I Did a Bad Thing

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Extract

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One

His name was fourth on the list. Coming after Flaherty, Rowbotham and Lees. It was his name but it didn't mean it was him. Only that after all this time, I still flinched at the sight of it.

'Is this it?' I said to Terry, waving the piece of paper in the air. 'No CVs or anything?'

'They're probably somewhere in Doreen's filing system,' he said, staring out from his goldfish bowl office across the newsroom.

'And where is Doreen today?'

'Shopping for shoes in Stratford-upon-Avon.'

'What's wrong with the shoe shops in Birmingham?'

'Not the same level of service, apparently.'

I shook my head. Doreen had filed Princess Diana's death under M for minor royal. Trying to find the CVs would involve probing the dark recesses of her mind as well as her filing cabinets. I didn't want to go there. To be honest, I didn't even want to be doing these interviews. But Phil was still off with stress (allegedly caused by the disappearance of his deputy editor clipboard) and Keith and Lisa were too busy presiding over the military junta on the news desk to be called upon. Besides, for some reason I had yet to work out, I was Terry's 'chosen one'. Which explained why I was sitting there staring at a list of names. One of which was causing the crisp white shirt I had put on that morning to stick to my back.

'Do you remember anything about them?' I said. 'First

names, male or female, where they're working?'

The permanent furrow in Terry's brow deepend. 'One's a woman, works on some magazine, one's shifted on the nationals, one's a lobby correspondent for the Press Association and one works for the *Western Mail* in Cardiff. Not sure which is which, though.'

It wasn't much help. A bit like playing the fifty-fifty card on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. I was left with two possible candidates, the middle ones. I was pretty sure he'd gone to London at some point as I'd seen his byline on political stories in various national newspapers. But my latest efforts to Google him had drawn a blank. He seemed to have gone off the radar. I managed a thin smile at Terry as I tapped my fingers repeatedly on the desk. Hating myself for being so pathetic, for getting worked up like this. I had to stop panicking, think rationally. Reassure myself that there was no reason on earth why he would apply for the job of political editor on the *Birmingham Evening Gazette*.

'Let's hope they're a bit more memorable in the flesh,' I said. Not the last one on the list, though. I didn't want that one to be memorable. Because, daft as it seemed, I didn't even want to work with someone with the same surname as him.

A robust knock interrupted my thoughts and the door opened to reveal a stern-faced woman dressed in a charcoal trouser suit with a fine white pinstripe.

'Marie Flaherty,' she said, only a trace of a Scouse accent remaining. Terry shook her hand, introduced himself and turned to me.

'This is Sarah Roberts, our chief reporter.'

Marie Flaherty nodded, shook hands like a man and sat down without being asked. I was impressed. The rest of the newsroom, it seemed, were not. On the other side of the glass, Cayte was holding up an ice-skating-style scorecard reading '3.5' followed by 'boots' as a way of explanation of her marking criteria which, she had

already informed me, would concentrate on artistic impression rather than technical merit. As Marie detailed the qualities she could bring to the role, I allowed my gaze to drop to her feet, which were encased in black patent boots with kitten heels and splats of white fur all over them. It was weird how I never noticed these things myself.

'Anything you'd like to ask, Sarah?' Terry was looking at me, unaware that I hadn't been paying attention.

'Have you got any cuttings we can look at?' I said, hoping to fill in some career details from the missing CVs.

She unclasped her immaculate briefcase, which looked as if it had been bought especially for the occasion. As she pulled out a plastic folder a fluffy white toy dog with a red ribbon and a bell round its neck tumbled on to the floor. I waited for her to apologise, to blush, explain that it belonged to her daughter or something. She didn't. She simply giggled like a high-pitched machine gun and squeaked, 'Ooops, lucky mascot,' as she picked it up and sat it on her knee.

'Oh, God,' I groaned as I lowered my head into my hands. The warning sign was obvious now. Woman in unsuitable footwear. I should have guessed she'd be an emotional flake. She had a nerve to call herself a journalist. Come to think of it, she probably worked for *Dog World*. It would be on her CV, somewhere in the filing cabinet.

Terry couldn't suppress his laughter as Marie gathered her things and scuttled out of the office shortly afterwards.

'I wasn't sure who I should be interviewing,' he said. 'Her or the poodle.'

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'What for?'

'On behalf of the female species, I apologise for her existence.'

Terry laughed. 'Oh well, that's the token woman gone. Now we'll get on to the serious candidates.'

He said things like that to wind me up. He wasn't the only one. 'Sarah-baiting' it was called in the office.

Rowbotham looked like a Rowbotham should. Tall, sculpted hair like that stand-in newsreader on BBC1 at the weekends, creases in his trousers, perspiration on his upper lip. Cayte was holding up '2.1' before he'd even sat down.

He introduced himself as Rowbotham, as if he was a civil servant in the MOD. They pissed me off, people who pretended they didn't have a first name. I decided to go in hard.

'Can you tell me how you'd make politics relevant to the lives of our readers in Handsworth?' I asked.

Rowbotham raised his eyebrows slightly, shifted in his chair so he was facing Terry, and began. 'I don't believe in dumbing down, Mr Kay. I believe in encouraging working class people to embrace the complex political issues we face today, to recognise the implications that closer European union and the creation of a federal Europe would have on the sovereignty of this country . . .'

His voice droned on, directed exclusively in Terry's direction. As if I was some dumb secretary hired to relay the questions. I resisted the temptation to yank his head round to face me, deciding instead to let him continue talking himself out of a job. What he didn't realise was that Terry's instructions to the previous incumbent on the night of the local elections had been 'Don't make it too political.'

We were down to the last two. I could feel beads of sweat gathering on my forehead, belying my otherwise cool exterior. It was as if the old Sarah was seeping out of me. Telling me it was OK to lose control. It was fine that a tiny part of me wanted it to be him. Which it wasn't, I knew that. I had Jonathan now. I had a whole new life. The old one had nothing to offer me.

At some point in the proceedings Rowbotham had evidently stopped to draw breath and Terry managed to get him out of the office. Because a new man was sitting in the chair now. A man with a ridiculously small head for his body. Who was twiddling his thumbs, which sat on hands which were way too big for his arms. I imagined a new Mr Men book. *Mr Out of Proportion*. With a primary colour version of our man Mr Lees on the cover. Cayte had placed her scorecard on the top of her computer. '1.5 (ginger pinhead)'. I thought she was being a bit harsh. I didn't have a problem with red hair. I found the Welsh accent rather soothing after Rowbotham's clipped tones. And he seemed to be very knowledgeable about the Welsh Assembly.

'So, tell us about Cardiff.' Terry liked questions like that. Thought they opened people up.

Mr Lees took a deep breath, thought for a moment, his eyes glistening, and started to cry. Not a single tear trickling down his face but a torrent, enough to warrant a man-sized box of Kleenex. I noticed his crumpled jacket, the faint smell of alcohol which had drifted into the room with him, and wondered if he was going through some kind of personal crisis.

'I'm sorry,' said Mr Lees, eventually, his long fingers like windscreen wipers, brushing away the tears. 'I get very emotional talking about my birthplace.'

That was it. No family tragedy. No tale of death or destruction. The guy simply liked the place where he was born. I was quite fond of Leamington Spa myself but couldn't imagine ever bawling my eyes out at the mention of it.

I looked at Terry; he shrugged. I rolled my eyes. Three down, one to go. I wasn't going to be put out of my misery yet, though. I had to wait for Mr Lees to compose himself, to tell us how his great-grandfather came to work at Cardiff docks and how it was a joy to live and work with his fellow countrymen, before he finally left. Taking a

look round the newsroom as he went, where Cayte's sign was still on prominent display.

'Imagine if I offered him the job,' said Terry, shaking his head. 'He wouldn't be able to tear himself away. Tiger Bay would be flooded during his leaving speech.'

I nodded and smiled. I wasn't thinking about Mr Lees though. I was thinking about the next person who was going to walk through the door. The one who, unless this was some kind of set-up for an 'interviewees from hell' TV show, was going to get the job.

'I reckon the next one will be smoking a spliff and suggest we run a feature on MPs' favourite porn websites,' said Terry, chuckling to himself. I wanted to remind him that he'd selected these people. It didn't say much for his judgement. Unless the rest of the applicants had been worse than this, which was hard to imagine.

We waited for fifteen minutes past his allotted time of midday. That was when I knew. He always used to be late for everything. It was simply a matter of waiting then, until I caught a glimpse of his head and shoulders bobbing along above the filing cabinets.

'I'll ring reception,' Terry said. 'See if he's left a message.'

'No need,' I said. 'He's here.'

'How do you know?'

'Female intuition,' I said.

The door opened and he walked in. Resplendent in his Burberry trench coat. Hair the colour of Bournville chocolate. Stubble caressing his chin. Shit. He looked even better than I remembered.

'Nick Hardwick,' he said. 'Sorry I'm late.'

His introduction was directed at Terry. But by the time he got to the apology he was, rather aptly, looking at me. Seven years too late, actually. That's what I should have said. I didn't though. I smiled politely at him. Waiting for him to react.

'Sarah.' He sounded surprised, unsure, nervous even.

I tried to hide the fact that I was disappointed he didn't sound pleased.

'Long time, no see,' I replied. It was a stupid thing to say. I'd tried to sound unimpressed but it had come out wrong. I stood up and steadied myself for a moment. I felt like one of those balloon animals, knotted and twisted in all the wrong places. I waited for him to come towards me, to hold out his hand, before I stepped forward and shook it.

'How are you?' he said, as if he cared.

'Fine, thanks,' I replied, as if I didn't.

'I take it you two know each other,' Terry said. I was trapped in some crap movie where everyone says stupid things.

I waited for Nick to answer but both he and Terry were looking at me.

'Nick was news editor on the *Rugby Chronicle* when I was a trainee there.'

I managed to make it sound as distant and fleeting as possible. Hardly worth a mention. Giving no inkling of what had really happened between us. I glanced at Nick to see if he looked hurt. He didn't.

'Small world, journalism,' said Terry. 'That's why I'm nice to Sarah, in case she ends up as my boss one day.'

My laugh sounded strained. Nick's wasn't much better. We all sat down. Nick took off his trench coat, looked round for a coat stand and, seeing there wasn't one, hung it over the back of his chair. He was immaculately dressed in a brown moleskin suit and cream shirt. It was weird seeing him like that; I remembered a much scruffier version. I could smell his aftershave on my hand. I didn't recall him wearing it before. I wondered what else had changed. He was older, for a start. Thirty-seven by my reckoning. But unfortunately he was one of those annoying people who got better-looking with age. The smile was still the same. I used to be a sucker for that smile. I tried to block out the memory of the last time I

had seen it. In case I dislodged the cry of anguish which was still stuck somewhere in my throat.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Cayte brandishing her scorecard: '6.0 (drop-dead gorgeous)'. I glanced around. Every pair of female eyes in the office were looking in his direction. And one pair of eyes belonging to a male sub-editor who was single and had a penchant for black polo-necks. Nick clearly hadn't lost his touch. Bastard.

'So, tell me about yourself, Nick. And why you want this job.'

Terry asked the question. I feigned indifference to the answer.

'Well, I've always had a keen interest in politics. I used to be politically active in my younger days. Bit of a hothead to tell you the truth.' He glanced at me and grinned. I didn't respond. 'I've spent several years shifting on the nationals in London and covered a lot of political stories in that time. But to be honest I've become disillusioned with national newspapers. I miss the contact with readers, the feeling of serving a community. And most of the stuff I was covering was tittle-tattle, nothing that affected real people's lives. This is a chance to do what I love doing, covering real politics about real people.'

It was as if he'd swallowed a book called *How to Impress Regional Newspaper Editors in Interviews* for breakfast that morning. I glanced at Terry: he had that expression on his face. Like a kid who'd found a Jammie Dodger in a box of Rich Tea biscuits.

He was going to get the job. I was going to have to see him, hear him, smell his aftershave, every working day. It was bad enough that he had the power to invade my dreams. Walking back into my life as well was such a bloody cheek. I sat on my hands to stop them shaking. Sarah Roberts didn't do shaking. Not the one everyone here knew, anyway. Nick only knew the old Sarah. I

wondered if I should tell him that she was no longer with us. Give him the chance to offer his condolences.

'Sarah?' It was Terry's voice. He and Nick were both looking at me. I guessed it was my turn to ask a question. Just one question, any question. Quickly.

'Who, what, why, when, where, how,' I blurted out.

That's what they taught you at journalism college. And they were the only questions I could think of. Nick and Terry were looking at me as if I'd lost the plot. Which I had. Ten minutes in his company and I was already a jibbering wreck. God knows what I'd be like after working with him for a month. But I wasn't going to let him do it to me again. Churn me up inside and then spit me out. I was stronger than before. The brittleness had been replaced by a Teflon coating. I took a deep breath.

'Nigel, sorry, Nick. Let me expand on that. Who are you trying to kid with this stuff? What went wrong for you in London? Why didn't you get a staff job? When did you decide you wanted to live in Birmingham? Where do you see yourself in five years' time and how seriously do you think we should take you?'

Terry finally broke the silence which followed with what sounded like a cross between a laugh and a snort.

'I think that was Sarah's way of finding out if you're up to the task of sparring with Clare Short,' he said.

Nick looked up. 'Actually,' he said, 'I think that was Sarah's way of getting past the bullshit. She was always very good at that.'

I wasn't sure if it was praise or sarcasm. I opted for what I hoped was a neutral expression.

'Right, moving swiftly on . . .' said Terry.

'I haven't answered yet,' said Nick.

'You don't have to.'

'I want to. OK, I admit it, I'm a sad failure of a hack. I didn't get a staff job because my face didn't fit. I didn't arse-lick as much as was required and I wasn't prepared to drop stories if they didn't fit the political line of

whoever I was working for. Plus I was the wrong side of thirty-five. I never had any intention of living in Birmingham. I've no idea where I'll be in five years' time but if I'm still here it will be because I like it. And you should take me as seriously as anyone who comes in here telling you it's their lifetime's ambition to work for the *Birmingham Evening Gazette* and that if they get the job they'll never look at the ads in the *Press Gazette* again.'

Another pause followed. Terry sat scratching his head. He glanced across at me and raised his eyebrows. I shrugged. Terry nodded. I looked down at my foot just in time to see the bullet I'd fired blow it apart.

'Congratulations, Nick,' Terry said, standing up and grinning as he held his hand out across the desk. 'When can you start?'