can't stop thinking about my little house. I love it so much. I can't bear the thought of going back to a tiny rented flat....years of scrimping and saving to find another deposit before I draw my pension. Last time my savings only just kept in front of the house price rises... I'd give anything to avoid that again.'

Roger's eyebrows issue the question and Judy answers fervently. 'Yes Roger. To avoid that fate. Anything.'

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It is lunchtime in the hairdressing salon managed by Judy's friend Tracey Livo. Tracey is fussing over a new customer. It is Ms. Sew, who has acted on Roger's recommendation and has come in for a hairdo. Her hair is wet and she has a towel around her neck and shoulders. The salon is brightly lit and rather steamy; the air thick with the perfumed and acidic odours of hair salon dyes and lotions. A radio is quietly playing pop

music, which adds to the general noise level of the intermittent hairdryers and other hairdressing machinery. This makes conversation more difficult, so people have to raise their voices, which adds more to the general noise level. All in all quite loud.

Tracey talks loudly herself, in Ms. Sew's left ear. 'I love having a new customer. I aim higher. How did you get to know about us?'

Ms. Sew answers, turning her head and raising her voice. 'It was a business contact. Recommended you. Roger Marlowe - says he's a friend of yours. It's not much of a drive from the office and I thought I'd treat myself.'

Tracey is delighted. 'Yes I know Roger - boyfriend of a great friend of mine, Judy Smithers.. Nice of him to recommend me.'

'I felt like a change. Must be something in the air. Springtime.'

'It is rather warm for the time of year. All the birds are pairing up and building nests. Singing sexy songs to snare their mates.'

Ms Sew is impressed. 'What a lovely thought. You're not a poet are you? That was a poetic thought.' Ms. Sew has regained her power of empathy.

Tracey replies, 'As a matter of fact I do write poetry. Fancy you spotting that. I've been published too. Just the once but it was lovely.'

'How nice.'

'Do you like poetry?'

Ms. Sew smiles. 'Yes very much. As a matter of fact I write poetry too. I have been published but it was a long while ago.'

'Well there's a coincidence!'

The salon door opens with a ping. The light appears to brighten momentarily - perhaps some power surge from the machinery, perhaps the reaction of those inside to the charisma of the person who appears in the doorway; and Nicolette Diralt enters the salon;

smoothly and elegantly. As she walks to the centre of the room Ms. Sew feels an especially big reaction - she stands up and stares. Her stare is extremely rude but she appears not to notice her gaucherie. Tracey greets her customer. 'Good morning Ms. Diralt. Nice to have to you here again. Katy can do you now if you like.'

Tracey's assistant, Katy, guides Nicolette to the next hairdressing chair. Ms. Sew sits down again. Tracey addresses them both. 'Have you two met already?'

Ms. Sew replies and turns to Nicolette. 'No I don't think so. I'm sorry. Pardon my staring at you like that'. I just had a sudden reaction. Perhaps we have met?'

Nicolette looks at Ms Sew and replies. 'No. Not as far as I know.'

The hairdressing and nail work begins. Tracey and Katy talk to each other over the heads of their clients, who themselves begin a conversation- so there are two conversations in progress at once, both rendered private by the convention of the ladies salon. Hair dryers, towels and apparatus go on and off.

Tracey and Katy:

'Planning your holiday this year?'

'No - can't afford it - have to leave it - have a nice holiday in the local park!'

'That's a shame. I was thinking of going to Ibiza again - with my mate Judy. But it's not going to happen I think'

'Is she still with that boyfriend? He's got something that one.'

'Certainly has'

Nicolette and Ms. Sew.

'I couldn't help noticing your reaction to me. It's as though we had something in common. Don't you think?'

'It is odd. I do apologise for my reaction. Very rude of me. Are you sure we haven't met?'

'No I don't think so. I do know you I think. You're Ms. Sew aren't you? The executive at Truedawn Milling Machines? I'm Nicolette Diralt from DB Consulting. One of my clients is Wellington Purlins.'

'Oh... yes. How do you do, I'm Barbara Sew. Would you mind if we don't talk business. I'm having a break from business. Rather a stressful day. Do call me Barbara.'

'Barbara...Of course not... It's clear you haven't seen me before but I have met that kind of reaction before. May I explain?'

'It was odd. I'm still feeling it. Very intense. Do go ahead.'

Tracey and Katy.

'He makes me go all gooey. Strange cos he's a real dope.'

'Don't be too hard on him - he does his best.'

Nicolette and Barbara:

'Well... may I ask...Barbara...are you often congratulated on looking very young for your age? I don't mean to be personal but I'm afraid this is rather personal.'

'How did you know that? I've had many remarks along those lines. I'm not complaining but I do seem to age rather well.'

'I have the same remarks addressed to me. You see we have that in common. Do call me Nicolette. I won't tell you how old I am but I'm much older than I look.'

Tracey and Katy:

'Roger the Dodger. I suppose he's a top salesman at his job'.

'No he isn't really. Actually he's having a hard time at the moment'.

Nicolette and Barbara:

'How odd. I too am much older than I look. We must be eating the right vitamins or something.'

'I'm not married. My guess is you're not married either.'

'A sad fact... Nicolette ...if one devotes oneself to the job. Perhaps it's the same with you. A consultant did you say? Tough assignments most of the time?'

'Yes indeed.'

The hairdo is finished. Tracey uses her mirror to show the results to Barbara. 'How's that Madame? I think that looks really nice.'

'Lovely thank you.'

Nicolette thinks it is time for lunch. 'Do you know that little wine bar just down the road? I'm going there for lunch after this. They do a very fine little lunchtime menu. Would you care to join me?'

Barbara accepts the invitation with pleasure - a break from her usual routine, and a chance to get to know this person that piques her curiosity. 'Well, I must say I am intrigued by the physical reaction I got when I saw you. Not at all unpleasant but very profound. I think I can take time for a little lunch. I'll call my office.'

Barbara uses the phone in the hallway of the salon. Then Nicolette and Barbara walk out together, heading for a convivial lunch.

The wine bar is conveniently just down the road from Wellington Purlins Ltd. and from Tracey's hairdressing salon. The bar is darkly lit with cosy nooks and low tables. Just the place for a pleasant business lunch or a meeting between friends. It is a little late for the early lunch favoured by business people in the Midlands, and the place is emptying out, the fug of warm stale air dissipating. A waitress buzzes about clearing glasses. Nicolette and Barbara enter, sit on two low armchairs in faded red velvet placed alongside a low table, and order.

Barbara is now in a better mood. The attentions of the salon and her meeting with Nicolette have enlivened her and she is intrigued. She grumbles nevertheless. 'I don't know why I've let you inveigle me into this little tete a tete. I've had to cancel my afternoon

meeting. Never been known before. They'll all be amazed at the office. Wonder if I'm sickening for something...'

Nicolette settles into her seat and hesitantly begins to broach the reason for her invitation. 'It's good of you to indulge me. Please don't get annoyed, but I have a strong idea I know something about you. Something you probably have not recognised yet. It will be good for you to hear it from me - it's too hard working it out on one's own. I had a guardian angel when I discovered my true nature ...'

Nicolette pauses. Her eyes focus on events long ago. She continues in a quieter, less confident tone. 'She was so helpful - that was a long time ago. Much longer than you could possibly realise... Yes.'

Barbara is interested. 'Well do go on - say whatever it is that's bugging you. I promise I won't take offence. I'm intrigued is the fact of the matter.'

'Thank you. I need to lead into it. Its a delicate matter. You'll find it rather weird and improbable I'm afraid - but bear with me. A little background. Bear with me...'

Another hesitation. She clearly finds the topic very difficult to get out in the open. 'These things are easier now since they discovered remains of the new type of hominins in Russia and possibly in Indonesia You've perhaps read recently of the discovery of the Russian findings?'

Barbara has indeed heard of these hominins. 'Hominins. Is that how it's pronounced? Not Neanderthals then? Yes I think so. I keep up with science discoveries - the name rings a bell. Aren't they yet another type of human species - more old bones found in a cave somewhere? '

The waitress brings the drinks and takes their orders. Steak tartare for Barbara and avocado salad for Nicolette. The elegance of this menu rather spoiled by the smell of fish and

chips emanating from the little kitchen. Both drinks are gin and tonic, and the first beautiful sips are taken by both women, who then begin to relax.

Nicolette clearly finds the science topic a little easier and continues more strongly. 'Yes indeed. A cave in Siberia - bones from fifty thousand years ago - specifically the finger bone of a young girl. Apparently the DNA showed that it might be a new human species even.... according to the scientists a species that had actually interbred with Homo Sapiens... as had the Neanderthals indeed. They say that DNA tests now show that many modern Europeans have a little bit of Neanderthal and possibly other human species in them. Some have more than others.'

Nicolette pauses and looks at Barbara to gauge her reaction, which is light-hearted.

'Really? Neanderthal bits - OK. So we have a little bit of Neanderthal in us do we? Must account for my oddities.'

Nicolette decides to change the topic. 'Maybe it does indeed...Anyway I thought you would find that possibility interesting. More anon perhaps. But I confess I did arrange to run into you at the hairdresser to discuss business. Mutually beneficial business I hope. But now that I have met you I just want to get to know you better'.

'Ok... then I give in - your beautiful blue eyes have overwhelmed me.' Barbara gives a little laugh. She hadn't intended to be so frank. The gin has relaxed her.

Nicolette smiles back. 'Yes I can feel the attraction between us too, but it's not like that is it? I'm guessing we are both heterosexual in our tastes'.

Barbara thinks for a moment and then acknowledges the truth of the supposition. 'Yes indeed ... as I was sadly reminded this morning... What can I do for you?'

Nicolette outlines her thoughts. 'I do want to get to know you better. There is something we have in common. I can help you, and I do hope you can help me'

The two talk on, a relationship is formed as the bar gradually empties. Eventually the two depart arm in arm.

#

A week later, in the salon, Tracey Livo is blow-drying the hair of one of her clients and her assistant Katy is blow-drying another. The air is thick with the smells of hair chemical as usual, and the air very humid. So moist that little clouds form at the intake nozzles of the hair dryers. She switches her dryer off when she speaks, 'I think that's about the right length,' and then on again when the client replies, so the client's voice, masked by two hair dryers, is imperfectly received. She has learned that, in general, this reduces complaints and difficulties.

From the client, 'I think it's a little too short'.

'Well we can leave it next time'

The client again. 'That's what you said last time. I really think it's a little too short.'

Judy enters and takes a seat. Tracey waves to her and carries on talking to her client.

'Mmmmm. Very good. Lovely. There now all done. Next time as usual?'

'I really do think it's a little too short.'

The drier is finally off. The customer stands, is primed, pays with notes and gives a tip. Tracey is effusive to her customer as says goodbye. 'There that's lovely. Looks marvellous. Thank you - see you next time. She turns to Judy. 'Hello Jude how are you? Just in time as usual. I'll do you now then we can go to lunch at the wine bar. '

'Hello Trace. Hello Katy.' Judy slumps in the chair. Her head hangs low.

'God you look miserable. What's the matter with you? Roger the Dodger not working out? God you do look terrible. What on earth is the matter?'

Judy is distraught and stands up, flinging her arms around Tracey's neck. 'Sorry. Sorry sorry. It's my job. I shall be made redundant. Sorry.'

She begins to sob quietly, Tracey comforts her, patting her head as one would with a child. 'There there. You poor thing. Sit down. What's all this about?' Katy looks sideways at Judy but thinks it polite to ignore her. She attends to her own client.

'Sorry. We've just lost a big contract. If we can't get it back the firm will have to sack a lot of people - including me I'm pretty sure. Sorry.'

'You poor thing. What will you do?'

A wail from Judy. 'I don't know.' Another sob. 'I'm pushed to pay my mortgage as it is. I'll have to move. I'm racking my brains. It's Roger's client. But he's so hopeless.'

Nicolette enters the salon and takes a seat as both chairs are busy. Tracey looks up as the light changes momentarily.

'Hi there. I'll be with you in a minute. Just a minute Jude.' She tidies and cleans the hairdressing chair and then pops out for a moment.

Nicolette engages in conversation. 'Excuse me. Aren't you the girl from Wellington Purlins? Who made me that lovely cup of coffee when I came to your office. Whatever is the matter? Can I help?'

There is a fresh outburst of snivels from Judy, who is embarrassed, and also discomfited by Nicolette's presence. 'Sorry. Sorry. I had hoped you would be able to help. With your expertise you know - we might have won back that contract. But Sir Colin has decided not to use your services hasn't he? Has he told you yet?'

Nicolette purses her lips and replies, 'Yes he has. Alas he is averse to paying my fee it seems. It is a considerable fee. Nevertheless one he can well afford. Especially considering the costs of failure. I understand the loss of the contract will cause much of the works to shut down with all round redundancies. Ah well - he'll have to fend for himself - he thinks he can win over the dragon lady. Not a chance in my opinion. He's a large part of the problem in the first place - so I'm told. I may come up with another offer in due course'

There is a pause. Then Nicolette goes on. 'Funny my finding you here. I was going to ask you a favour. Something in it for you of course. I have several ideas for fixing the problem. I wonder if I could possibly ask you...'. She dangles the offer in the air.

Judy is prepared to clutch at any straw. 'Anything.'

'Excellent. You see our methods require complete commitment from our clients and a passionate desire to solve the problem. People who would do whatever it takes.'

'Anything.'

Tracey re-enters the salon. 'Hi there. Sorry to keep you. Please take a seat. Jude I'll do you after lunch.'

Tracey ushers Nicolette to the chair and goes to put a robe around her. Nicolette raises her arm, stops the robing and leans closer to Judy. 'Perhaps I could take you to lunch Ms. Smithers. We can discuss my idea. I'm sure you'll find it attractive.'

Tracey gives up with the robe and takes it off. 'No problem Jude. You go with this lady if you like. We can have our lunch tomorrow.'

Judy is hesitant, but accepts the intriguing invitation. 'Thank you. It's good of you to take an interest'.

The two leave the hairdresser salon together and head for the local wine bar just down the road, where Nicolette had entertained Barbara Sew the previous week. It is raining a little, but they keep mainly dry by walking under the shop awnings. Nicolette raises Judy's spirits a little by making jokes and by playing a game of dodging the drips from the awnings, with little jumps and hesitations. By the time they reach the wine bar Judy is feeling better. She is young and resilient. Something will turn up.

#

The bar is darkly lit with a cosy nook and a low table. The atmosphere damp from the rain outside. A waitress buzzes about clearing glasses. Nicolette and Judy are sat with several

glasses in front of them - they have been there some time- Judy is somewhat the worse for wear. She hesitantly asks, 'Do you really think I could become a sales rep? I've never done it before. They had me down as a secretary at school and I've never thought of changing. Lack of ambition I suppose.'

'Yes. But you've acquired ambition now haven't you - the idea of losing your little house has put a bit of steel in your soul. I can see it.'

'You can see my soul?'

'Your inner thoughts and desires. Yes, in a manner of speaking. It's my art and my talent. Acquired over many, many years.'

Judy is polite. 'Many years? 'You don't look that old.'

'Don't I? Are you sure?' Nicolette glances at Judy to see what she is really thinking.

Judy is now more honest and reveals her thoughts. 'Not entirely. Perhaps you are older than you look. Sorry I don't mean to be rude.'

'I take no offence I assure you. I am indeed much older than I look. Much older. You are using your art and your talent that's all.'

'You really don't look old but somehow... Sorry. I've had a little too much of this lovely wine. It's making me outspoken.'

Nicolette is definite, 'I do think you would make a very effective sales rep. If Roger is the standard.'

Judy is happy to discuss Roger. 'Roger is a pretty bad salesman I know - seems to me anyway - I suppose I could try and do better than him. He's a lovely bloke but he is pretty hopeless. I do know all the stuff about Truedawn - better than Roger now I think of it. Do you think Sir Colin would let me try with Truedawn and Ms. Sew? The firm has other salesmen than Roger. Though they're not up to much either in my opinion. If it's true that he's the problem.'

'I'm concluding that he is the problem', says Nicolette firmly. 'Apparently there is nothing particularly wrong with your product and Sir Colin has mostly not been involved much recently. I'm pretty sure I could get Sir Colin to let you have a go at rescuing the situation - with my help at a reduced fee - that should do the trick.'

There is a long pause as Nicolette ponders. Then she says, 'You are attracted to Roger aren't you?'

'Oh yes - he's lovely - makes me go all gooey - sorry - not very professional. I have had quite a lot to drink haven't I? What do you think of him?'

Nicolette agrees about Roger. 'I can quite see the attraction. I'm afraid he makes something stir deep inside. Not something I'm used to these days... Enough of that. You're going to be a star sales person. This is now lesson one. You can put your drink down.'

She pauses and goes on, 'I'm sure you will now go out and buy all the books you can find on sales techniques - even though I tell you it's a waste of your time and money - right?'

She looks at Judy. 'I thought so. I know you are keen and conscientious - and the opposite of stupid - that's why I picked you. Let's examine the sales process. Number one - the customer is presented with the product and asked to buy - simple isn't it? Number two - the customer buys the product, or they buy a rival product or don't buy anything - piece of cake - so what is all the fuss about? '

Nicolette sniffs. She scorns the premise of the whole idea of the sales instructional publishing industry - that sales ability can be learned from books. 'Well all those books are products - and you are the customer - when you have bought the book that's the end of it. Sale accomplished. I'm not saying they are rubbish - they are packed with sound advice - look both ways before you cross the road - that sort of thing. The fact is every situation is different - different products, different customers, different salespeople, different circumstances. Tricky that last one.'

She leans in to Judy and drops her voice. 'No the talent of a good salesperson is empathy- other talents help of course - hard work, stamina, charm - but empathy is the thing. And basically one either has it or one doesn't - you my dear have it. In rather exceptional amounts. My instruction is just going to save you time - lots of time - that's all.'

'It's so kind of you to help me in this way.'

'Yes it is isn't it? Lesson two.'

'Already?'

'Yes - remember I save you lots of time. Lesson one - every sale is different. Lesson two what is the customer thinking?'

'Wow - you've got my head spinning.'

'Come on focus - what is Ms Sew thinking?'

'She's pissed off - sorry - upset - with us - with Roger? But what can he have done?'

'Come on - keep going.'

'Poor Roger won't have done anything - he'll have just turned up for his sales visit and chatted away. I did his notes for his last meeting. There's nothing there - just chat about the party he was going to take me to...Is that it?'

'Keep going.'

'Is Ms. Sew reacting to something? Perhaps she doesn't like parties? Sorry I'm being silly.'

'You have a natural empathy talent. Very high level. Let it lead you where it will.'

Judy keeps going some more. 'No it must be something to do with the product. With Wellington's performance. Is Ms. Sew reacting to our performance. But we've not changed. The product is being delivered up to spec and more or less on time - as far as I know. I've looked at the figures. Perhaps she really doesn't like parties? Sorry still silly.'

More thought from Judy, who is now on the trail of an idea. 'Perhaps she doesn't like Roger? But she's been happy with him as our salesman since he took the account from Sir Colin in the early days... Perhaps it's something at Truedawn? They're a very big and thriving company. Financially very solid. I checked them out. Our product is just small beer to them. They can easily replace us. It was a wonder we won the big contract in the first place. It happened when Sir Colin took Roger along...'

Judy muses for a moment, then, more strongly, 'Perhaps she does like Roger - he is lovely...he does like flirting. Perhaps she doesn't like the idea of him taking me to a party and not her? No still silly. Surely not petty jealousy.'

Nicolette smiles encouragingly, 'I think we're getting there. That would be my analysis.'

Another ruminative pause as Judy considers the facts presented. Then she goes on, 'If that's the case how does my involvement help? Surely Roger is the key. My seeing her would just be oil on flames wouldn't it?'

'Yes Roger is the key. You've got it again. Your talent is really remarkable. But you won't understand why at this stage. Perhaps later. Let's just say I have plans for Roger. You'll have to trust me. Do you trust me?'

'I suppose I do. You're doing so much for me.'

'Good. Lesson 3. What does the customer want?'

Judy hears this and blanks out for a moment; overwhelmed by new information and ideas buzzing wildly. What does the customer want? Who knows what the customer wants? Do I have it in me? Can I really do it? She says my talent is remarkable, Roger might think her claim is farcical, Sir Colin that my talent's not discernible. Ha - silly old git. Do I have it in me?

Nicolette hears some of this as a brief mumble and says, 'What was that? '

Judy has had enough. 'I don't think I can handle any more today. And I have to get back to work. '

'OK - you're right. Come on I'll walk you back to the office. I think I can clinch the arrangement with Sir Colin for you to become a salesperson working with me. I shall offer terms that are so reasonable that he can not lose. Then we can fix another time for the next session.'

The rain has stopped as they walk back to the Wellington site through the late afternoon crowds in the street, housewives shopping in their early break from work, buying something for their husbands' supper. Men now leaving work, having been labouring since dawn, now grabbing a pint and pie in the pub. Almost all members of the social class without capital, yet heedless of the morrow and the chasm that would yawn should they lose their jobs. Judy sees them and is grateful for the chance to try to save her job. Maybe, even more hopefully, enhance her career, maybe even acquire a little capital. Maybe even pay off the mortgage. Now that the idea has been planted she is keen to get started.

Nicolette walks rapidly and Judy trots to keep up. Two pairs of high heels clicking on the wet pavement stones in a jazzy rhythm.

The older consultant is eager. She apologises. 'Forgive me for pushing. I must control my eagerness. My impatience. We can meet here tomorrow after work - it's pretty quiet - we'll drink orange juice and I'll teach you how to sell - or rather I'll unleash the potential that I can see you already have'

#

First Monday of the month and it is time for the regular sales meeting at Wellington. Unusually the meeting has been scheduled for the afternoon, but something seems to have gone wrong with the planning. Outside it has again been raining all morning - a dull Midlands drizzle that makes it easy to be gloomy. Sir Colin is pacing up and down - the

office is unmanned and empty and he is decidedly gloomy - not at all a happy man - he kicks the odd chair.

Roger enters. Sir Colin swings around and glares at him. 'At last. Where the hell is everybody? It's like the bloody Marie Celeste in here. Nobody aboard.'

Roger answers. 'Sorry Sir Colin. I've just been at lunch. The secretaries must be out. Unlike them to leave the office unmanned - or unwomaned - ha ha.'

'You really are a twit Marlowe.'

'Yes sir. Sorry sir. Just trying to lighten the atmosphere. I think you said the monthly sales meeting was to begin at two-thirty and it's only two pm. Haha. I can't get over that Truedawn cancellation. I've tried to get through to Ms Sew at Truedawn but she just hangs up on me.'

Pantype snorts at the mention of Truedawn. He paces once more up his little quarterdeck, the sales office. 'That contract is our bread and butter. I can't accept the cancellation. I've had that Diralt consultant woman on to me again with a proposition. I'm minded to accept it. She is very persuasive.'

'Oh good,' says Roger. He continues enthusiastically, 'I was impressed by her credentials. Pretty hot at this kind of situation I would have thought. We could use her help.'

'Yes. As a matter of fact we could indeed use her help. But she doesn't want you in on the deal. Specifically not you.'

Roger is taken aback, his enthusiasm quenched. 'Oh. I thought she and I got on very well.'

'Yes. I'm sure you did. Perhaps you do. Nevertheless - she was insistent. And I've agreed.'

Roger takes in the new information. 'Oh. '

Salesmen and secretaries begin to arrive. The room fills. People busy themselves arranging chairs, setting up whiteboards and laying out the tea which is planned to follow the meeting.

Sir Colin continues, 'Yes. Weirdly she doesn't want me involved either. Gave me a long tale about client relationships. Ms. Sew won't take my calls either. So I've had to go along. Don't like it but needs must.' He stiffens and raises his voice. 'We've got to get that contract back or I'll have to take a bloody chain saw to the staff roster and sack half of you.'

'Yes.' Says Roger.

Sir Colin pauses and look sideways at Roger. 'Yes. Odd thing is Diralt wanted our secretary to assist her - what's her name?'

'Judy Smithers?'

'Yes. Can't think why. She's keen enough. Diralt is on a contingency. If we don't get the contract back she gets nothing. So I'm in a mood to grant her wishes. Well?'

Roger is nonplussed 'Oh.' He pauses for a moment. 'Judy's very good. She doesn't know anything about selling though. But I'm sure she'll be a big help.'

Sir Colin claps his hands to get the meeting started. The audience sit in the chairs and quieten to hear him. He seems agitated. He strides up and down searching for some words of exhortation to inspire his crew to success. The sales team are his men. Their jobs, the mortgages they carry, the lives of their wives and children are his responsibility, and he feels it. He also feels his own inadequacy. 'I've had the latest sales figures'. He spells out the figures, clearly set out on the whiteboard. They do seem to have fallen off the fucking cliff.

He raises his voice to a shout, desperate to inspire. 'At this rate we'll soon be bust. Half of you will get the chop if we can't make some sales.' His voice cracks and becomes a crazed falsetto as the pitch goes high. 'For God's sake do some selling, you bunch of useless plonkers!'

The plonkers look worried. They are used to being harangued and insulted at the monthly sales meeting, but this time things seem more serious. Blantyre mumbles to Roger from the side of his mouth, ' This time he really means it, no more room to skive old boy.' Roger grimly replies, 'I feel we'll all be selling for our lives this month'.

The meeting drones on. Gloom descends on all. The tea after the meeting is very quiet. No rich and vibrant smell of bacon grease for this afternoon meeting. Instead the dry taste of the canteen rock cakes. The staff contemplate the likelihood of getting the sack. One of the secretaries begins to cry and has to leave the room.

The rain is still falling, but the sky has brightened with streaks of yellow and orange as the sun sets.

#

After the monthly sales meeting, and a brief word from Sir Colin, Judy was relieved of her secretarial duties and became a trainee salesperson. There was no mention of a training course. The plan was for her to tag along with one of the experienced salesman. Blantyre was mentioned by Sir Colin as a possible. She searched the library for books on sales and selling, of which there were many. After several weeks of dedicated study she has read many of them, though they are yet to be digested. Blantyre's sales visits, which she enjoyed, the little outings in his Cortina had been very pleasant, had taught her very little, though Blantyre had kindly offered comments on her dress. 'More business suit style', he had said, 'You're not a secretary now'. She had bought a cheap suit from Mark and Sparks and thus moved imperceptibly up the social scale. Sir Colin had not offered her a Cortina.

The visits had consisted of chats about the cricket and had not resulted in any new sales. Her confidence had much increased. She was now sure she could visit people and chat,

though not perhaps about cricket. Maybe the latest film or gardening or something - or even the weather.

Eventually Sir Colin gave her a patch to look for prospects. Her patch mostly consisted of council estates. No scope for purlins there unless they were to build a new school or perhaps a new shopping parade. She visited the local Council offices to enquire on their plans, but was passed around various officials and got nowhere.

She met with Nicolette, who boosted her confidence after the Council visit. 'Let's leave the local politicians for now. The local politics is very complex. They all dance with nods and winks on the outermost fringes of bribery and corruption, and work with people they have known for many years. A complex web of barely legal favours and backslapping. Not for beginners. We'll have a go at them later.'

Judy received her training on selling from Nicolette. Slowly these ideas began to percolate into her brain. Her character started to change. The humble secretary and receptionist slowly began to acquire a sales person's patina, glossy and impervious to disdain.

Now she is sitting in the local wine bar in the early evening, with an orange juice on the low table before her. She is studying furiously, a pile of books beside her. The books have labels such as, 'How to Sell Fridges to Eskimos', 'Selling Simplified', and 'You too can be a Super Salesman'. After a moment Nicolette Diralt enters. There is the usual slight disturbance to the light. Maybe it is something she is wearing - her jewellery perhaps or else her black leather court shoes, highly polished. Judy stands up as Nicolette greets her. 'Hi there - I see you're still ignoring my advice about books on salesmanship.'

Nicolette glances disdainfully at the pile of books as she sits down beside them. 'No doubt you're thoroughly confused. They're all so full of good advice but there is just so much of it. How can anyone remember all that? Come on sit down and we'll get on. What is it? Lesson Twenty? I can't remember.'

They both sit- a waitress brings Nicolette's usual order without being asked, gin and tonic. Judy sighs, 'It's Lesson Twenty-One - we've done three every day for the past seven days and I'm stuffed full of new information. You're so right about the books! I hereby give them up!'

Judy stuffs the books back in her bag, zips them up and slaps the bag dismissively. Nicole continues, 'Good. Lesson Twenty-One - a practical test. I've arranged for Ms. Sew of Truedawn to come in here for a drink after work. You are to introduce yourself and make a sale.'

She smiles at Judy's obvious discomfort. Judy protests, 'What just like that? I can't! You can't mean it! A solo sales meeting with the biggest customer!'

'Relax. You'll be fine. If it doesn't work this time it'll work the next. Calm down!'

Judy makes a big effort with deep breathing - and calms down. 'How did you get her to come here?'

Nicolette smiles, 'Lesson Twenty-One - you've got to have something the customer wants. It may well have nothing to do with the product. I've done lots of digging on Ms. Sew - she interests me in many ways...'

She pauses as she brings her thoughts on Barbara to mind. 'And I finally found an angle. She has a weird name hasn't she? Sew spelled 'S e w', and pronounced like what you do with needle and thread. Well I discovered it wasn't always like that. When she was a little girl - a long time ago believe me - it was spelled 's o w'. It's on her birth certificate. Now you can pronounce that as either way - pronounced in one way it is the name of a certain female animal that lives in a pig-sty and goes 'oink' - 'sow'. Not very nice. Some people still use it as an insult don't they?'

Another pause as thoughts rise in her brain. 'Or they did in the rough cockney pubs around the London docks when I was last there - before it all got gentrified and turned into a financial district. Well she had it changed of course.'

Judy thinks for a moment and agrees. 'How interesting - of course... she had it changed.'

'I issued an invitation for her to meet you here - I've given you a cover story - a background - you are researching Truedawn in order to write a commercial history, going back to the beginnings of the firm. You are doing this privately - inspired by your interest in the firm seen from Wellington's viewpoint. You hope to sell a few copies but mainly use it for your research degree on business history that you plan to do in future.'

This is news to Judy. 'My research degree?' But Nicolette continues, 'This is all in your head - no paper trail if she cares to check up on you - which she may well do! She has been there for ages so she is the obvious subject for interview about Truedawn. She will have worked out that you may possibly discover her name change. She needs to control the situation to avoid possible embarrassment over the name change and her age and appearance.'

There is a pause - Nicolette drinks and eats while Judy absorbs the news. Then Nicolette continues. 'We'll soon see if I have calculated correctly. If she is coming she'll be here soon. Just remember lesson what ever it was - the one about cold introductions - smile and ask for help. The sale you want to make is for her to like you and trust you and give you another interview. That's all.'

'Oh God.'

'I've explained who you are - Roger's girlfriend. She's fine with that. Her problem is with Roger not you. And I think she's over that now.'

'Oh God.'

'Come on focus - I need to disappear. You know what she looks like don't you?'

Judy nods - Nicolette gets up and exits with a cheery 'Good luck!'

The wine bar is dark and quiet except for the clink of glasses as the waitress clears the tables. After a few minutes Barbara enters, looking round. Judy gets up and goes to her 'Ms. Sew? I'm Judy Smithers. Thank you for coming to meet me. Can I get you a drink?'

'Thank you. I'll have a gin and tonic. Judy Smithers was it?'

'Yes - please call me Judy. Shall we sit down?'

They sit - the waitress takes orders. Judy hesitates, recalls Nicolette's instructions and summons her courage. Then she plunges in. 'Thank you for coming. Er, I'm most grateful. I'm hoping you can help me with my research into your firm.'

'That's why I'm here. I want to make sure you get all the facts right. Wouldn't want any misinformation getting into print would we? You can call me Barbara if you like but most people call me Ms. Sew. I've been with the firm for donkey's years. I'm a little bit old fashioned I'm afraid - I'm rather older than my appearance might indicate.'

'Yes. I should say that I work for Wellington Purlins and I know about the recent order cancellation. My work on the Truedawn commercial history has nothing to do with any of that. Er...I'm hoping to make some money from the publication and to use it for my business history research project.'

'I like to see ambition in the young. Well done. The Wellington situation is complicated and commercially sensitive. I hope we can avoid the subject.'

'No problem. It doesn't bear on the history of the firm. Such a small recent event. Not for Wellington of course, but in the history of Truedawn. Er... I should add to make it all quite transparent, that my boyfriend Roger Marlowe was the salesman for Truedawn - no longer your salesman I hasten to add - and I'm hoping to get into sales myself.'

'Really. I remember your salesman - Marlowe was it - mentioned he had a new girlfriend. No longer eh? I like that idea. Not enough females in sales. Good luck with that.'

Marlowe was it? Quite hopeless as a salesman from the little I can recall. Based everything on charm. Hopeless. Your consultant Diralt has contacted me and given me some background.'

'It's so good of you to help me. So little documentation. I shall have to rely on oral histories.'

Barbara agrees, 'Oral history of course. There is little documentation at present. How about we start by my recounting my outline of the history and you can ask me further details as we go along. I'm very proud of our firm. It has a long and distinguished history, to which I believe I have contributed significantly over the years'. Barbara smiled a small proud smile, clearly sincere in her claim. 'I look forward to seeing it written down correctly.'

Judy is now getting into her stride. 'Perfect. Today can be a brief start - I don't want to wear you out. If you have time in the evenings I would be happy to buy you the odd dinner somewhere pleasant and relaxing.'

Barbara is quite content with this arrangement. 'Perfect', she says. The meeting is going very well.

#

Another early Monday morning at Wellington Purlins Ltd - another monthly sales meeting. The salesmen are sitting in front of a whiteboard waiting for the meeting to start - among them Roger. The meeting is starting late. Some rise and move about as the room is cold. The bacon butties are waiting but they are bound to get cold too. The smell of bacon grease is not working its usual heartening magic. Judy is not present. Sir Colin enters briskly but it is clear he is miserable and downhearted. His voice less full of vim and pep - the bubbles in his ginger beer have gone and now it is flat - vimless and pepless. His world, the firm he has worked for over many years, is under threat, and he does not bother to disguise

his mood. 'Good morning team... Actually it's not a very good morning - it's a bloody terrible morning.'

The audience gets the message of gloom. There is a deep silence. Sir Colin goes on, 'I've just had the latest sales figures and they're looking bloody awful!' He looks around. All avoid his eyes. He goes on, 'Bloody awful! The Truedawn contract cancellation is hitting us hard. The warehouse is stuffed full of unsold purlins. No room for any more. The factory is now on a three day week and they spend most of that drinking tea! There are bound to be major redundancies if this keeps up. Over half of you will be looking for new jobs. But I don't want to hear any talk or rumours about that. We must keep up our spirits and fight for sales. Fight like bloody hell for sales!'

This in a dull squeak. Still no vim and pep. 'Er I would have liked you to welcome Miss Smithers to the sales team. Odd that she doesn't appear to be here. First month on the job and she misses her first sales meeting. Not a good start.' He is disappointed by her, but, old-fashioned gentleman that he is, gallantly suppresses a sneer. 'You'll all know her from the office secretary role she has been engaged in since she joined us. A very fine secretary I'm sure you'll all agree. I'm giving her a go on the Truedawn account. Nothing to lose I suppose'. This last he delivers sarcastically. Then 'She has support from our consultant Ms. Diralt.'

He stops his speech and the silence hangs heavy. Then, 'OK Blantyre please lead off.'

Blantyre puts up his figures on the whiteboard and goes into his spiel, managing to sound quite cheerful despite the fact that he has no new orders to report. 'Thank you sir. Good morning everybody. I've had a busy month as you can see from my figures. A good lead from BAV for aluminium purlins for small roof fixings.. They liked the new samples and may place an order. I've now got more leads from the building trade and hope to convert. Er ... thank you.'

Sir Colin is grateful for the positive spin but not for the lack of orders. 'Thank you Blantyre. An actual order would be nice. Man does not live by leads alone.'

The other salesmen give their reports. Many good leads but few actual orders. Sir Colin reports for Jackson. 'Jackson is still abroad - finishing his North America trip. He reports a good month. Possible order for the new purlins. Well done Jackson. Shame there are no actual orders.'

Then it is Roger's turn. He smiles confidently and goes into his spiel with vigour. 'I've worked my new patch hard this month but as yet I've nothing to show. Should pick up next month. I can support Jackson in the reception received for the new aluminium purlins - which seem to going down very well. The motor trade are impressed by our lab figures and are looking to test samples. Er ... thank you.'

Sir Colin is not impressed by the vigour. He sees the figures. 'Thank you Marlowe. I appreciate you have a new patch but I'm sure you could have done more this month. We can't live on goodwill - we need orders.' The pitch of his voice rises up a major third and crescendos from piano to fortissimo. 'Try harder this next month... or for many of you -, ' now come strong staccato accents and blows of his fist on the table, which cause beads of sweat from his forehead to fall to the floor. 'There won't be a next month next month!'

Once more the silence hangs heavy. Judy creeps in to the room. In the silence all turn to look.

Sir Colin is now coldly sarcastic. 'Ah Miss Smithers here at last. Thank you very much for coming..... OK Miss Smithers, we're all waiting... it's your turn.'

Judy is hesitant, but does not appear to be as gloomy as the rest. 'Thank you sir. Good morning everybody. This is my first sales meeting - please excuse my nerves.'

'No need for that Ms Smithers. Just get on with it.' Sir Colin's basic decency surfaces above his despair. He smiles his encouragement and helps Judy set up her whiteboard.

Judy puts up a paper on the whiteboard on which is written -'hot topic 'Truedawn account cancellation'. She leads off. 'I've been very lucky with Ms Sew at Truedawn. I have met her several times and she has agreed to place a large order for purlins for the new Trudawn factory.' Now a little dramatic pause. 'And she has cancelled her cancellation for the main order ... er... we are back in business at Truedawn - just as before.' Judy smiles broadly and continues, 'Thank God for that!'

She draws a black, dramatic line through the word 'cancellation'.

The room is instantly delighted and erupts in a huge chorus of relieved applause. The mood changes from gloom to euphoria. Judy speaks, raising her voice to come over the applause. 'I must acknowledge the help of Nicolette Diralt, the consultant. She has taught me a lot. I am most grateful. I don't know what price she is charging us. I'm sure we'll soon find out when she sends in her bill. Ha Ha.' Everybody laughs with her. A communal cackle. 'But in my book she is worth it.'

They agree and cheer more. When they finally stop she says 'Er... thank you,' and sits down.

Sir Colin is overwhelmed. He splutters, 'Thank you Judy. I don't know what to say. Cancellation cancelled eh? That's marvellous.' He laughs delightedly 'You seem to have saved our bacon. I know you're a beginner, but I have to say you have made a major contribution... a major contribution.'

Much applause. 'And Jones is still on holiday. Nothing from him. Well that wraps up our meeting. Keep up the good work. And keep pushing the message on the new aluminium purlins. I'm sure we are on to a winner there. I'd like you to congratulate Judy Smithers. She's got off to a flying start on the Truedawn account. I'm pleased to say, subject to confirmation of the cancellation of the cancellation... er... looks like we can forget all that talk about redundancies in the near future.'

More ecstatic applause. Blantyre stands and interrupts. 'Er... I'd like to congratulate Judy Smithers on saving me from having to make my aluminium purlins accounts support the whole firm. Er ... thank you.'

Yet more ecstatic applause. Sir Colin wraps up the meeting. 'Yes indeed. Now please join me for our buffet and drinks. Mine's a large one!'

The buffet and drinks are served. The butties have not yet gone cold and are enjoyed by the audience. The salesmen and the secretaries stand, mingle and chat, drinking and eating off buffet plates. The conversation has one focus. Basically variations on, 'Smithers J has saved our bacon.'

Roger buttonholes Judy and jokes to his girlfriend, 'Well done Miss Smithers. You seem to have pulled the fat out of the fire. Now we can all rest easy and forget about imminent redundancies.' He is really pleased for her. 'I'm proud of you. What's the magic ingredient?'

'I don't know Roger. That consultant Nicolette worked wonders for my confidence. It was all just a breeze. I got the impression that Ms Sew was a little disturbed by your presence - did you ever feel that she fancied you? Nicolette asked me if she could borrow you.'

'Borrow me?'

'Yes. Peculiar thing to ask. I said feel free - I didn't own you - you always did what you felt like anyway.'

'All my lady customers fancy me I think - just part of my charm. I thought it was a good thing but now I'm not so sure. I wonder what she means 'borrow me' - some sales plan scheme I suppose - I'll be the before and some hot shot will be the after - haha.'

Sir Colin joins the group - Roger edges away. Judy speaks up. 'I thought the meeting went very well Sir Colin.'

'Yes indeed. Keep it short and sweet is my motto. What are your plans for next month? I hope you are going to do great things for the firm. I have in mind a small rise. I think you've earned it.'

'Thank you sir. I appreciate your interest in me. Perhaps I might qualify for a Cortina soon.'

#

Several months later Judy Smithers was marching determinedly down the serried ranks of the skyscrapers on the Avenue of the Americas, in New York City. One step to the left on the sidewalk was the sudden deep shadow of the immense cliff of the building opposite, but she stayed in the sunny side. She had cajoled Pantype into the necessary expenses for the trip with a few white lies about hot prospects that she had set up. There were no hot prospects. Just some research on an idea that might work.

Here she was - this building here on the right. She dived in to the lobby through the revolving doors of the entrance. The plane had been uncomfortable, the taxi from Idlewild even more so. She was hot and sticky as she lugged her bag in her hand. Inside it was cold - too much air conditioning. Her sweat congealed. Now she was underdressed. Should have worn the woollen underwear. It was so hard to tell what a New York Spring meant in terms of temperature. She walked to the lobby desk, about fifty yards from the doorway, click click of her heels on the faux-marble floor, and smiled at the clerk, a middle-aged Latina wearing a brown uniform and dark glasses. 'Goldwasser Real Estate? 'Take the forty ninth floor maam - the central row of elevators'. Judy smiled again and marched over.

She muttered to herself, 'Elevator, not lift', and pressed the button for the forty-ninth. The lift, sorry, elevator, went whoosh, and the door opened on the offices of Goldwasser Real Estate, where her hopes lay. Another lobby, another march, only twenty yards this time, to the receptionist. This time a pretty young blonde woman, with a silk blouse struggling to

enclose an impressive bosom. Another big smile from Judy. 'Mr Goldwasser please - I'm Judy Smithers'.

The receptionist dialled the phone, gave Judy's name, then queried 'Is he expecting you?'

Now there may have been some advice on this phase of the operation, somewhere on page umpty-ump of one of the sales text books she had read, but as Nicolette had predicted, nobody could remember all that stuff. Judy would have to trust her instinct. She smiled even more broadly, reached across and gently but firmly took the phone from the receptionist, put it to her ear and said, 'He must have forgotten, I'll explain - Mr Goldwasser? Mr Gareth Goldwasser? I have little deal for you which you will love. No I'm right here - Yes I'm here in your lobby. Just take a breather for a few minutes and satisfy your curiosity about the deal - and about me if you like'. Judy listened for a moment, then handed the phone back. 'Thank you - he's coming out'.

And so he was - maybe it was the English accent.

Gareth Goldwasser grabbed Judy's outstretched hand. 'Hi Judy, so what's the deal then - I can give you ten minutes - come into my office'. He was about forty and rather heavy set - many Big Macs make big bum style. His office was large and freezing, with a desk like the deck of an aircraft carrier.

'Mr Goldwasser'. 'Call me Gary'.

'Gary - yes - not Gareth then?'

'Ah no - I'm Jewish but my grandmother is Welsh - that's where the Gareth is from - but it's Gary in New York'.

The conversation breezed along. Judy was alert to what Gary might want. Her empathy radar on full strength. She picked up on his anglophilia. A deal was expounded. An offer to get Gary tickets to a box at Wimbledon. She hoped she could do that via Sir Colin,

who had been an all-England tennis player in his youth and was a member of the Club. In return Gary would give Judy introductions to his American clients looking to build in Europe. Why should they just use purlin suppliers they knew already when there were perfectly good - and cheaper - suppliers in England ready to do business with them. A win-win situation. Gareth and Judy looked forward to many pleasant strawberry and cream teas at Wimbledon. Sir Colin would just have to entertain fewer of the county set he normally took, none of whom even knew what a purlin was, let alone placed an order.

After a couple of hours Judy left the Goldwasser office and got a taxi to her hotel, where she had a bath and fell into bed exhausted. Perhaps she was getting the hang of it. The secret of selling; find out what people want and give it to them. She would meet Gary for drinks and dinner that evening. The next day another trek down the as yet unexplored skyscrapers in Avenue of the Americas.

#

Spring has given way to Summer and a balmy bright day. Today on the Truedawn site the Black Country is blue above and green below, and the Truedawn office of Barbara Sew is cool and airy. Nicolette Diralt is paying a visit. She shakes Barbara's hand. They are warm together, like old friends. Drinks have been poured out and are now being sipped. Nicolette says, 'Id like to thank you for allowing Judy to make that sale and for reinstating the Wellington contract'.

'No problem - she did extremely well, with her work on the Truedawn history and my part in it. Very discreetly handled, my being so old and still in charge - and then she has made it clear that she is no longer Roger's girlfriend - she is a natural salesperson that one - she told me you had been training her - but she hardly needs training - she knew what I wanted almost by instinct and gave it to me - I wanted to give her business. By the way may I say how much I enjoyed our little outing last time - I hope we can do it again soon'.

'So do I. But today I think is the time for me to continue the tale of the homins.'

'The Neanderthals?'

'Yes. And the others. You remember I started telling you about them. I'm leading up to something. It's very hard to discuss. That topic gives me a sort of introduction to a tricky subject'.

'What's tricky about it?'

Nicolette does not answer directly, but asks another question. 'How about the possibility of the discovery of another 'human ' creature - Homo Whatsisname?' This could happen tomorrow.

'I'm with you there too. Another human species - why not?'

'Yes indeed ... ever wondered if there might be several more human species - ever wondered if they might not be extinct? Ever wondered if some of those mixed genes are still around in the human species?'

'No not really.'

'The tricky bit is to do with you and me - and our genes'

Barbara is none the wiser. 'What is tricky about our genes?'

'I don't know, but something must be. I have never had my DNA analysed and I advise you to do the same. Avoid it. They will discover something very odd I'm sure.'

Nicolette pauses and grows solemn. 'They have found faint remains of several more human species recently - odds and sods with no names as yet - just numbers. Ever wondered if there might be more?'

Barbara waits for Nicolette to continue. Nicolette takes a swig of her drink and goes on. 'Well believe me there are more. Many humans have just a few Neanderthal genes mixed in. That was discovered very recently and it helps to explain a bit. From my personal

experience I can assure you that there is at least one more species, or subspecies, or mutant group, or whatever. One more.'

She pauses, dropping her voice to a soft conspiratorial tone and continues. 'Not extinct. Still living. And not a million miles distant either.' Nicolette sticks out her chin. 'I've never had my DNA tested. I'm too frightened of the consequences. I don't want publicity. I don't want to be a freak. My guardian angel told me to be careful. Though there was no DNA testing when she told me. She was born in 1655 - she told me in 1829 - I lost touch with her a while ago - after she had had her child.'

She pauses and Barbara waits, her mouth open in amazement.

Nicolette continues 'How old are you did you say?'

'That's very personal.'

'I'm over two hundred years old. How old are you?'

'Good Lord!...' Barbara's mouth opens even wider.

'Well? '

Barbara waits and then answers softly, 'I don't let this out these days. I've learned not to. But I had to set it out for Judy - and ask her to disguise it, which she did beautifully. I'm eighty.'

'Perhaps you begin to see?'

Barbara hesitates once again. Her brain has grasped a suspicion and begins to come to a conclusion. 'Are you suggesting you might be one of these creatures... this subspecies or mutant group or odd gene crowd or whatever you call it...And I might be another? Is that what you're suggesting?'

Silence from Nicolette and then - very seriously and in a voice heavy with portent.

'Oh yes.'

'Good Lord!... I've always wondered if there might be something different about me. The slow ageing.'

'Not being able to have children?'

'Yes - I'm not a virgin - I stopped taking precautions sixty years ago - no results.'

Nicolette answers the implied question. 'We can have children. Its just a little more complicated than normal humans.'

'Normal humans?'

'Yes normal Homo Sapiens. With us - the ones who are not normal - its just a little more complicated than normal humans.'

'Normal being Homo Sapiens? And the other ones?'

'Yes - and our lot... call us what you like. We don't have a scientific name - ha - as we are for very good reasons unknown to science.'

Nicolette stands and walks around the room. She looks out on the green paths. 'We survive - though there a very few of us - and have children - also very few. It's just a lot slower. I have no children yet, but I hope to one day. We survive if we keep ourselves secret. Otherwise we burn as witches I'm afraid.'

Barbara is startled. 'Witches?' She waits a moment then, as the truth of the matter sinks in, continues in a rush. 'Yes. I seem to have always known that I must keep myself secret - or risk bad things happening. I'm surprised by what you've said - forgive me I'm still taking it on board - but in a curious way not so surprised.'

'There's more to say. One of our peculiarities. We are all female. Every one of us is female. Never a male... We need a male to produce a child - any normal homo sapiens human male will do - though there are some unusual requirements. Another peculiarity - we don't last long once we have had a child. Just a few years... My guardian angel lasted a mere seven years after her baby. I found a good foster home for it.'

Nicolette again looks out of the window. She knows the Rubicon has been crossed with her revelations to Barbara. 'No doubt you are an orphan.' This with confidence.

'Indeed. My foster parents didn't tell me but I worked it out recently. They are long dead. Apparently I had a guardian before they fostered me. She paid for my education but I never met her.'

'There's even more to say. Sorry to pile it on you so. I want a baby. My time is come. I've lived long enough. I want to have my child and die soon after. I need help to do all this. I want to be your guardian angel. You can help me. If you will.'

Nicolette sighs with relief. The difficult revelation has gone well. 'Have another drink and have a little think. Ha ha. Sorry. I've been waiting a long time to get all this off my chest. I have a plan for all this. You know Roger? He is a possible male in my scheme.'

'Yes. '

'The vibrations are all good.' Nicolette muses inwardly, but Barbara catches something of her thoughts and feelings. Nicolette's mind is contemplating her bay and then her death'. She speaks aloud, 'I must have my baby'.

Barbara responds quietly but firmly, 'I owe you a debt for telling me all this. I need to think about it. But I'll help you if I can.'

#

The year has rolled round. It is now Spring again. The daffodils are in bloom. The winebar waitress is bustling about as Tracey Livo enters the winebar with her friend and co-worker Katy. They sit - the waitress takes the order and returns with a drink and a bag of crisps.

Tracey orders. 'Two diet cokes please and a bag of crisps.'

Katy is curious 'Are we on our diet or not? '

'Sort of yes - but not entirely. I've got a packet of biscuits back in the salon in case we get low sugar before tea time. Till then we starve. And share one bag of crisps.'

'Seems pointless to lose weight when all the men I know seem to like a bit of female flesh on a woman.'

'Is that what you think?'

'I don't know what I think. Mostly I just think what I'm told to think. Or perhaps I just keep on thinking what I was thinking before.'

'I know the feeling. '

'Not like Judy. She's really changed since I first met her when I started working at the salon. Like a different person in the last year.'

'Yes hasn't she just.'

'Well I'm trying to look good for Roger. Judy told me she's moved on from Roger - why I don't know - but she was definite. She's always known I fancied him. She told me he was now available'.

Katy snorts loudly. 'He won't stay available for long. He's lovely. Do you think he'll come?'

'Well he said he would. I came right out and asked him for a date. Just a drink in the wine bar. He looked at me long and hard - then he said he would love to. I hope it works out. I think we might be very compatible.'

Katy is very happy for her friend. 'So do I - I'll disappear when he comes.'

'Thanks Katy - I'll do the same for you.'

Roger enters the wine bar, looking around for his date. He spots Tracey and Katy, hesitates and comes over to their table.

'Tracey - hello.'

'This is my colleague Katy.'

Katy is very friendly. 'Hello Roger - I've heard a lot about you - I'll catch up later Trace - just off now.' She stands up and walks quickly to the exit. 'See you back at the salon.'

Tracey is very pleased to see Roger. She stands, takes both his hands and pulls him down next to her. 'Come and sit down. Lovely to see you. How have you been?'

Roger is very pleased to see Tracey. 'Well it's lovely to see you too. I'm fine thank you....'. Roger brings up the inevitable subject. 'Have you seen Judy? How is she?'

'She's fine. Shame about you two breaking up.'

Roger is philosophical about his ex. 'One of those things. I'm over it now. We grew apart.'

Tracey commiserates with Roger. She saw herself the changes in her friend. 'I saw it happen. I don't see much of her now. She's bought that big house in London now she's mainly based there. Cost an arm and a leg and she bought it without a mortgage. Alright for some. She's Miss Moneybags alright - that and the Porsche she drives. Bit out of my league now.'

'One of those things. I'm over it now.' He goes on about the transformation that occurred. 'You know how she changed when they made her a salesperson and she started to do spectacularly well. She made five times her sales target after just three months of last year. She's all over the place now, getting promotions right and left. She's just back from Germany - selling many a purlin in Berlin. Ha. How about that for salesman's wit? Many a purlin in Berlin.'

Tracey wants to be accommodating and friendly, but she is after all a poet, and things poetic matter to her. 'I think that's very witty Roger. Doesn't quite scan though does it? Matter of accented syllables thingy. Purlin... Berlin.'

'Scan? Oh I forgot you're a poet. Yes I see. Oh well I do my best. As a matter of fact it was hard keeping up with her. I'm not the world's greatest salesman but I do all right. '

Tracey warms to her man 'I think you do all right - you're fine by me.'

Roger relaxes. 'Not in her league though. All of us at Wellington owe her a big debt for saving the Truedawn contract. If she hadn't fixed it we'd all be out on the street. And now she's blazing a trail across the country and Europe with the new purlins - amazing sales'

'Well we're still friends though I don't see so much of her now she's gone to that other office. Miss Big-Shot...

So... what are your plans for this evening?'

'I haven't got any plans for this evening.'

Now a tease from Tracey. 'Well how about making some and including me in them? - look I made up a couplet just for non-poets like you - Roger Marlowe's fine by me -Roger Marlowe's my cup of tea.

Roger is on board with that sentiment. He responds swiftly 'Definitely..... Definitely.'

#

The following week it is still Spring in the Midlands and love is in the air for Nicolette and Barbara. They are in a softly lit luxurious hotel room in the centre of Birmingham. The hotel is very well known for assignations. I was told about this evening meeting many years later by the desk clerk, who I got to know quite well. He assured me it was all true, and I have every reason to believe him. There is a very large bed, on which is a scarlet satin bedspread. Pink lampshades and soft pink light. Nicolette and Barbara are lounging on the bed in flattering negligees and expensive, sexy lingerie with a glass of expensive champagne.

Barbara is enjoying herself in an odd sort of way. 'This is all very pleasant. Lovely champagne, your charming company. I do feel a little odd. You do realise I'm not gay don't you? Ha ha. Of course you've told me you're not gay - just rather different. I hope you're right about our race. I sense an imminent fulfilment in some way.'

Nicolette is in charge. She seems to know what she is doing. 'Relax. Nothing will happen if there is just the two of us. Another drink?'

'Yes please. You must have done this before I suppose.'

Nicolette concurs and relates the tale of her previous such occasion. 'Yes - though not often. Everything with us is slow and very occasional. My last time was in 1940 - in the middle of the Battle of Britain. My partner had managed to bag a flyboy who was having a three day break from three weeks of solid air sorties night and day, in his Spitfire against the Luftwaffe. He could hardly see straight. I'm afraid our little session didn't help his vision much. Afterwards we put him back in his uniform and stuck him on the train for his RAF airfield in Norfolk - he was fast asleep when the train left the station. A wonderful memory. I was in heaven for weeks afterwards. My partner conceived.'

'Had you known her long?'

'No - just a few months - rather like us. I stayed with her for the birth - a girl of course - we are all female - and then lost touch. She died when the child was seven. I helped in finding a good foster home and have watched out for her since with the odd bit of financial assistance.' Nicolette grew solemn. She shuddered and stretched, breathing in the hot air in the room, heavy with the scent of the two woman's perfumes, and their body scents which mingle delicately together. 'Now it is my turn.... I'm entirely ready.'

There is a knock at the door - Nicolette goes to the door and admits Roger, who hesitates in the entrance as he sees the scene before him.

'Roger Marlowe! Thank you for coming. You are right on time. Do come in. Please excuse my dress - or lack of dress. Ha ha. We're just having a couple of drinks - let me offer you one.'

Nicolette leaves the bed and walks to the table, where she pours him a drink and gives it to him - it is pink and fizzy - not the champagne but some other concoction.

Roger takes the drink and nervously takes a sip. 'Thanks. Sorry to disturb you. You said it was urgent. I've brought the new brochure on our purlins.' He waves the brochure at Nicolette, who takes it and puts it on the table. She smiles broadly. 'No really - you're right on time. This is going to be an informal meeting. No purlins. Really informal.. Bottoms up! Do people still say that?'

Nicolette's charisma is set to stun. Roger is in the beam. He takes a big swig and splutters a bit- it is strong stuff 'Cheers!

Barbara smiles as well, She is very pleased to see him. 'Yes, I think people still say that. Down the hatch!'

Nicolette makes the introduction, though it is not needed. 'You know Ms. Sew of course.'

And Barbara takes his hand and shakes it gently 'Hello Roger. How are you?'

Roger replies hesitantly. 'Well - I'm fine. How are you? ...Cheers!' Another nervous swig- this one really hits the spot.

'Cheers!', from Barbara, who takes another swallow of champagne and gives a small sigh of pleasure as the bubbles do their stuff. Nicolette says 'This is really good stuff. You'll be feeling the effects already I expect. A wonderful tingling in the loins... and a dreamy, languorous lethargy. Come and sit next to me. Why don't you take your jacket off. It's nice and warm in here isn't it?'

Roger takes off his jacket as bidden and hangs it on the back of a chair that is conveniently placed. He sits on the bed between the two women who have made a space for him. This is the weirdest sales meeting he has been in, but he is willing to go along. Who knows what sales he might make - and he really needs a sale.

He speaks up 'Well - this is informal - yes it is rather warm. Er... what's the meeting about? You said it was urgent.'

Nicolette answers languidly 'Oh it is urgent. We are both feeling very urgent. How's the tingling feeling?'

Barbara is now much aroused. She reaches to Roger. 'Let me take your tie off'.

Roger is now well under the influence of the pink fizzy drink. He allows his tie to be taken off, his shirt to be unbuttoned and his shoes to be removed. His speech is now slurred. 'It is rather warm isn't it - haha? '

Barbara carries on with the undressing. 'Let me take your shoes off.'

Roger's drink has worked very fast. He is now befuddled and helplessly intoxicated. He sighs 'This drink is beautiful - it really hits the ... hits the ... hits the spot! You can untie the knots, this drink has hit the spots. He giggles.'

Nicolette calculates and says 'Just one more swig I think.'

Roger drains the glass and Nicolette takes it from him. Her calculation is correct. He is ready for the big event. For him the lights appear to fade and then change. There is much red and leaping shadows - and the odd flash of lightning.

Barbara starts to growl softly, lost in an erotic stupor, her eyes open wide and staring; Nicolette follows suit. Both women hurl themselves at Roger. They wrestle him unresisting to the bed, tear off his clothes and their own, and writhe furiously on his helpless and almost unconscious body. Bedclothes are tangled and pillows and bits of clothing thrown in the air. Roger, suddenly restored to consciousness, becomes suffused with a furious energy. He grunts and giggles softly and helplessly, as the two women growl and shriek. The orgy grows in passionate cadences. The woman scream and wail like banshees at the top of their voices. A climax occurs like the bursting of a high dam. Fluids flow forth from and to various orifices. Several long minutes of screaming; till Roger slumps, depleted, exhausted and dead to the world in a deep trance, and the two woman subside, like piles of seaweed left by the tide after a storm.

Roger sleeps deeply. The two women, immensely satisfied, also sleep.

Next morning, the chamber-maid, well used to disarranged bed linen, tidies up the room, and wrinkles her nose at the odd alien scents still hanging in the air.

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The years pass by. Now it is 1974. The British Prime Minister is no longer Harold Wilson, whose misfortune was to devalue the pound in the people's pocket, but Edward Heath, who was soon to have his own misfortune when he, presiding over a miner's strike power cuts and a three day week, asked the people, 'Who governs Britain?', and received the answer, 'Not you mate!' All are a little older.

It is early Monday morning in Autumn at Wellington Purlins Ltd. The weather mild and still warm. The monthly sales meeting has just finished and the buffet started. Bacon butties no longer scent the air. The firm has moved upmarket to canapes for sales meetings. The canapes come from the refrigerator and smell of nothing. A group of salespeople, including no less than two female salespersons, are standing around with drinks and snacks. Blantyre is, as usual, attentive and obsequious, a stance that has served him well over the years. 'Excellent meeting Sir Colin. All well with you?

Sir Colin is still Sales Director, though now only of the Black Country division of the firm, which has expanded mightily and is now head-quartered in London. 'Yes - thank you Blantyre. Great sales figures this month. Well done.'

Blantyre is excited about some news and discusses it with Sir Colin. 'I hear our local group is getting a visit from Judy Smithers today. I wonder what we have done to deserve the royal attention? I remember her from ten years ago, when she was a newbie salesman working for you. What a meteoric rise!'

Sir Colin confirms the news. 'Yes. She's here to keep a beady eye on us all, and deliver a pep talk no doubt. Ha ha.'

Blantyre prattles on. 'I remember - her sales figures were astonishing before she went up to board level. A top salesman indeed in my book. We all saw the birth of that super salesman didn't we?'

'Yes. That woman has done wonders for the firm. The board only made her Managing Director a year ago and now we've doubled in size again. Better not say salesman - she prefers salesperson.'

Blantyre is much gratified with this hint. 'Salesperson. Oh of course. Yes of course. Thank you.'

Roger Marlowe is present. He walks by with a drink in his hand, to be hailed by Sir Colin. 'Marlowe. Hey Marlowe! Didn't you used to be her boyfriend or something? Judy Smithers. I remember her as a young secretary. That was you wasn't it?'

Roger acknowledges the fact. 'Yes that was me. All of ten years ago that was. Like another age.'

Sir Colin reminisces. 'Good Lord yes. Just ten years. Life is full of surprises. She was a secretary, but I always thought she would go far that young lady. It was me wasn't it that gave her her first sales assignment.'

'The Truedawn job. Very nearly my last sales assignment.'

'Yes I remember that too. Potential disaster there. She fixed it all as if by magic. Remarkable.'

Judy enters and all stand for her. The light changes slightly. Is this her charisma or just a cloud passing off from the sun? She has seemingly not aged much, still a young woman, but quite changed. She has grown in stature and authority and has an aura of power. She wears an expensive, beautifully tailored, power suit in dove grey. It shows off her trim figure. Skirt length just below the knee. Sober but not dull. Her elegant shoes are highly-polished, shiny, and black. A light lilac silk blouse sits below her suit jacket, and round her

neck a small fortune in pearls. A very well-dressed and beautifully groomed young male flunkey follows her in, two paces behind. He carries her briefcase and sets her off perfectly.

She smiles broadly and warmly. 'Good morning sales team. Please take your seats. ' The team feel included and valued. They all find their seats and sit, bar Sir Colin, who somehow prefers to stand in her presence. She is many ranks above him in this army.

She goes on. 'This is just a flying visit. I have some news on our new division I'd like to announce and I've also just introduced a new bonus scheme - which I'm sure you will find very interesting. Then I'll stay for some of your sales meeting.'

Sir Colin shakes hands with Judy and flusters. 'A pleasure to have you with us Ms. Smithers. You are very welcome. I'm afraid our sales meeting is over, but please do join us for a drink and a bite after your presentation'.

Judy graciously accepts. 'Yes I shall enjoy that very much. It's nice to be back at Wellington. Nice to meet my old colleagues again.' She smiles and looks around the room, including in her gaze her old associates, 'Mr. Marlowe. Sir Colin. Mr Jackson. Mr Blantyre.' She makes her speech. Her voice is brisk and low. 'Now our new titanium fixings division has opened for business. The head is Charlie Punnett who is moving over from property. You will all be receiving a brochure. Please read it and be sure to notify Charlie Punnett's office if you pick up any sales leads for titanium fixings. We hope to turn over ten million plus in the first year and we need your help to get there. Our new bonus scheme has points for referred sales leads - so it's in your interest to keep your eyes open. My assistant will hand out a brief outline of the bonus scheme - you can read it at your leisure - any queries please put them through Sir Colin or direct to my office if you wish. I'm planning that the new bonus scheme will ignite your fire. My aim is to double our sales within the next eighteen months.'

Judy pauses and begins her peroration, the pitch and intensity of her speech rising gradually, 'Our products are the finest in the world. Especially the new titanium range which

is a real winner - they may not be the cheapest but they are worth it to our customers - top quality and rugged reliability are vitally important to our customers - and we provide them! We provide them! Top quality and rugged reliability in Wellington titanium!' The final phrases of the speech bring delighted applause from the sales team - now fired up and ready to get selling.

She smiles to the room and finishes, 'Now please resume your drinks party - you deserve it after such a successful month.'

The audience all stand and pick up their drinks and plates. Judy joins Roger and takes him to one side. 'Hello Roger - how are you? How is Tracy?'

'Hello Judy. Congratulations on your promotions. I hear you are doing very well. Tracy is fine thank you - we are planning another holiday in Spain this year.'

'Yes. Give her my regards. How is the baby? I miss the old days.'

'The baby is fine thank you. Yes - we're all getting older. Ha ha. Actually you're not - at least you don't seem to have aged at all. How do you manage that?'

Judy smiles. She is used to this compliment. 'I don't know. Pure thoughts and high minded living I suppose. People do remark on it a lot - those who knew me before.'

'Yes - do you plan on settling down and having children some day?'

'I don't know. Not in the near future for sure. Maybe in the far off yonder.'

Roger recollects. 'Bit like that consultant that started you off. She was a lot older than she looked wasn't she. I seem to remember. Though my memory of her is a bit vague.' His eyes defocus. He is lost somewhere, searching for a trace of the memory that eludes him...for a long moment he freezes. In his brain faint echoes of screaming and thrashing bodies... alien scents...

Judy gives him a gentle shake. 'Wake up Roger! Snap out of it! Nicolette Diralt? I wanted to tell you about Nicolette Diralt. Then you went all catatonic. In a trance.'

'Oh.'

'Have you heard she has died? It happened a week ago. '

'Oh.'

'Hadn't you heard? Yes. It happened a week ago. I was very sad - she was such a help to me when I started out in sales.'

'Oh.'

Apparently Roger has not heard. Judy goes on, 'I met her a few months ago and she said a very odd thing to me - almost as if she knew she had not long to live. Weird. She said I should remember her in a hundred years time.....and she said 'femina sapiens'. Very odd - normally 'homo sapiens' isn't it? Sounds like a new species of women. Must be her little joke.'

Judy ignores Roger's blank face and continues with her news. 'She had a little girl who she had just packed off to boarding school. Apparently she appointed Miss Sew as the little girl's guardian. Do you remember Miss Sew?'

Roger has now returned to Planet Earth, 'Oh really? Yes I do - very well.'

Judy has more information to impart. 'Yes. And she made another weird remark. She said her little girl was not yours.... did you and she have a fling? I remember she once asked me if she could borrow you. I thought that was for some sales demo?'

'I don't remember much about her.... Memory all blank regarding her and who was it - oh yes of course - Miss Sew.'

Judy awaits his reply with interest. 'Yes....'

'I do remember she was a super salesperson..... Bit like you turned out to be in fact.... Funny old business sales isn't it?'

Judy has caught something of Roger's mood and stares into space herself. For a moment reverting to her earlier persona: marvelling how Fortuna had smiled on her. Had she

really been a humble secretary worrying about her tiny mortgage; was she really now a powerful executive and wealthy via her shareholding in the new group?

She softly says her farewells to her old boyfriend. 'Yes.... Well good bye Roger... Keep up the good work.....'

She snaps out of her trance and briskly summons her flunkey. 'John!'

John rushes to her side, picks up her briefcase, and together they start to exit. Led by Blantyre, who composed it, the sales team break into their new sales chant, as they give her a cheer and watch her go. 'Let's give three cheers for Judy S! Of all the sales bods she's the best! We can sell it! We can sell it! It's no pose! Fridges to eskimos!'

Roger does not join the song and dance but stares into space again as Judy and flunkey stride out.

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I learned about all this from Roger himself, who became a good mate of mine in later years. We often used to go drinking together after a game of squash. I would quiz him about the art and science of sales as I was just becoming a salesman myself. He taught me a lot, and he would let slip the details of his experiences bit by bit. Yes... he told me he had changed the names of some of the cast in his little story, but I knew who he was talking about. A very interesting tale told over six or eight pints of Ansells mild ale. Do you know it? Warm, dark brown and not too strong - a beautiful drink for a long convivial evening in the pub. Happy days.