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Sol paced restlessly around his flat. More than once he picked up the telephone with the intention of phoning the police. But he never made the call. He went to bed in an agitated frame of mind and slept fitfully. Images of the dead appeared in his dreams. In one, he was in a kayak on a calm sparkling sea, paddling towards a white Lilo which was floating slowly out to sea. On it lay a naked young woman. As he approached she seemed to drift away. The sky darkened and the sea grew turbulent. When finally he reached the white Lilo he discovered only a rotting, maggoty corpse, with skin the colour of a peeled potato. Horrified, he turned his kayak and paddled furiously. But he could not escape. He and the stinking corpse were pulled towards a great vortex, were sucked in and spun furiously. Each dizzying revolution took him further from the lip and closer to the densely black opening at the centre of the whirlpool. Sol was terrified and at the same time burningly curious as to what he would find there. He awoke with a cry, sweating and breathless.

He lay on the bed reflecting on the images that were still vivid in his mind. The kayak was the one he once owned, that was plain. The woman had looked familiar, a cross between the Rachel who had washed his hair and the body on the white slab. He felt tired and drifted easily into sleep once more, which this time was deep and untroubled, so that he awoke refreshed in mid morning. Moreover,

the events of the previous day now seemed remote and unreal.

He showered, breakfasted, then walked to the newsagent for his daily paper. He returned home, settled himself in a chair, and turned directly to the crossword.

'Let's get the old mind into gear,' he said. But it was much the same as the day before. He raced through half a dozen clues and then was unable to progress.

Sol thought he might eat out that night, on his own, as he usually did, with a book, so that his fellow diners would think he was an eccentric writer, or a scholar who chose to use the time productively, rather than someone who had no partner or close friends.

He turned to the features pages, where a review of a recently opened seafood restaurant caught his eye. The critic – one Breen Maricaibo – began by saying she and her partner had had a 'little fallout' on the way to the restaurant and they were still 'snapping at each other like demented piranhas' as they studied the menu. However, the excellence of the food by stages dissipated the animosity so that by the last spoonful of salmon mousse they were smiling at each other, they were playing footsie during the main course, and by the time the sweet arrived she was squatting on the table-top filling the otherwise hushed restaurant with lusty atavistic howling. Sol, like the huge majority of readers, was not the least bit interested in the tedious day-to-day details of a journalist's life and so moved on.

He turned to another page and a blaster headline caught his attention.

ASBESTOS HORROR
by Ganny McIlwham
Environment Correspondent

A wave of pathological terror swept the town today after a single fibre of asbestos was discovered in a sealed container in an underground bank vault.

According to one unconfirmed source, grown men wept and tore off their own limbs rather than risk coming into contact with the horrifying substance – whose lung-rotting deadliness comes in a variety of bewildering colours.

Local councillor Krige Nimgimmer said: ‘It’s a tragedy and a catastrophe. The end of civilization as we know it. But it doesn’t mean the town isn’t a nice place to live and raise a family. It is, and there are excellent amenities and good shopping, and generous rates and rent holidays for new businesses.’

Jarry Gowser, chairman of the Ratepayers’ Association, said something should be done about it. ‘Something should be done about it,’ he said.

A police spokesman said the force was being coy about the whole thing: ‘There has been a complaint and we’re monitoring the situation. It’s too early to say at this stage of the investigation if it’s an asbestos-related incident or not. But we’re keeping an open mind and not ruling anything in or out.’

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‘Hmm,’ mused Sol. ‘A slow news day, I would say.’

He looked at his watch, threw the newspaper aside, put his jacket on and left the flat. He had a dental appointment.

The dental receptionist explained that Sol’s regular dentist was not at work. There had been a telephone call three days

previously, from Patagonia, where his parents had retired to raise beef cattle. They had been doing rather well, but there had been an accident and his mother was not expected to recover.

Sol expressed his sympathies then turned his attention once more to the woman's lissom white-coated form.

'There is a locum to take his place,' said the receptionist. 'Would you like to see him?'

Sol replied that he would, adding that one dentist was much like another in his experience.

'I wouldn't be too sure,' she replied with a little smile, and asked him to go on in to the surgery.

The nurse, older than any Sol had encountered before, greeted him and repeated what the receptionist had said about the absence of the regular dentist, Dr Corrigan.

'Yes, I've been told. Most unfortunate circumstances,' said Sol. He looked at the dentist and then, with puzzlement at the nurse.

'Yes, I know,' she said, wearily. 'He's blind.'

As if her statement was a cue, the dentist stumbled into a table and scattered some instruments on the floor.

'Pick them up, would you, Hetty?' he said. 'And put them through the sterilizer. Don't just put them back on the table. They'll need to be cleaned. People come in here with dog merde on the soles of their shoes, you know. I can smell it before they've left the waiting room. This is what happens when you're blind. Your other senses grow sharper. Everyone has a smell. I can smell Hetty. I can smell you. You probably don't realize how much you smell.'

'Dear, really,' Hetty said, and looked apologetically at Sol.

'Oh, it's not a bad smell. Not unpleasant. Smells don't have to be bad. But I would recognize you if you came again.'

'I should perhaps explain', said Hetty, 'that though my husband may have no sight, his other senses are unimpaired – he works by touch much of the time. I act as his eyes to a limited extent. I can guide his hands.'

'How was Dr Corrigan on the blindness issue?' asked Sol.

'We sort of skirted around it,' admitted Hetty. 'When we spoke on the phone he didn't ask, so we didn't bring it up. My husband is a fully qualified dental surgeon, after all.'

'Oh, I don't doubt,' said Sol.

'I wasn't always blind, you know,' said the dentist.

'It happened about ten years ago,' explained Hetty.

'Just woke up one morning and everything was black,' continued the dentist. 'Doctors were stumped. Said it was some sort of virus and it would probably go away in its own time. But it didn't. Never seen a thing since. Completely black. Most blind people see shapes, you know. Outlines and things. I see nothing.'

'Well,' said Sol, touched by the man's plight. 'It was very courageous of you to continue as a dentist. Many might have given up.'

'What was I supposed to do?' the blind dentist asked sharply. 'Stand on a street corner and sell matches?'

'They don't do that any more, Bernard,' said Hetty, gently.

'Or sit making bloody paper poppies all day?'

'We're of that generation,' said Hetty. 'We were taught just to soldier on.'

Sol studied the dentist. He was a tall man. Very tall, with a thin, striated neck the colour of old parchment. He seemed to be for ever craning, as if his blindness were the consequence of being stuck in a hole, such that if he could only peer over its edge he might see something. When he moved his head it appeared to rotate in a quantum

fashion rather than as a continuum, seemingly able to get from one position to another without passing through any points in between. Sol could think of no great evolutionary advantage this would give a creature – not even an eagle, which was the beast the dentist most resembled in profile. And not just an eagle, but a Semitic eagle. And not just a Semitic eagle, but a Semitic eagle whose father was a rabbi who could trace a direct lineage back to the prophet Ezekiel.

Indeed the nose was prominent.

‘Is the patient in the chair, Hetty?’

‘Not yet, dear. No.’

She smiled at Sol and invited him to sit down. After a moment’s hesitation Sol took his position.

‘Now,’ said the dentist. ‘I should tell you. Because I rely so much on touch, I don’t use gloves. That’s a modern thing anyway. They’re not essential. But you can be assured, my hands are clean.’ And he held them up for Sol to see, front and back.

Hetty guided the dentist closer to the patient.

‘Just close your mouth to start with,’ said Hetty.

‘Relax,’ instructed the dentist. ‘I like to get a general feel of the shape of the face. The jaw line.’

When he had run his fingers over Sol’s jaw, he asked him to open wide. He slid a couple of fingers inside and ran the tips, very lightly, along the gums, and over all the surfaces of the teeth. Sol could taste the brackish residue of antiseptic soap.

‘Don’t need mirrors. Mirrors distort anyway,’ said the dentist. ‘Don’t have to go prodding gums with those miniature gaff things – can’t even remember what they’re called, been so long since I used one. Barbaric. Ahh! Some tartar there. Did you get that, Hetty?’

‘Yes, dear. I’ve written it down.’

‘There’s some gum recession too. At the front. Not a lot I can do about that, I’m afraid. Write that down, Hetty!’

‘Yes, I know, Bernard. I know what to do. You don’t have to keep telling me.’

‘Fingers are sensitive, full of nerve ends,’ said the dentist as he continued to feel the inside of Sol’s mouth. ‘Do you know which part of the body has the greatest concentration of nerve ends? Hmm?’

‘Earlobe,’ replied Sol, although it came out as ‘eghrurb’.

‘No, it’s not the tip of the penis.’ The dentist smiled, the only time he did in the whole session. ‘Most people think that. Most men, anyway. No, it’s the earlobe. I ask you, what’s the point of that? Nature got that one wrong. A few token nerves to let you know when it’s cold, or when the wife’s nibbling it. That’s all the nerve ends you need in an earlobe.’

The dentist withdrew his fingers, which seemed very thick to Sol. Too thick for a dentist, more befitting a grave-digger or a farmer.

‘Oh, do excuse me,’ said Sol. ‘I appear to have dribbled.’

Hetty handed him a tissue, and also a tumbler of liquid the colour of dilute blackcurrant cordial. It was antiseptic wash.

‘Just rinse and spit,’ said Hetty.

‘In the bowl, if you please,’ added the dentist, severely.

‘Dear, you don’t need to say that.’

‘You do, though, Hetty. You do! You have to spell it out. Some of the riffraff you get coming for treatment these days.’

‘Not this gentleman, dear. I must apologize—’

‘No need,’ said Sol, who had adapted to the dentist’s manner. ‘I can see your husband has a very subtle sense of humour. Very dry. Pawky, as the Scots say. Said without a smile.’

‘But that’s the way it should be,’ said Hetty. ‘It’s always struck me as conceited to laugh at one’s own witticisms.’

‘What are you talking about now?’ asked the dentist in a voice of weary irritation.

‘Nothing, dear. Nothing at all,’ replied Hetty, her tone peevish. ‘I was just trying to be friendly to the patient, but I suppose *that*’s not important.’

The dentist walked into the table again and a number of implements fell on the hard floor with a bright ringing sound.

‘Don’t worry, dear,’ said Hetty. ‘The other ones will be clean now. They’ve had their ten minutes in the sterilizer.’

‘Yes, well. Let’s get on with it then,’ said the dentist. ‘You need two fillings. One quite urgently, the other we can nip in the bud.’

‘We could do them now, if you like,’ suggested Hetty.

‘The thing is . . . ’ began Sol. So far he had been impressed with the dentist’s steady hand and diagnostic sensitivity. But a filling? A screaming drill? What use a steady hand if the diamond tip missed the mark and burrowed ferociously into soft tissue?

‘If you’re busy just now, then we could leave it until tomorrow,’ offered Hetty.

‘The thing is . . . ’ replied Sol who did not generally struggle to find the right words.

‘Bloody thing’s not working again!’ exclaimed the dentist plaintively.

‘It’s not switched on, dear. You have to switch it on.’

She flicked the power switch and the drill burst into life, almost leaping from his hand, like an angry serpent.

‘Thing is . . . ’ said Sol once more.

‘It’s okay,’ said the pained but dignified Hetty. ‘You don’t have to say anything. We understand.’

‘Thing is that Dr Corrigan and I go back a long way. I do feel it should be he who carries out the work.’

‘Of course.’

'I feel it would be underhand and disloyal if I—'
'Please don't worry about us. We'll get by,' said Hetty. She looked away and seemed to be struggling to hold back tears.
'I mean, perhaps a clean?' offered Sol. 'As I'm here I might as well—'
'Don't patronize us!' barked the dentist. 'You don't need me to clean your teeth.'
'I just thought—'
'Clean your own bloody teeth! What's the world coming to?'
'I'm just trying to be—'
Hetty intervened. 'He was just being kind, dear.'
'Don't need his charity.'
'He gets like this,' said Hetty. 'He's a proud man. It's been very difficult.'
'Yes, I can appreciate,' said Sol getting up out of the chair. 'Well, thank you both very much.'
'Just get out, would you?' said the dentist. This time Hetty said nothing in Sol's defence.
'Yes. I was just going, actually. I, er . . . thank you. Goodbye, and good luck.'

Parlando drew back the curtain at the same time as Sol walked through the door of the salon.

'I knew you'd be back,' he chimed. He seemed happy, pleased with himself.

Sol closed the door. 'That's more than I did. How did you know?'

'Because you've unfinished business here.'

'A haircut, you mean?'

'I suppose there's that, yes. No, the other thing.'

'What other thing?'

'I found a way to get you out of the hole you were in.'

‘What hole? I’m not in any hole.’

‘Not any more you’re not. Thanks to me.’

Sol stared at the hairdresser and was once more struck by the uncanny likeness to himself. And yet no-one else had commented on this. He thought some of the staff might have turned their heads when he walked through the salon yesterday; a double-take. Or it would have been an obvious handle for the hair-washer – Rachel, or not-Rachel – to have begun a conversation with.

Sol sighed. ‘I’m not sure why I came back, actually. I, er—’

‘Guilt. Guilt draws us back, like a dog to its vomit.’

‘But “guilt” suggests I’ve done something wrong.’

‘Don’t you believe it, Sol. Guilt needs no object to attach itself to. Listen.’ Parlando seemed to consider something for a moment. ‘Why don’t you come through for a coffee?’

‘Well, I—’

‘In the office. We can have a cosy little chat. I’ll let you in on what’s happening.’

‘That would be something,’ answered Sol. ‘I’d certainly like to know.’

As they walked through the salon, Parlando called to someone a little way off. ‘Oh, Rachel!’ He mimed holding a cup and tipping it to his mouth. ‘If you wouldn’t mind, love. In the office.’

Sol looked to where the request had been directed, but it could have been aimed at any one of a number of young women.

‘Rachel’s back at work, then?’ he remarked.

‘What?’

‘Didn’t she phone in sick yesterday morning?’

‘Did she?’

‘That’s what you said.’

‘Oh yes. Rachel. Of course. Gippy tum. She’s better now.’

‘And the other Rachel?’

‘Shhh!’ Parlando held his finger to his lips and said, sotto voce:

‘We’ll talk about her in the office . . . ‘Ah good,’ said Parlando as they stepped through the doorway. ‘Coffee’s ready.’

Sol looked to a desk where indeed there was steaming coffee in a silver pot, and two small cups of fine china. There was also a plate full of fancy French cakes.

‘How did . . . ? That was quick!’

He looked to Parlando for an explanation, but none was forthcoming.

‘You do worry about inconsequential things, Sol. Just help yourself, okay?’

As Sol sipped his coffee the events of earlier in the day came back to him. ‘Tell me,’ he asked. ‘Would you employ a blind hairdresser?’

‘I shouldn’t really say it, especially in front of a customer,’ Parlando replied, ‘but sometimes I think I have. Some of them haven’t a clue when they come here.’

‘Why do you take them on?’

‘Because it’s my job to teach them. To pass on what I know. If they leave here better than when they arrive, then my work has been done.’

There was on one side of the spacious office a bank of CCTV screens. Sol squinted into one and saw fuzzy images which appeared to represent two boiler-suited figures standing over a steaming cauldron, which now and then one of them stirred with a large paddle.

‘What’s happening here?’ Sol asked.

Parlando walked over and stood by his side, as Sol pointed to the screen.

‘Is that hair they’re pouring in?’

‘I believe so.’

‘Why?’

‘Because . . . ’ Parlando giggled uneasily. ‘I suppose I should know, shouldn’t I?’ He pressed a button and the image vanished. He pointed to another screen. ‘I wanted you to see this, anyway. That was where you were yesterday.’

Sol leaned forward. ‘Where I was washed? Bay 7?’

‘No. Next door.’

‘You mean where—’

‘Exactly.’

‘The unfortunate—’

‘Quite. Do you notice anything unusual?’

Sol studied the grey image. ‘No.’

‘Good.’ Parlando smiled. ‘Good. There is nothing unusual. Everything’s back to normal.’

They both watched as the attendant massaged Formula into a customer’s hair.

‘Business as usual, I would say,’ said Sol.

Parlando smiled again. ‘I tell you, things couldn’t have worked out better.’

‘Really?’

‘Fortune has smiled on us. Come and sit down. I’ll tell you about it.’

They sat at Parlando’s desk.

‘What’s the perfect way to get rid of bodies? What do you think?’

Sol felt uneasy at the question. ‘I really don’t know.’

‘Oh, come on! You read books, you’re a man of wide knowledge. What do you think?’

‘Well . . . ’ Sol thought. ‘I did see a film where they put a body – they were on a ship, this couple. They wrapped it in a blanket and just shoved it through the porthole.’

‘Brilliant! We’ll just charter a bloody steamer, shall we?’ Parlando picked up the phone and, not taking his eyes off Sol, stabbed randomly at the keypad. As soon as a voice

answered, he smiled and returned the receiver. ‘Just as well I didn’t let *you* take care of things.’ He laughed. ‘No, we don’t have to go to sea. In fact, we don’t have to do anything. It’s all taken care of.’

‘What? What’s taken care of?’

Parlando laughed again. He patted Sol’s thigh. ‘Good. I like it. You’ve got the idea. Funnily enough, you were part of the way there when you said “film”. That’s the key. I don’t know if you know, but they’re shooting a big scene for a new film in the town.’

‘I didn’t know, no.’

‘Down at the churchyard, at the edge of the common?’

‘Ah! I passed by there. I wondered what that was all about.’

‘It just so happens that this big scene is a funeral. Indeed, the funeral of the tragic couple around whom the entire plot revolves.’

‘So?’

‘So, two bodies, two coffins. Perfect.’

Sol thought about what Parlando had said. ‘Okay, just to get it perfectly straight. There’s a film involving a funeral. And the two bodies I witnessed – at least I think I did, it all seems very unreal – two real-life dead bodies are going to be, as it were, props in this film, and buried in a pretend funeral?’

‘Very good summary. Just so.’

‘Hmm. Okay,’ said Sol. ‘Let me play Devil’s Advocate here for a moment. If it’s a film, it’s not real. It’s pretend. Ergo, not a real funeral. Yes? No-one really dies in films, do they? Not really.’

‘Exactly. But that’s the whole point. For this “funeral”’ (Parlando’s index fingers etched the quotation marks in thin air) ‘we don’t need all the paraphernalia. We don’t need post-mortems, we don’t need death certificates, we don’t

need undertakers, and nor do we need officials who ask awkward questions.'

'Yes, but let's take it step by step. Supposing . . . well, how are you going to get the bodies on to the set, for a start? Without arousing suspicion?'

'It's done. Taken care of.'

'How?'

'Doesn't matter. As we speak there are two coffins containing bodies waiting to be lowered into the ground. The hole's already been dug. Ashes to ashes. They've been embalmed. All the bits that go off really quickly have been removed. They've had all the make-up on. You know? Full-facials from the undertaker.'

'It's possible, as it's only a film,' continued Sol, 'they might not follow the whole procedure. They might not bury anything. They might cut and take their lunch break just as the coffins are being lowered. Then what?'

'I've seen the script. They *do* get buried. It's a wonderful scene. Immensely moving. It's all there. The Latin chants, the altar boy swinging the censer. A choir. The jilted lover throws in a handful of dirt, then the embittered parent. The crowd melts away and the gravediggers – four of them, honest working-class types – start shovelling in the earth. Dust to dust, amen. I know this director. I do a lot of work for him – hairstyles for the cast – and he's big on authenticity. There's no way he would compromise with some half-arsed funeral scene where the coffins are not even buried. He has his reputation to think of, and he thinks about it constantly.'

Sol nodded, as if to commend Parlando on his argument. 'Okay, but just suppose they look *inside* the coffins, and discover there really *are* bodies in it?'

'Suppose they do,' replied Parlando, calmly. 'Suppose they do. Are they going to think, "Hello! someone's trying to dispose of some real dead bodies," or are they going to

think, “Pretty realistic, these corpses. Props have done a great job here.”? What do you think, Sol?’

Sol reflected awhile. ‘I’m thinking, how did a man like me, who has never had so much as a parking ticket in his life, get sucked into this? I’m thinking, it’s not right somehow: everyone deserves a proper send-off.’

‘And they’ve got one! They’ve got a fantastic funeral!’

‘No, it’s not the same—’

‘There’ll be hundreds of people. There’ll be . . . it’s all in the script. It’s magnificent in concept. And big. It’s a big scene. It’s so big they can only afford to do it once. Must be right first time.’

‘But it’s not *real*, is it? The *priest* isn’t real, for example, is he?’

‘He’s a great character actor. Good as any ordained priest, and probably better. His words are taken verbatim from the sanctified . . . liturgy, or whatever they call it.’

‘You’re ignoring my point,’ said Sol.

‘Honestly, you’re such a nit-picker.’

‘I think it pays to be sceptical in this life. And cautious.’

‘Scepticism is one thing but . . .’ Parlando tried to think of the second thing, but couldn’t. ‘You know, you can stretch scepticism just as much as belief. That’s what I’m trying to say.’

‘I just get the feeling – how shall I put it? You’re not the one in control. There’s someone else, someone I don’t know about, who’s pulling the strings.’

‘You’re saying I’m not in charge?’

‘That did occur to me, yes.’

‘I – work – for – no-one!’

‘Fine.’

‘I’m my own boss. That’s all a hairdresser has to aim for. To open a shop, be his own boss, and cherish the illusion he’s master of his own destiny.’

‘Okay, okay.’

‘Because otherwise . . . do you seriously think anybody wants to spend the whole of their working life, fifty years, just cutting hair? Just listening to the tedious chatter of asinine customers when you could be paying someone else a pittance to do it for you?’

‘Well, you know, it’s a job. Jobs need to be done.’

‘Platitudes. Clichés.’

‘It’s not my cup of tea, certainly,’ admitted Sol defensively. ‘And it’s not like that at my work. We only talk to communicate information germane to our work.’

‘It’s not my “cup of tea” either. That’s why I built up all this.’ Parlando gestured towards the cathode-ray representation of his empire.

‘You’ve done very well, Parlando. I applaud you.’

‘Don’t be so surprised! When it comes to business, hairdressing has a lot going for it. It’s up there with the essentials. People will die, people will be born and people have to eat. Hair will grow, and needs to be cut. We can’t stop it. Even when it stops growing on our head, it grows in other places. Even when we’re dead it keeps on growing. It doesn’t know when to bloody stop!’

‘Yes,’ said Sol. ‘There will always be a demand.’

‘And of course, we haven’t even talked about vanity. There’s no shortage of vanity in the world, and it isn’t going to go away.’

‘And yet for all that—’

‘I know what you’re going to say. People do fail at hairdressing, despite the great potential for success. Some of my staff leave to “set up on their own”, as they put it. And who can blame them? I give them my blessing, when what I should really say is: “Write No Hope Business Ltd on the sign above the shop. At least then when you do fail miserably no-one can accuse you of being unrealistic.” I don’t mind if

people want to reach for the stars, Sol, but, for goodness sake, how long's the human arm?'

'Two, three feet?'

'And how far's the nearest star?'

'Alpha Centauri? Oh, about four light years.'

'Exactly. You do the arithmetic, Sol.'

'I think I see your point. But we digress. To return to the matter in hand. You seem to have thought things through carefully, and in all your arguments there's a peculiar logic. I'm not saying this funeral plan won't work. It's just, I'm not exactly sure what's been going on and—'

'You don't have to know. It's not important that you do. I've not asked you to help in any of it. All I'm asking is that you draw a line under it all. Just get on with your life and forget about all this.'

'Yes. It's been a bit unsettling. I'd like to put it behind me.'

'Good. Fine.'

'One thing, though.'

'Yes?'

'I wouldn't mind that haircut at some point.'

Parlando smiled. 'Of course.'

'If you can fit me in?'

'As it happens, we've had some cancellations. Quite a few, actually.'

'Oh?'

'I think there must be a virus going around, or something. We'll book you in on the way out. Would you excuse me a minute? Coffee goes straight through me.' And Parlano left the room with alacrity.

Sol drifted over to the CCTV screens and scanned them. The day-to-day work of a busy salon continued. He pressed some buttons and watched the images change.

'Hello! What have we here?' It was a room with a small

bed, and nothing much else. A naked form glided into view, then out again. Sol wondered if there was any way of remotely adjusting the camera in that room, but then the young woman appeared again, this time full-frontal to the camera. Now with another body behind her.

‘What are you looking at?’

It was Parlando, returned, still adjusting his zip.

‘Nothing really.’ Sol stabbed some buttons in an attempt to get rid of the image, but all he got was a different aspect of the same scene.

Parlando stood next to him. ‘I see. Little bit of a voyeur, are we?’

‘Not really. What is this anyway?’

Parlando looked at the screen. ‘I think it’s pretty obvious what it is.’

‘No, I mean, why is it taking place in a hairdressing establishment?’

‘No-one’s forcing you to watch, if you find it all so bloody disgusting.’

‘I don’t think it’s disgusting.’ In fact, Sol was rather taken by the naked young form and found it hard to take his eyes off the screen.

It was as if Parlando could penetrate his thoughts. ‘Look, we’re both grown-ups. You don’t have to be prissy. If you’re interested you just have to ask for “Bay 17” when you book in. Okay? They’ll know what you mean. Bay 17.’

‘Yes, thank you, but I don’t usually—’

‘Yes, I know. You don’t have to pay for it. Scores of big-busted wantons beat a pathway to your door every Saturday night. Is that it?’

‘I don’t do too badly,’ replied Sol, although in reality he knew he didn’t do wondrous well when it came to women.

The door of the office opened and a secretary hurried in.

She appeared agitated. She was about to speak, then noticed Sol, who had turned to look at her.

‘Don’t worry, Ruth,’ said Parlando. ‘Sol’s okay. But what is it?’

‘The police are here!’ she gasped.

‘Police! What do you . . . ?’ Parlando hurried to the screens, pushed Sol aside, and scanned them.

‘Where, for God’s sake?’

‘In reception.’

He zoomed in on the two men, who appeared to be admiring the wooden curtain.

‘Shit!’ Parlando looked severely at Sol. ‘What have you been saying?’

‘Nothing. Don’t keep accusing me.’

‘Okay, okay. Just keep calm. Let’s all of us keep calm. *Calm*. Let me think. Right, I’ve got it. You pretend you’re me.’

‘What?’

‘Yes, we could maybe swap clothes.’

‘Whatever for?’

‘It’ll – no. No, you’re right. It’ll just make things more difficult.’ Parlando seemed to be turning things over in his mind. ‘I want you to come down with me,’ he said.

‘I don’t see what all this has to do with me.’

‘Just come with me. Whatever I say, back me up. That’s all I’m asking. I’m not telling, I’m asking.’

Sol sighed. He gestured helplessly. He was truly confused. He began to protest.

‘It’s not a lot to ask, is it?’ pleaded Parlando. ‘After what I’ve just done for you?’

‘I’m not sure I can help you. I—’

‘Good! Excellent! Don’t say anything, though, unless it’s to back me up. Right? Have you got that?’

Sol nodded warily.