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# Two Jobs in London

There was only one chair in the meeting room, and it belonged to the call centre manager. He sank into its soft leather, sighing indulgently, the rest of us gathered around him in a semi-circle. Many of the charity fundraisers shared a quiet joke or smiled as if to prove their spirits were still intact.

My colleague Terry went and perched on the boss's knee. The boss put his arm around Terry's paunch.

"Yes, you're doing very well, Terry," he said, giving him a little bounce.

"Of course I am," he said.

Had they been lovers this scene would have been logical, if rather unprofessional. But they were not. This was my boss's idea of call centre management. If you performed well, you were his honorary child. Terry performed consistently well. He seemed to revel in his reward. And this repulsed me because he was a writer, and I had certain ideas of what a writer should be. Subversive. Rebellious. Anti-establishment. He was the first writer I'd met since moving to London, and I'd looked at him as a possible future version of myself. He'd had a novel published. He wrote reviews of plays. I had just finished my degree and moved into a grotty old flat in Tottenham, and so, meeting him on my first day, one month ago, I was attentive to his every word.

"Tottenham," he'd said, "ah yes, I used to live in Tottenham."

"What did you think of it?" I said, not sure, at that point, what I myself thought, for though it was a fascinating part of the city, there was a "knife bin" outside the church just up the road from where I lived. GET A LIFE, it said, BIN THAT KNIFE.

Terry had a dead flower in the top pocket of his tweed blazer, which he nudged with the tips of his yellow knuckles.

"Oh, it was awful," he said, distractedly. "I was tortured by gypsies."

He had an odd, high-pitched laugh, and his teeth were grey. Later, he told me he smoked crack cocaine once a month. He'd wear his best silk gown, sit by the fire, and indulge. I discovered that his novel was out of print. He said he'd bring me a copy to read, though he never did.

He was a *flaneur*, a sort of Baudelaire. He wandered the city late at night, and he hung around with criminals and homeless people. I found his casual crack habit vaguely disturbing, and yet I was affected, nonetheless, by his persona, this ruthlessness, which I associated with all the captivating horror stories of the literary world.

As time went on, I saw this other side – his servility, and so gradually I realised that if Terry represented a vision of my future, it was one that was kaleidoscopic, strange and shifting. How was this man, who'd made real what was to me a dream, who wrote with a typewriter, and who went to the end to indulge in this role of the decadent artist, the same who bounced so happily on the boss's knee?

"Edgar," said the boss. He had decided I looked like an Edgar, and so he called me this instead of my real name. "Edgar, how are you getting on?"

"Not too well," I said.

"You're doing shite," he said, correcting me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's because of your attitude. You've let yourself go. Just look at you. Look at your hair.

When are you going to get your haircut, Edgar?"

Edgar ... Edgar could not afford a haircut. Edgar was very thin, because Edgar could not afford to eat. Edgar was a writer, but could not write. Edgar had not finished one story since moving to London. Edgar wrote bad prose. Edgar knew nothing about life. Edgar was a corpse, sitting in this huge call centre, headset on, waiting.

Waiting for the voice on the end of the line.

The computer dialled numbers from the database automatically, one after the other – a hundred per person, everyday. Most people were confused when I started talking about raising money to "save the snow leopards." Some put the phone down immediately.

Then a woman called Mrs Smith answered, an elderly lady with a soft voice. "Yes, please go on," she said. "I'm very concerned about this sort of thing."

I explained that, in the Himalayas, the snow leopard population was in decline because of poaching and the expansion of human settlements. There were between only two and five hundred leopards left in that part of the world.

"So sad." She sniffed.

"They're amazing animals," I said. And as I explained how we were working to save this animal from extinction, I felt the real sadness of this, an entire species in decline – and yet I was aware of the theatre of my own speech, as I conjured, with Machiavellian grace, the spirit of the conservationist.

"Have you ever seen one?" she said. She might have missed the bit in my intro about calling on *behalf* of the World Wildlife Fund. I decided not to correct her.

"I have seen one," I said. "In Peru."

She gasped. "You did?"

"Oh yes. They're such *ethereal* animals."

She seemed in awe, only breathing ever so softly.

"I so appreciate all the work you do out there," she said.

She said she would be glad to help. After taking her details, and saying goodbye, I banged my fist against the desk in victory. Terry turned to me and smiled, and, maybe it was a trick of the light, but in that moment his teeth looked black.

Riding home on the bus, the feeling of euphoria changed into one of deep sadness. The melting snow on the window obscured my view of the city, mixing the light from the street lamps and shop fronts, hiding the detail of the faces of the people walking on the pavement below.

Part of the journey I had to make on foot. As I walked past the college, a short man with snot pouring across his face rushed towards me, saying, "Sir, please, I need some money, please – can you spare some money?" There was a ten-pound note in my pocket, but I needed this to keep me going for the rest of the week.

"Please, sir," the man said.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I've no change." And I kept on, along the dark, icy street.

He followed me, until I turned to face him, and he fled.

As I walked on, I imagined myself from outside, just another man walking alone in the city at night. I looked down, watching my footing on the ice.

When I looked up again, I saw a gang of perhaps ten young men coming around the corner, all dressed in hoods, and with scarves over their mouths.

I kept going, and when I came close enough one of them brought his hand out and struck me on the side of the head. It was a sharp blow to the eardrum, which sent me into a daze. Another punched me in the mouth. I walked on but they followed, punching and kicking me until I was on the ground. I waited for the attack to end. I felt them pull my backpack away from my body. When I looked up, they were halfway down the street. I ran the rest of the way home, slipping, now and then, on the ice.

When the police arrived, they asked me what had been taken.

"My bag," I said.

"What sort of bag?" the policeman said, writing in his report.

"Just a green backpack."

"What was in your bag, mate?"

I remembered. The policeman looked at me curiously as I smiled, my mouth alive with the taste of blood, sweet, metallic. "

A book," I said. "*Elements of Style* by Strunk and White."

He smiled back. "What is that, mate, a self help book?"

"Sort of," I said.

At my new job, I went by my real name. (Edgar was dead.) I wore a suit. I worked in a large, shiny office with a view of St Paul's Cathedral, selling financial publications to the CEOs of insurance and reinsurance companies.

Every morning, I ascended the stairs of the Underground station and walked into the sea of smartly dressed men and women commuters, accountants and brokers, finance people of one sort or another, a scene filled with the promise that all was well, that all of humanity was busy and productive, and that this productivity gave each of us an air of dignity known only to the elite. And I was one of them.

I stopped trying to write. I went out drinking with friends. I went to restaurants. I went on dates.

I wasn't bright red like so many of my clients, but I had started to glow. I'd put on weight and owned plenty of nice new clothes. If I worked late, I took a cab from the underground station to my front door. I was safe, secure.

I felt confident at work, for although I didn't really understand the insurance industry, it was mostly on the phones, and so I could pull information from the Internet whenever I needed to. But then, one day, my boss asked me to go, that evening, to a business awards dinner, which had been arranged by the publisher of our financial magazine. I was to sell at the event, face to face.

That night, I was nervous, watching the money people gathered in their little circles, sipping champagne. They seemed identical, all bloated middle-aged men, very red in the face, laughing in that loud, self-congratulatory way.

I scanned the room for a less daunting scene, and noticed an old Japanese man alone at the buffet cart, filling his plate with nibbles.

"Hello," I said, introducing myself, "William Pittam, *Insurance Risk*."

He shook my hand reluctantly. He was the CEO of a small reinsurance firm. As I stumbled through my spiel about the industry, he began eating as if he hadn't eaten in years, filling his cheeks, flakes of pastry snowing onto the arms of his tuxedo.

Finally, he stopped. "You're a salesman?" he said.

"Yes," I said, rather annoyed he'd not been paying attention.

"Your publication is too expensive," he said. "I own a very small company."

"I understand," I said.

"And frankly," he added. "I don't like it."

There it was again – that sting of rejection.

"Right," I said, "I'm sorry to hear that."

He smiled, as if to make fun of me. I tried to protest.

"Well, this publication isn't for everyone, but we have others – "

"Come on," he said. "This is no good. This," he gestured toward the crowd.

I said nothing.

"What else do you do?" he said. "Is this all you do, try to sell these magazines?"

"Well, no," I said, recklessly. "No actually I'm a writer."

"There. You're a writer, that's good. I used to write. I was a philosopher."

I'd never spoken with a philosopher, let alone a philosopher turned reinsurer. We spoke about writing. I told him I struggled with philosophy. I'd fallen asleep, a few times before, beneath the formidable bulk of Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*. Some philosophers are different, he said. I asked him why he'd stopped writing.

"I was a fool," he said. "I was scared about money. I began working in finance. I moved from Hiroshima to London, and now I have money but I'm not happy."

It was as if the crowd around us had gone, nothing but his glittering eye. His lids were heavy as if he were bored or sleepy, yet his eyes seemed to shine.

"Well, but we must have money to live," I said.

"I'm not happy," he said again.

"One must eat," I said.

"Just eat beans ... Eat beans," he said.

"What about loneliness?" I said. "What about that?"

"Who cares?"

"It's difficult," I said, "being alone."

"Come on," he said, in a harsh whisper. "Who cares about that?"

I saw one my superiors watching, frowning, from the edge of the crowd. I told him I had to go. We shook hands. A smile spread for a moment across his face and then was gone. And, as if condemned like Sisyphus, once again he began to pile his plate with complementary nibbles.

During my cab ride home, I thought about what the philosopher had said. I thought perhaps he had made the wrong decision. But where did the other path lead? I thought of Terry. I imagined him without any teeth at all, just two rows of glistening gums. I thought of him lying on the side of the road, improvising poetry for nobody, nothing but the street lamps, the lights illuminating the vomit on his tweed blazer.

"You look deep in thought, mate," the cabbie said.

I nodded. I felt guilty for not making conversation, and after an awkward silence, I said, "What's it like being a cab driver?"

He said it was difficult. He told me about what they called The Knowledge.

"You've got to know every road," said the cabbie, "every side street. Your new cabbies, they all use GPS, which is wrong. It's daft.

What if your GPS stops working, what then?" After a while, he started telling me about the breakdown of his marriage, how his wife had had an affair with a man half her age.

"She went to Greece with him," the cabbie said, "it was all lovely, all days on the beach, and then she found out he was nicking money from her. So she came back." After a pause, he said, "I took her back in, you know, like an idiot ... Ah, well, it's that love thing, innit?" He smiled at me sheepishly in the mirror.

And I saw something in his face that set my heart racing, the detail of it, those lines around the eyes, a trace of something deeper, a story.

I rubbed the condensation from the window and looked out at the night. The shop fronts glowed yellow and gold. There were people walking in little groups. Some were holding hands. Some were alone.

"Tell you what," I said, "drop me off here."

He pulled up at the side of the road.

I paid my fare, opened the door to the cold, the roar of the traffic and people laughing, shouting, drunk, this world of sudden, inexplicable noise.

"Do you know where you are, mate?" said the cabbie.

"No," I said. "No. But that's alright."

## About William Pittam

William Pittam is from Staffordshire in the UK. He is now in the final year of his MFA at the University of Arkansas where he is a recipient of the Lily Peter and Walton fellowships for fiction. 'Two Jobs in London' was written specifically for his reading as part of The Big Rock Reading Series held at Pulaski Technical College in Little Rock.