Staying Alive

Matt Beaumont

one: like on the telly?

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I point the camera at . . .

Sophie Dahl's prone and virtually naked body.

The dawn-lit terraces of Machu Picchu, high in the Andes.

Elvis/Lennon/Tupac as he emerge., s from a cave deep in the Hindu Kush.

None of the above, actually. They're there to make me seem big and clever.

The truth now.

I point the camera at a multi-pack of Schenker Alpenchok bars. I angle it carefully – experience has taught me to do this to avoid catching the glare from the fluorescent tubes that line the rim of the Safeway freezer display. Hell, am I good at this? The box shows Heidi patting a cow on the foothills of the Matterhorn. She beams at me through the viewfinder – a big happy-dairy-girl smile.

Exude sexy ice-creaminess, baby . . . Mmm, yeah, that's working for me big ti—

Something crashes into my thigh. A shopping trolley, the type that hitches up to an electric wheelchair to make the HGV menace of supermarket aisles. I should know; I've been dead-legged by enough of them. An old lady is at the controls. A lime-green hat sits on her head. It's shaped like a turban and makes her look like the Mekon – as if Dan Dare's archenemy just popped into Safeway for baked beans, loin chops and loo roll. 'What've you done with the frozen veg?' she snaps.

'I'm sorry, I don't work here,' I reply, rubbing the fresh bruise.

'You lot keep messing with the freezers and I can't find ¬anything.' She scrutinises my lapel for a badge proclaiming name and rank.

'Really, I don't work here,' I protest. 'If you ask—'

'What are you doing, then?' she says, spotting the camera. 'You shouldn't be taking pictures. You're a spy, aren't you? You're from Tesco.'

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'No, I've got permission . . . I work for an advertising agency.'

My trump card, though I don't produce it as if it's the ace of spades – more like the three.

'Adverts? Like on the telly?' She sounds impressed.

I nod. And smile – it's rare that I impress anyone with my career choice.

'I've been wanting to have a word with you,' she says, her eyes narrowing. 'I saw your one for the funeral plan. I signed up, but I'm still waiting for my free carriage clock. It's been weeks now.'

'I— We don't do that one,' I explain.

'Oh, you're ever so charming when you want to sell us something, but the minute you've got us you don't want to know,' she spits.

My mobile vibrates against my hip and I pull it gratefully from my pocket. The Mekon looks on with distaste. 'They cause cancer, you know,' she says. Then she hits the throttle, running over my foot with her wheelchair's solid rubber tyre and trundling off into the fluorescent Safeway sunset – taking no prisoners in the quest for world domination/frozen peas. I look at the display on my mobile. Maybe it's Sophie Dahl's people calling to tell me her body is prone, very nearly naked and waiting aquiver for my camera's attentions.

Funnily enough, no. It's work.

'Hi, Jakki,' I say.

'What are you doing?'

'Getting grief about a funeral plan.'

'You what?'

'Never mind. What's up?'

'You'd better get back here. Niall's having a shitfit. You've fucked up, apparently,' Jakki tells me. 'Something to do with invoices. Don't ask me to explain. He wants to see you.'

'Well, he wants me to do store checks in five different supermarkets before tomorrow's meeting as well. Which is it to be?'

'It's serious. You'd better come back . . .'

'OK.'

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'But don't come without the ice-cream shots.'

Silence, but only because I'm stifling a sneeze.

'You all right, Murray?'

'I'm coming down with something, you know.'

'Got the sniffles? You're such a wuss,' she laughs.

'Am not.'

Sitting behind her desk manning the phones and diaries she has no concept of what it's like out here in the field. Every time I head for the supermarket freezers I risk death from hypothermia. I'm the Captain bloody Oates of advertising.

I end the call and as I re-aim the camera at the ice-cream ¬display, the sneeze finally explodes. Definitely coming down with something. I look through the viewfinder and wonder if the Schenker Foods brand group will spot the shiny glob of snot on Heidi's embroidered bodice.

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