

## X11

Fiona Wilmslow retrieved the Shropshire Star from the empty chair. She turned to the puzzles page; the sudoku, crossword and wordsearch had already been completed in a blotchy blue biro. Errors abounded. She refolded and positioned it on top of the laminated menu to obscure the toe-curling abuse of apostrophes. ‘Egg’s’ for goodness’ sake!

Nine-twenty-five. The dead time between the workers’ breakfast rush and the arrival of the posh coffee brigade. At least she had secured the round table in the alcove with a good view of the bus stop.

The lion-haired waitress gave her table a cursory wipe and dropped a cup of English Breakfast and a flaccid pancake in front of her. Fiona didn’t much care for pancakes but it was the third item on the menu and it was Wednesday. She didn’t have time to run through her usual decision-making protocol. It was her day out. She nudged the squalid batter with her fork; it shuddered like a beached jellyfish. Inedible. A beaten looking man in a trench coat was furtively feeding pieces of crumpet to the three-legged terrier under his table. The words ‘low stimulus environment,’ came to her – no idea why.

The fire door to the kitchen was propped open allowing the smell of long-simmered baked beans to pollute the atmosphere. Val would have been fuming. Health and safety violations were the stallion in her stable of hobby horses. Her risk assessments at Alexander Fiennes Printed Word Ltd were infamous. Loose wiring, obstructions, faulty appliances – no hazard was left unchecked. Safety first. Best not think about it. Today of all days.

Drizzle misted the window, coalesced into rivulets and traced a path down the dusty pane. She liked the word coalesce; it had a pleasing vowel-to-consonant ratio. What now? Synonyms and antonyms? Serial seven subtractions? It was wise to keep the old cerebral neurons firing. She didn’t want to go the way of her mother. Perhaps words beginning and ending with a vowel. Perfect.

Undo.

Ignite.

Absolve.

The first bus pulled up outside with a hiss of air brakes. The Park-and-Ride shuttle – that would have been a disaster. The translucent film on her tea glistened in the reflected light. She took a sip. Lukewarm and slightly stewed.

Exuvia. Oh, very nice. She had worked on *The Encyclopaedia of Entomology*, a beautiful three volume set with colour illustrations. It had brimmed with poetic words and delightfully accurate descriptions, and had provoked in her a fascination for insects. She had even toyed with a visit to the insect house at London Zoo but initial research showed that it housed a walk-through spider exhibit. Not nice. Also, not insects.

Ukraine. No, proper nouns weren't allowed. Her game, her rules.

'Problem?' The waitress nodded accusingly at the uneaten pancake.

'Not hungry after all.' Fiona offered an apologetic smile.

'Pfft.' She swept it up and stalked off.

Inferno.

Amaretto. Was it in the Chambers English dictionary? Foreign words were acceptable if in common usage.

Fiona removed a white spec from her tea and plopped in a sugar cube; it didn't help. The second bus disgorged a straggle of people with shopping bags as its idling engine shuddered the window. The 701 to Newtown. Not a place she'd choose to go on a chilly Wednesday in March – or anytime really. Another bullet dodged as Val would say. A woman in a leopard print coat struggled through the door bringing with her a gust of cold air and diesel fumes. She met Fiona's welcoming smile with a blank stare. The woman ordered a cheese sandwich

to go – no mayo, no pickle, no salad – then stood impatiently at the counter and sniffed. No one used hankies these days.

Avenge.

Injustice.

Impromptu.

What a lovely word. And so apt for her new lifestyle. Fiona was cultivating impulsivity. Coaxing a sense of spontaneity. Honing the ability, if not to throw, then to offer caution tentatively to the wind. She had yet to act on a single momentary impulse, but she was trying. Yesterday she had regressed and performed a cost-benefit analysis on porridge versus shredded wheat. Porridge won for its lower energy release coefficient. Picking a number was just playing at impulsivity. Courting chance. ‘Baby-steps’ as Val would say. They would tease each other with clichés – for which both they shared a loathing. ‘You’re my rock.’ ‘You’re my paper and scissors.’

Fiona fastened her lambswool coat and stacked a tower of pound coins on the table – the third bus could arrive at any moment to take her to wherever it happened to be going.

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The X11 to Builth Wells. Oh well, why not?

‘Single please.’

‘Where to?’ The bus driver made a cursory entry on his clipboard.

‘Builth Wells.’

He looked up. ‘You’re going all the way?’

‘Yes.’

‘To Builth Wells?’

‘Yes.’

He puffed out his cheeks and checked his chart. ‘Eleven pound fifty.’

‘Oh, that’s a lot.’

‘It’s a long way. Thirty-seven stops.’

‘Goodness.’ She clutched the handrail and glanced towards the open door.

‘You coming or not?’

Fiona settled herself into the window seat in the middle of the bus, equidistant between the front and back wheel arches to minimise motion displacement. An old man sat at the back reading the Racing Post; he’d be bouncing like a mayfly once they hit the back roads. Two chattering women took the designated disabled seats although they looked as fit as fleas. A long juddering wait yielded no further passengers. Perhaps she should just go home and make herself a proper cup of tea? But they were off, weaving through the rain-washed streets of her town; Mill Street, Bell Lane, Old Street, Temeside, over the bridge and up into winding Killhorse Lane. No turning back.

The conifers of Mortimer Forest stood defeated in the grey light. A haze obscured the glimpses of Ludlow below. Either that or she was getting cataracts. The bus bell pinged as they rounded into Pipe Aston. The two women got off without thanking the driver. Rude.

The doors wheezed closed and they trundled west. Ten-twenty. She was regretting not persevering with the pancake. Thank goodness she had a bag of mini-Mars bars in her handbag for just such eventualities. Fifteen minutes; one stop down, thirty-six to go. At this rate it would take nine hours. Oh Lord, that can’t be right, maybe she should ask the driver? Would that constitute planning? A tightness in her chest, heart racing, hard to breathe. She stood up and pressed the bell.

‘Ten minutes to Leinthall Starks.’ Shouted the driver.

She sat back down.

‘That’s my stop, love. I’ll tell you when we get there.’

She turned to thank the man. He wasn’t old after all; just bald and podgy. Porcine. Like a muppet. He winked. Good grief.

Keep calm: focus out. Grey sky. Scraggy sheep in muddy field. A derelict barn. Water in tractor ruts. An old phone box. Starlings denoted a musical score along the telegraph wires. On and on and on down the empty road. And then a moment of pure joy. A metallic insect landed on the window and crawled towards her twitching its antennae. A jewel. Iridescent green, round black eyes and a long snout. No, what was that called now? Proboscis? No, rostrum. It was a Clover leaf weevil. A gift that made life worth living.

Val said she should search the fields and hedgerows, discover a new species; name it after her. Forever the optimist. Until she killed herself.

‘Nearly there.’ The man leant over her smelling of mints and alcohol. ‘What address are you after, darling?’

‘Oh, I’m fine thank you.’

‘The Vic will be open if you fancy a quick one.’

‘My mistake, it’s not my stop after all.’

‘Suit yourself.’ He stepped out and blew a kiss as the bus moved off. Pervert.

She’d get off at the next stop, the third stop; perfect.

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Fiona was sinking, tumbling, plummeting through endless space.

Pitch black. A void. A void.

The incongruous sound of children’s laughter burst from a blazing comet. She snapped open her eyes to a crocodile of red jumpers and tiny back-packs jiggling down the aisle.

Oh no. She'd missed the third stop, maybe the fourth and the fifth. She struggled upstream to the driver.

'How far to Built Wells?'

'Another hour.'

'Will I be in time for the bus back to Ludlow?'

'Yes, plenty. It's nine-thirty-five next Wednesday.'

The last child was clambering aboard. No time for deliberation.

'Thank you, driver.'

Fiona alighted onto a rising road of nineteenth-century houses that terminated in an ornate clock tower. Oh Lord, of all the border towns on all the borders she had to walk into this one. This town, this very road, that redbrick building: home to Alexander Fiennes Printed Word Ltd for seventy years. Now renamed Orbit. Obit more like. Beyond the roller blind of the first-floor window stood the desk where she'd spent her entire working life. The physical pain as she walked out of that shiny black door, down those worn steps, patted Eric the stone lion for the very last time. Slumped into her Fiat Punto and burst into tears. She had thought then it was the worst day of her life. Not even close. That came the following day. Three years ago today.

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Val always joked that the best thing about Knighton was the train out of there. Fiona could catch the eleven-fifty-five; be home in time for lunch. No harm done. But she was walking up the steps, ringing the bell, hammering the brass wolf knocker with unseemly insistence.

Val had kept the ship afloat, turned it around, stoked the engines. Val was AFPW Ltd. She had endured a glacial rise to manager and eventually been offered a partnership. But a grenade was thrown. The business handed instead to Marcus; a slime mould in a polo-neck

who sunk the business within weeks by amalgamating with a social media firm. Old Mr Fiennes would have been rolling in his grave – had he been dead rather than sipping margaritas in Marbella. The betrayal hung heavy. She never really recovered.

Fiona loved her job. She was the last word in proofreading. The doyen of spelling and grammar, fêted eliminator of cliché. Old world skills. In the sell-off she became a sundry item, an unwelcome part of the handover package. Sucked into a vortex she was spat out into an alien world of break-out areas, nerf guns and pizza Fridays. Allocated to the User Experience Team, even her job title was an abomination: UX Tester. Pointing out that experience began with an E had been a tumbleweed moment. Her new job description made her wince: ‘To ensure quality and accuracy of online content and review existing user journeys.’ She learned their language but after the obligatory four weeks, she was ‘let go.’ Dropped from the mothership without an oxygen mask; she still hadn’t landed.

‘Hey there.’ A tall child wearing jeans and a white T-shirt grinned down at her. He had yet to master the Bic razor.

‘Good morning, I’m here to audit the QI team,’ she heard herself say.

The boy’s face worked through various computations before settling on grudging acceptance. ‘Oh, okay.’

‘Maria Henderson.’ She extended her hand. ‘Head Office, Quality and Insights.’ She was on a roll.

His hand was soft, moisturised. ‘Sorry, but Marcus and Bernice are working from home today.’

‘No matter. I’m able to assess adherence to our accuracy standards without human interfacing.’ She stepped past the boy and headed for the stairs.

He followed at a gallop. ‘Accuracy standards?’

‘To ensure compliance with our performance metrics.’

‘Oh, sure.’

The place was unrecognisable. All the walls and doors had gone. The desks and carpet vanished. No trace remained of Val’s hard-won accoutrements; no paintings, no plants, no special-order orthopaedic chairs. It was a desert of standing workstations and computer screens.

The oak beam where Val took her last rasping gasp was adorned with twinkling red lights. Health and safety code violation X-eleven. Honestly, it was a ten-minute job to coil them back into the Christmas box in the store cupboard. No one did anything at Orbit unless it was ‘tasked.’

All Val’s work ruthlessly erased. Even her meticulous documentation. Oh, that day when Marcus instructed her to cancel the building insurance. The poor thing couldn’t sleep for a week. She applied for early retirement. They had talked about a cruise: Ancient Antiquities of the Aegean.

The final tightening of the noose – literally – came when Val discovered that the AFPW pensions had been stolen. Appropriated to buy the adjoining building for Marcus and Bernice’s new home. She could not afford to retire. The match in the powder barrel. The straw heaped upon the camel. The light at the end of the tunnel had been extinguished.

After Fiona’s banishment, Val had returned to the office after hours and strung herself up above Marcus’s desk.

The bravest woman she had ever known.

Fiona propped herself against a sloping workspace. ‘Where is everyone?’

‘It’s Work from home Wednesday.’ He stared anxiously out of the window and swept a hand through his floppy hair.

Fiona tossed a coin. Heads it is.

‘Could you print out the QI and UX team’s home addresses for me?’



‘Sorry?’ He turned around and blinked his Bambi eyes.

‘If clearance for remote working has been granted, home bases are classified as satellite offices. I’ll be able to sanction environmental allowances for you.’

‘Cool.’ He clicked vigorously at his iPad until a whirring of paper erupted from the corner.

Only six names remained on the payroll; they must have had another clear out. In the event of a police investigation there would be plenty of ‘disgruntled employees’ for the suspects’ board. ‘I’ll do you first. Name?’

‘Tom Weddow.’

She ran her finger down the list. ‘Twenty-four, Lime Kiln Lane?’

‘Exactamundo.’

She tapped away at her phone, no matter that it wasn’t a smartphone, and wasn’t turned on.

‘Tom, I wonder if you could just pop out and get me a sandwich and a packet of ready salted?’

‘Of course. Panini? Sub? Tortilla wrap?’

‘Whatever you’d choose for yourself.’

‘Alrighty.’ He turned to leave.

‘And Tom.’ She pointed a nerf gun at his head and a hushed index finger to her lips.

‘Remember, I know where you live.’

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Val always said that electrical fires were the biggest threat; worn cables, faulty fuses, the accumulation of combustibles. Loose wires from innocuous plugs. Perhaps the microwave used to heat up the endless slices on pizza Fridays. Or the blinking twinkling lights.

Fiona watched the sparks leap into the unemptied wastepaper basket and spread to the sack of shredding. The joy of reckless impulsivity was quite delicious. She could get used to it.

‘This one’s for you, love.’

If she was quick, she would just make the eleven-fifty-five.