What Was Lost

Catherine O'Flynn

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Extract

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Written for Peter,
and dedicated to the memory
of Donal of Hillstreet
and Ellen of Oylegate

1984

FALCON INVESTIGATIONS

1

Crime was out there. Undetected, unseen. She hoped she wouldn't be too late. The bus driver was keeping the bus at a steady 15 m.p.h., braking at every approaching green light until it turned red. She closed her eyes and continued the journey in her head as slowly as she could. She opened them, but still the bus lagged far behind her worst projection. Pedestrians overtook them, the driver whistled.

She looked at the other passengers and tried to deduce their activities for the day. Most were pensioners and she counted four instances of the same huge, blue checked shopping bag. She made a note of the occurrence in her pad; she knew better than to believe in coincidences.

She read the adverts on the bus. Most were adverts for adverts: 'If you're reading this, then so could your customers.' She wondered if any of the passengers ever took out advertising space on the bus, and what they would advertise if they did.

'Come and enjoy my big, blue, checked shopping bag, it is filled with catfood.'

'I will talk to anyone about anything. I also eat biscuits.'

'Mr and Mrs Roberts, officially recognized brewers of the world's strongest tea. "We squeeze the bag."'

'I smell strange, but not unpleasantly.'

Kate thought she would like to take out an advert for the agency. The image would be a silhouette of her and

Mickey within the lens of a magnifying glass. Below, it would say:

FALCON INVESTIGATIONS
Clues found. Suspects trailed.
Crimes detected.
Visit our office equipped with
the latest surveillance equipment.

She made another note in her pad of the phone number on the advert, to be rung at some later date when the office was fully operational.

Eventually the bus reached the landscaped lawns and forlorn, fluttering flags of the light industrial estates that surrounded the newly opened Green Oaks Shopping Centre. She paid particular attention to unit 15 on the Langsdale Estate, where she had once witnessed what seemed to be an argument between two men. One man had a large moustache, the other wore sunglasses and no jacket on what had been a cold day – she'd thought they both looked of criminal character. After some deliberation and subsequent sightings of a large white van outside the unit, she had come to the conclusion that the two men were trafficking diamonds. Today all was quiet at the unit.

She opened her pad at a page with 'Unit 15 Surveillance' written at the top. Next to that day's date she wrote in the slightly jerky bus writing that dominated the page: 'No sighting. Collecting another shipment from Holland?'

Fifteen minutes later Kate was walking through the processed air of the Market Place of Green Oaks. Market Place wasn't a market place. It was the subterranean part of the shopping centre, next to the bus terminals, reserved for the non-prestige, low-end stores: fancy goods stores, cheap chemists, fake perfume sellers, stinking butchers, flammable-clothes vendors. Their smells mingled with the

smell of burnt dust from the over-door heaters and made her feel sick. This was as far as most of Kate's fellow passengers ventured into the centre. It was the closest approximation of the tatty old High Street, which had suffered a rapid decline since the centre had opened. Now when the bus drove up the High Street no one liked to look at the reproachful boarded up doorways filled with fast-food debris and leaves.

She realized that it was Wednesday and that she'd forgotten to buy that week's copy of the *Beano* from her usual newsagent. She had no choice but to go to the dingy kiosk in the centre to get it. Afterwards she stood and looked again at the *True Detective* magazines on the shelf. The woman on the front didn't look like a detective. She was wearing a trilby and raincoat . . . but nothing else. She looked like someone from a *Two Ronnies* sketch. Kate didn't like it.

She rode the escalator up to the ground floor, where the proper shops, the fountains and plastic palms began. It was the school holidays, but too early to be busy. None of her classmates was allowed to go to the centre without their parents. Sometimes she'd bump into a family group with one of her peers in tow and would exchange awkward greetings. She had picked up a sense that adults tended to be uncomfortable with her solo trips out and about, so now whenever questioned by shop assistant, security guard or parent she would always imply that an unspecified adult relative was just off in another store. Largely, though, no one questioned her, in fact no one ever really seemed to see her at all. Sometimes Kate thought she was invisible.

It was 9.30 a.m. She retrieved her laboriously typewritten agenda from her back pocket:

09.30–10.45	Tandy: research walkie talkies and microphones
10.45–12.00	general centre surveillance
12.00–12.45	lunch at Vanezi's
12.45–13.30	Midland Educational: look at ink pads for fingerprinting
13.30–15.30	surveillance by banks
15.30	bus home

Kate hurried on to Tandy.

She was flustered to arrive at Vanezi's restaurant a good twenty minutes past noon. This was not the way a professional operated. This was sloppy. She waited by the door to be seated, though she could see her table was still free. The same lady as usual took her to the same table as usual and Kate slid into the orange plastic booth which offered a view out over the main atrium of the centre.

'Do you need to see the menu today?' asked the waitress.

'No thanks. Can I have the Children's Special please with a banana float? And can I not have any cucumber on the beefburger, please?'

'It's not cucumber, it's gherkin, love.'

Kate made a note of this in her pad: 'Gherkins/cucumbers – not same thing: research difference.' She'd hate to blow her cover on a Stateside mission with a stupid error like that.

Kate looked at the big plastic tomato-shaped tomato-sauce dispenser on her table. They were one of her favourite things – they made total sense.

At school last term, Paul Roberts had read out his essay, 'The best birthday ever', which culminated in his grandparents and parents taking him out to Vanezi's for dinner. He spoke of eating spaghetti with meatballs, which for some reason he and everyone else in the class had found

funny. He was still excited as he rushed through his story of drinking ice-cream floats and ordering a Knickerbocker Glory. He said it was brilliant.

Kate couldn't understand why he didn't just take himself there on a Saturday lunchtime if he liked it so much. She could even take him the first time and tell him the best place to sit. She could show him the little panel on the wall that you could slide back to reveal all the dirty plates passing by on a conveyor belt. She could tell him how one day she hoped to place some kind of auto-shutter action camera on the belt, which could travel around the entire restaurant taking surveillance shots unseen, before returning to Kate. She could point out the washing-up man who she thought might be murderous, and perhaps Paul could help her stake him out. She could maybe invite him to join the agency (if Mickey approved). But she didn't say anything. She just wondered.

She glanced around to check that no one could see, then she reached into her bag and pulled out Mickey. She sat him next to her by the window, so that the waitress wouldn't notice, and where he had a good view of the people below. She was training Mickey up to be her partner in the agency. Generally Mickey just did surveillance work. He was small enough to be unobtrusive despite his rather outlandish get-up. Kate liked Mickey's outfit even though it meant he didn't blend in as well as he might. He wore a pin-striped gangster suit with spats. The spats slightly spoiled the Sam Spade effect, but Kate liked them anyway; in fact she wanted a pair herself.

Mickey had been made from a craft kit called 'Sew your own Charlie Chimp the Gangster' given to Kate by an auntie. Charlie had languished along with all of Kate's other soft toys throughout most of her childhood, but when she'd started up the detective agency last year she thought he looked the part. Charlie Chimp was no good though.

Instead he became Mickey the Monkey. Kate would run through their agenda with him each morning and he always travelled with her in the canvas army surplus bag.

The waitress brought the order. Kate ate the burger and perused the first *Beano* of the new year, while Mickey kept a steady eye on some suspicious teenagers below.

2

Kate lived a bus journey away from Green Oaks. Her home was in the only Victorian block of houses left in the area, a red-brick three-storey outcrop which looked uncomfortable amidst the grey and white council-built cuboids. Kate's house was sandwiched between a newsagent's shop on one side, and a butcher and greengrocer on the other. Her house had clearly also been a shop once, but now a net curtain hung across the front window and what had been the shop was a sitting room where Kate's grandmother spent her long afternoons watching quiz shows.

The house was the only one in the block not to function as a business (aside from Kate's putative agency operation), and it was also the only one used as a home. None of her shopkeeper neighbours lived above their shops; at around six o'clock each evening they would shut up and depart for their semis in the suburbs, leaving silence and emptiness on all sides of Kate's room.

Kate knew and liked the shopkeepers well. The greengrocer's was run by Eric and his wife Mavis. They had no children, but they were always kind to Kate and bought her a surprisingly well-judged Christmas present each year. Last year it had been a Spirograph, which Kate had used to make a professional-looking logo on her business cards. Now her time was taken up with the agency and constant surveillance activity, Kate had less time to visit the couple, but still once a week she would pop in for a cup of tea and, swinging her legs from the stool behind the

counter, she would listen to Radio 2 and watch the customers buy vast quantities of potatoes.

Next to Eric and Mavis was Mr Watkin the butcher. Mr Watkin was an old man, Kate estimated probably seventy-eight. He was a nice man with a nice wife, but very few people bought their meat from him any more. Kate thought this possibly had something to do with the way Mr Watkin stood in his shop window swatting flies against the sides of meat with a large palette knife. It was also perhaps a self-perpetuating situation, in that the fewer customers Mr Watkin had, the less meat he stocked, and the less meat he had, the less he looked like a butcher, and the more he looked like a crazy old man who collected and displayed bits of flesh in his front window. The previous week Kate had passed the window to see it contained only a single rabbit (and Kate was sure the only person alive who still ate rabbit was in fact Mr Watkin himself), some kidneys, a chicken, a side of pork and a string of sausages. This in itself was nothing too remarkable for Mr Watkin, but what caused Kate to stop and stare was an apparent new marketing initiative by the butcher. Evidently he had become a little embarrassed by the minimal nature of his window displays and so perhaps in order to make them seem less odd (and this is where Kate felt he'd really miscalculated), he had arranged the items in a jaunty tableau. Thus it appeared that the chicken was taking the rabbit for a walk by its lead of sausages, over a hillock of pork under a dark red kidney sun. Kate looked up from the grisly scene to see Mr Watkin nodding at her in amazement from inside the shop, thumbs aloft, as if taken aback by his own flair.

On the other side of Kate's house was Mr Palmer the newsagent. Mr Palmer worked alongside his son Adrian, who was the closest Kate had to a best friend, and was also the first and so far only client of Falcon Investigations.

Adrian was twenty-two and had been to university. Mr Palmer had wanted Adrian to get a 'proper career' after graduation, but Adrian had no such ambitions, and was happy to spend his days reading behind the counter and helping to run the small business. The Palmer family lived in a modern semi on the outskirts of town, but the mother and sister rarely visited the shop – sweet selling was left to the men of the family. Adrian treated Kate like an adult, but then Adrian treated everyone the same. He wasn't capable of putting on a different face for different customers as his father did. Mr Palmer could switch from an avuncular 'Now then, young man', to an utterly sincere 'Such a shocking headline, isn't it, Mrs Stevens?' in seconds.

But, whatever Adrian's enthusiasms were, he tended to assume they were shared by all, or at least would be if he spread the word. He spent his afternoons buried in the *NME* or reading books about musicians. He would earnestly recommend albums to his customers, seemingly blind to the improbability of Mrs Docherty suddenly switching from Foster and Allen to the MC5, or Debbie Casey and her giggling teenage pals ever finding much of significance in Leonard Cohen. As soon as Mr Palmer left him alone in the shop, Jimmy Young's radio show would be switched off and Adrian would slip a tape into the tinny radio cassette player. He thought that the reason no one ever asked him what was playing was because they were a little shy, so he would always put a scrawled sign on the counter: 'Now Playing: Captain Beefheart, *Lick My Decals Off, Baby*. For more information just ask a member of staff'.

With Kate, though, Adrian liked to talk about crime detection, about classic detective movies, about which customers might be killers, about where they might have hidden their victims' bodies. Adrian would always come up with the most inventive body dumps. Sometimes Kate

would go with Adrian to the wholesalers, advising him on what sweets to buy, and they would look at the burly warehousemen and assess which of them had criminal records.

Adrian knew about Falcon Investigations, though not about Mickey. Mickey was top secret. Mr Palmer had been getting increasingly irate about schoolkid sweet pilfering and so Adrian contracted Falcon Investigations to carry out a security assessment of the store. Kate told him that her rate was £1 a day plus expenses. She said she expected the assessment to take half a day at the most and no expenses would be incurred as she lived next door, and so she prepared an invoice for 50p. Kate was indescribably elated at this 'proper' commission. She even went out and bought a real invoice pad with duplicate sheets, which at 75p put the P&L in deficit, but she was building for the future. Kate asked Adrian to act as he normally would do when working in the shop and she played the part of a shoplifter. She said this was essential for her to pinpoint weak spots. After twenty minutes Kate left the shop and returned to the office to write up the report. She presented it to Adrian a couple of hours later, along with 37p worth of sweets she had managed to lift. The report was in two parts, the first detailing her time in the shop, the second making recommendations to 'stamp out crime'. These involved a rearrangement of some of the loose pocket-money sweets, a complete overhaul of the crisp display rack and the positioning of two mirrors at strategic points. Adrian treated the report with the seriousness in which it had been compiled and carried out the recommendations to the letter. Mr Palmer was delighted with the results and pilfering was brought to a virtual standstill. Kate asked Mr Palmer if he would write down any positive comments he had about the service, as she had seen other businesses use such personal testimonials on promotional material.

She imagined her advert on the bus garlanded with sincere plaudits:

'We received a rapid, professional service at very reasonable rates.'

'Our agent was confidential, tactful and most of all EFFECTIVE.'

'Crime rates have plummeted since we called in Falcon Investigations.'

She was then slightly disappointed to receive instead from Mr Palmer: 'Good girl, Kate! You're a little treasure!!'