Crossed Wires

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Extract

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Chapter 1

'Autocare Direct Motor Insurance. My name is Mina, how may I help you?'

It was the forty-eighth time she had said it today, according to the computer log. Nearly fifty policy-holders – anxious, irritable, impatient or merely bored – and it wasn't even eleven a.m. Number forty-eight was a man, and appeared to be none of those things; if she'd had to plump for a description, it would probably have been . . . hesitant.

'I'd like to make a claim, please. That is, I've had a bit of an accident. Nothing too bad, but you know how it is with any bodywork, it's never cheap. So I thought I'd better put in a claim, if that's OK.'

Embarrassed. That's how he sounded: embarrassed. As she could not recollect any previous caller in her three and a half years at Autocare's Sheffield call centre showing the slightest compunction about getting something back in return for the annual premiums, Mina found herself taking his details with more than her usual professionally pretended interest.

'What's your policy number, please?'

'Is that this long one beginning JDN/00 something?'

'That's the one.'

They went through the ritual soft-shoe shuffle of verifying that he was indeed Dr Peter William Kendrick of 9, Flattery

Fen, Allington, Cambs. His mother's maiden name was Midwinter – rather pretty, Mina thought – and his date of birth was 9 April 1968. A spring birthday was always nice, even if it did make him all but forty. Maybe it was the sheepishness that made him sound younger.

'And could you confirm the make and registration of the vehicle, please, Dr Kendrick?'

'Land Rover Discovery, K643TDR. It's a kind of dark blueygrey, if you need to know that. At least, I expect it probably still is, underneath all the grime.'

A joke. Not a very good one – the embarrassment again – but the way he knocked himself like that touched a chord with her. Mina could talk herself down with the best of them.

'Thank you. Now, I need to take some details about the accident, if that's all right. Where did it take place, exactly?'

'Just past the Dorlinsons' gateway. That's where the cat was from. It's a black one, you see, that's why—'

'What street, I mean. What was the name of the road you were in?'

'Oh, sorry.' If possible, the awkwardness in his voice upped a further notch; she could almost hear him wince. 'Stupid of me. I was just coming home. It was at home in the lane.'

Forefinger on mouse, she scrolled back up the on-line form on the screen in front of her. 'That would be in Flattery Fen, Allington, then?'

'That's right, yes.'

'And were there any other vehicles involved?'

'No. No such excuse.'

Beating himself up again – making her grin.

'No, there are hardly ever any other vehicles in our lane, not past the Dorlinsons', except the bin men coming on a Tuesday

or people turning round because they're lost.' A laugh, unexpected and vivid though still self-mocking, as he added, 'Flattery will get you nowhere.'

For a moment Mina floundered. 'Flattery . . . ?'

'Will get you nowhere. The lane, Flattery Fen, it's a dead end. My daughters' idea of a joke, sorry.'

Married then. Well, he would be, wouldn't he, by almost forty and with that startling laugh? No other named driver on the policy, but probably the wife had her car insured in her own name. Muddy old Land Rover for him, with his doctor's bag thrown on the back seat; what would she have, the GP's wife? Smart little runabout, handy for parking in town: Renault Clio, or maybe a Peugeot 207.

'. . . really derived from its contours,' she heard him continuing. 'Or rather, lack of. Being flat, you know – at least I've always supposed that's it – and it reminds me of being blattery, too, which is how it is for nine months a year. Blattery, you know: muddy. Except I'm not sure that's a word, is it? Just a thing my grandmother used to say.'

Mina's nan had said it, too, though she imagined there was rather less blatter to be met with living in a high-rise on the Manor estate than down south in the country; Nana had much more often had call to complain of its being parky, up there on the deck access. But there were three insistently repeating flashes now on the 'call waiting' light; Mina determined to focus.

'No other vehicle involved, you say.'

'No.'

'So could you describe to me, please, exactly how the accident occurred?'

Peter William Kendrick coughed. 'Well, it was the cat, you see. The Dorlinsons' cat. I can never remember what they call it,

one of those girls' names like Tabitha or Topsy. But anyway it's a black one, as I said, all except for a little patch on its tummy, and it was getting on for five o'clock and pretty well dark. I just didn't see it.'

Now it was Mina's turn to wince. She closed her eyes and tried not to hear the outcry of brakes, the judder of radials failing to grip on mud, the sickening crunch of impact. Maybe he caught her intake of breath.

'Oh no, it's OK, Tibby was fine. Shot straight across and dived under the hedge. Missed her by a couple of feet at least. But unfortunately I didn't miss the hazel stump. Mr Dorlinson took the tree down in September after those high winds we had or I guess it could have been worse. As it is, it's just all the underside of the front wing.'

'Passenger's side?' she asked, visualising the scene with a practised mind's eye, while she pondered the miles between their lives. Not just geographical ones: this man could identify a stump of wood by the kind of tree it used to be.

'That's right.' Then came the sudden laugh again, like a flash of sunlight off glass. 'My daughters think I should have a sticker in the back window. You know, like those ones that say "I slow down for horses"?'

She didn't know, not really. There wasn't a lot of call for that particular form of consideration in Sheffield 12. But she had sent herself up often enough to see the punchline coming in his case.

'Don't tell me – "I swerve for cats"!'

Meena, thought Peter as he replaced the receiver. Just Meena: working in a call centre meant never being graced with a surname. Maybe he should have asked her. Must be hard to remain human

in a mind-numbing job like that, but she had been really . . . well, very decidedly herself. Great South Yorkshire accent – he loved the living multi-culturalism that breathed through those second-generation voices, their vowels rooted in regional Britain and their ancestry in the sub-continent or the Caribbean. Third generation, even, perhaps: she sounded young, though you could never really tell on the phone.

Anyway, now he just had to complete the rest of the form when she sent it out to him, including a sketch of the position of the vehicle at the time of impact ('but not necessarily', she had added dryly, 'that of the cat'). And get a second estimate for the repairs. That was a pain because he had never entrusted the car to any but the nurturing hands of the Land Rover dealership in Cambridge and really did not fancy doing so now. He could ask Dan in the village, of course, who as well as supplying fuel ran a small sideline in repairs, but he hated to put him out when he knew he wouldn't be giving him the work. The lawnmower was one thing – though even that had been stuttering a bit when idling ever since Dan serviced it last spring.

No time to worry about it just now, in any case. Cassie and Kim had toothache and he had made a dental appointment for them at twelve. He would already have to sweat and drive right up to the speed limit – more radical or illegal measures being beyond the range of his contemplation – if he was to get to school in time to pick them up and drive them round to the surgery.

Packing into his rucksack the work he should have been doing if he hadn't been on the phone to the Land Rover garage and the insurance company half the morning, he grabbed his coat from where it hung on the back of his study door and headed out towards the college car park. RR:31 proclaimed the digital

display on the dashboard as he pulled himself up into the driver's seat. The clock had ceased to register the hour some years ago, but it was rare even for Peter not to have a reasonable apprehension of what the number to the left of the double dots should be. The minutes worked perfectly – and right now they were against him.

There was an additional problem at the moment, too: Allington Road was on the left. Not only that, but the turning where it split from the main Histon Road was a tight one; not far from a right angle, in point of fact. Even allowing for swinging out, should a gap in the oncoming traffic permit, he would never make it. 'Is the vehicle currently roadworthy?' Meena had asked and he had replied that it was. Not a lie exactly, because there was no problem whatever in driving it, provided one wished to proceed forwards or turn to the right. However, on tight left-hand corners, he had discovered, the compressed and mangled lower portion of the near-side wing came into squealing contact with the front passenger tyre to the accompanying smell of scorched rubber, and it was not an effect he was anxious to repeat. It was surprising how, with careful route planning, it was possible to get from A to B without ever turning left, circling in towards one's target in a clockwise direction. From home to college this morning it had been child's play; from college to home now it was trickier – doable, but it would add a good five minutes to his journey time.

As luck would have it, his lectures this term all fell between Wednesday and Friday, so clearing the middle of the day to get to school, dentist, school and back had not been prohibitively difficult. But Wednesday always seemed comfortably distant from the vantage point of the weekend and resolutions to prepare his notes on Sunday afternoon always crumbled with very little

resistance in the face of demands for a bike ride or a game of Cluedo. Monday had gone by, as Mondays do, with too many unexpected demands upon his time and not enough achieved, and that just left today to update four sets of lecture notes on top of three hours of supervisions this afternoon. He might just about have got through it – insurance claims and right-only turns notwithstanding – had the twins not suddenly developed toothache at breakfast time. Now he faced the certain prospect of another Tuesday night sitting up working until the small hours. He said 'the twins' had toothache, and indeed that is the phrase he had used to Mrs Moore when he called her from work to warn her of the time of the appointment. It entered neither of their heads that just because, strictly speaking, it was only Kim whose tooth was actually giving her pain, he would do other than pick up both girls from the classroom and ferry them to the dentist's and back. They would be less than pleased to see him – not because either of them feared the dentist's chair but because Tuesdays before lunch it was spelling test and they had last night cracked not only 'receive' and 'belief' but the fiendishly vowel-littered 'conscientious'.

Approaching the school car park from a side road on the left with the clock standing at RR:52, Peter pulled in, stopped and jumped out, flicking the central locking over his shoulder as he sprinted towards the double front doors. Joy on reception, watching his agitated progress with an ironic eye, had the signing-out book open with the time and the twins' names and form all filled in ready for his signature and his visitor's sticker peeled and waiting on her thumb. Her name suited her, he always thought; she never evinced any, but still managed to spread quite a lot.

'Thanks. It's their teeth,' was all he took time to say before

she buzzed him through and he loped down the corridor in the direction of 5M. They were at opposite sides of the room as he entered, Kim at her desk and Cassie over by the wastepaper bin sharpening her pencil, but the turn of their heads was equal and opposite, the mutinous jut of their chins perfectly synchronised.

'Oh, Dad, not now!'

'What about spellings?'

He exchanged apologetic smiles with Mrs Moore, both of them taking responsibility for this small show of dissent: her classroom, his daughters. They were by his side, anyway, with only a token dragging of scuffed toes on linoleum. He passed an arm round each.

'Sorry, no choice. I'm teaching this afternoon, and this was the only appointment Dr Szymański had before lunchtime.' Then, turning to their teacher, 'Won't be long, I hope. They'll be back in time for their lunch, anyway. Very sorry to disturb your lesson.'

Not that his appearance and extraction of the twins had caused more than a momentary ripple of interest before the room returned to its habitual state of chaotic activity, which he liked to assume was more purposeful than it looked. But apologising was a core component of Peter's nature; in his experience it never did any harm to say sorry, just in case. Mrs Moore smiled and wafted a don't-mention-it arm in his direction but her attention had already been reclaimed by two boys, one of whom Peter was fairly certain was called Max, in jostling dispute over the possession of a whiteboard marker pen. God knows how they do it, he thought, picturing his own peaceful study as he ushered the girls out towards the cloakroom to pick up their fleeces.

'It's cold out, you'll need them.'

They hadn't said anything, but when time was short it made

sense to head off protest before it began. It was when he started the engine, as always, that they began to talk.

'Mr Elsworth took assembly –'

'– but it was hymnbook assembly today –'

'– and he can't sing.'

Kim began a low, grumbling warble at the back of her throat, joined by Cassie who squawked up into falsetto as they both carolled tunelessly, '*And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be . . .*'

Peter winced, though not at their singing. They had both inherited not only Bev's ear but also her easy mockery of the tone deaf; like her, they sometimes forgot that this included himself.

'Leonie's back. Still got spots, though.'

'She reckons the doctor says they aren't catching any more once they stop itching.'

'But I saw her scratching in literacy this morning. Those ones on her arm. I could see because I was right next to her on the carpet.'

'You'll probably get it, then.'

'You will, you mean.'

'No, you.'

'Was it impetigo, you said?' intervened Peter smoothly. 'I'm sure the doctor wouldn't allow Leonie back to school if she was still contagious. Probably it's just a few scabs she's got left, that's all. And it isn't very nice to be talking about the poor girl that way.'

'Leonie's OK,' said Cassie defensively, as if somehow it were he who had called into question her health or habits of personal hygiene. He gave up and just drove.

'What's in our sandwiches, Dad?' asked Kim.

'Cheese and cucumber.'

'Dairylea or real cheese?'

'Farmhouse cheddar. Grated not sliced.'

More work to make, but they claimed it made all the difference.

'I'm hungry.' This was Cassie. When was she not hungry?

'Are you sure we'll be back by lunchtime?'

'Maybe we should have brought our packed lunches with us, just in case we have to queue?'

'Of course we shan't have to queue.'

He spoke shortly, sincerely hoping it was true, and trying not to think about the essay and a half he still had to mark before his two o'clock supervision. But he was right, and the receptionist asked them to go straight through.

'Hello, girls,' said Dr Szymański in purest RP; only her paternal grandfather was Polish, she had once explained in response to Peter's inquiry. 'Hop up.'

And they did: both of them in the chair together, as they had sat every six months like clockwork since their first teeth came through. Right-handed Cassie on the left, left-handed Kim on the right. That's the way round they sat in the car, too, and at the kitchen table; quite possibly it was the way they had lain in the womb. When they were small it had been a way to help them remember which was left and which was right. Now it was simply the way things were.

'Which of you has the poorly tooth, then?' asked Dr Szymański cheerily and both twins pointed dumbly at Kim.

'Open wide.'

Kim obliged, while Cassie assumed an air of quizzical sympathy. The two pairs of slim nine-year-old hips fitted side by side in the grey leatherette chair with room to spare and Peter found himself easily able to push back into the future the question of when they might be too big to sit this way.

'Ah yes, this one here at the back, is it? Well, it looks like the adult molar is trying to come up and hasn't quite room at the moment. I think it's just butting on to a nerve down there. But this one above should start to wobble soon enough, and then the thing should resolve itself.'

'Ii aa-e-y ii o-ii,' said Kim.

The dentist nodded sagely and prodded the tooth in question with a gloved fingertip. 'Already is wobbling, is it? Oh yes, I think I do feel just a little give in it. You're right.'

'Mine, too,' chipped in Cassie, fingering a back tooth on the other side.

Peeling off her gloves, Dr Szymański turned to Peter with a clinically regular smile. 'Keep an eye on it. If the milk tooth comes out and it's still bothering her then it may mean we don't have room in there, and you'll need to bring her back. But it doesn't look too crowded to me.' She cast an approving eye back at the girls as if assessing horseflesh. 'Lovely broad jaws, the pair of them.'

Suppressing an urge to laugh, he thanked her gravely as the girls slid from the chair.

'Can we get back to school now, Dad?'

'They might still be doing the spelling test.'

It was when he had dropped them off and was halfway back to college, with theories of urban poverty concentration occupying the forefront of his mind, that an image intruded that made laughter rise in his chest even while it disconcerted him. If Cassie and Kim were separated, he speculated, would each of them be condemned to turn endlessly in circles like a winged Land Rover?