

Cheating the Darkness

You are only conscious of a clock ticking when the rest of the world is silent. Daniel stood waiting for the seconds to peel away from the hour. He had already reset the other four clocks - each with the same precision. He waited now for the exact moment, to be sure his alarm clock was *to-the-second* accurate. That was Daniel. Every strand of his dark hair plastered into place, neatly trimmed round neck and ears until he looked like one of those round headed Lego people, minus the pink chin, of course, and plus the fine-rimmed glasses through which his small steely eyes noticed every detail. It was his attention to detail, especially in his manner and dress which had secured him rapid promotion to manager at the Superstore. It had been the same with his relationships. Sadly, his marriage had lasted barely a year before sensitive Sue had been driven to distraction by his obsession with hygiene and having everything in its proper place. Sue was from farming stock. She was used to natural timetables but only as guides and with her laid-back attitude she was ready to enjoy every little diversion from the norm. *'You want your home to be like the Store'* she used to tell him. *'Everything looking right and presentable for the customer. But I'm not your customer. I'm your wife!'*

Their separation had come at the same time as Daniel's promotion to a large out-of-town store. He took the opportunity to move away and make a new life for himself and found himself a small flat. The two bedroom third floor accommodation had soon been fitted out and brought up to his obsessive military-parade perfection. Having completed it however, Daniel began to experience the depressed moments which so often accompany loneliness and he found some solace at The Engine Room pub just round the corner from the Store. He had already established a few casual *arms-length* friendships there. The pub was frequented by staff, but he had not encouraged their friendship much yet.

They had talked about changing the clocks when he had been in the Engine Room last night. It was Robert, an accountant he had got to know who started the conversation *'We have a longer day tomorrow!'* *'No we don't,'* Daniel had argued. *'We lose an hour!'* *'But we do get longer day-light.'* Robert insisted. *'My mother used to call it cheating the sun.'* *'But if there's more light!'* Daniel reasoned. *'Surely that's like cheating the darkness!'* Robert had not responded. Discussions destined to go nowhere were not his thing. Daniel quickly resumed the pause. *'Well, I'm going to have to cheat the darkness. I've certainly got a longer day what with starting earlier and I'm on the late shift.'* He paid his bill and said good-night.

Daniel needed to adjust his bedside clock - it was five seconds fast. He pressed the set button and carefully positioned the small grey clock on his table, wondering how many staff would have forgotten the hour, or used *'I forgot to put the clock on.'* as an excuse for being late. How would he approach that - a reprimand? - or treat it lightly? He had a huge staff and had not found relationships totally easy yet. He liked to be seen on the shop floor and he wanted employees and customers to know he was around. He was naturally friendly, but a little stiff with it. That made some staff cautious of him but others felt happy to joke with him. There were a few who just tried to ignore the new manager! *'It takes time.'* he told himself - but he wanted it to be right - and right now. He knew the tension contributed to his somewhat depressed feelings but he was determined not to let them show.

The biggest problem was Diane, his under-manager. She had not told him, but he learned she had been interested in the promotion which he had secured. She appeared cool with him, though friendly and loyally committed to her work. Her occasional feisty tone went with a similar preciseness to Daniel's own. Perhaps it was that which made for tension between them. He liked her smile. It was accentuated by her wide lips dividing an oval chin from a beaky nose, all in a halo of auburn hair. Daniel was not sure how much of her coolness was resentment or just uncertainty as to her

position. A certain competitiveness had already developed between them and Diane did not respond happily to what appeared to be Daniel's criticism of store layout, time-keeping and the need for up-to-date schedules. Yesterday had been difficult. Diane had walked away in the middle of what, in retrospect, seemed a futile disagreement. He could not remember the details except that it began with baked beans and ended with bhajis.

There was only one member of staff who used the daylight excuse next morning and she was only twenty minutes late. Diane was in a happy mood and seemed to have forgotten baked beans and bhajis. The sunshine outside helped. It had cheated the darkness to bring a beautiful morning, though customers were commenting on a strong, chilly east wind. Daniel would be denied seeing much daylight himself today. There were mounds of paper-work and statistics to attend to. Still, he had to make time to walk the store.

In the tissues and toilet roll section he noticed an elderly lady leaning wearily over her trolley. He could hardly not notice. The pink suit topped with a thick woollen yellow scarf and the bright blue hat and gloves were no disguise. She was moving very slowly and taking an age to find what she wanted.

'Can I help you,' Daniel asked her. *'One of the staff will go round with you if you like.'*

'No thank you young man.' The voice was cultured, quiet, tired with a hint of sadness. The smile overflowed every worn wrinkle of her aged face.

Daniel saw her again a few times more before he decided to retreat to his office. For one moment more he looked around him, then paused. The lady in pink was at a check-out. He was pleased to see an assistant come to help her load her shopping into two bags. Then he was distracted by Diane waving a paper in one hand and clutching a cucumber in the other. She wanted to tell him about poor quality this week. The cucumber examination took a few minutes. When Daniel glanced back at the check-out the old lady had gone, but Mandy, working that check-out was waving to attract Diane's attention. Daniel went across with her.

'That lady in the pink dress' explained Mandy while at the same time dealing with the next, obviously impatient customer. *'She was very distressed. Kept rummaging in her purse and her shopping saying she had lost something. Then she picked up her bags, left the trolley and went. When I went to put out some fresh bags I found this!'* Mandy held out a wad of twenty pound notes. Daniel snatched them from her and made for the exit. *'I'll go and find her. She can't have gone far.'*

He was delayed by congestion at the revolving doors and realised he was not even sure from which entrance she had left. His gaze swept the entrance area and the nearest parts of the car park. The lady had disappeared. Surely she couldn't move that fast. Perhaps she had stopped at the toilet. He went back inside and with no small measure of embarrassment enquired of a lady emerging from the toilet, *'Was there an old lady in pink in there?'* His informant gave him the strangest look. *'I think I was the only one in there.'*

Daniel went out to the car park again still clutching the cucumber list Diane had shown him and the money Mandy had found. Birch saplings bent right over pointing to the newly opened section of the parking area. It was an enormous place to search. He would have to ask again. He pushed the bank notes firmly into one of his pockets and tucked the cucumber list loosely on top of them. Buttoning his jacket to defend it from the thieving wind, he approached a woman loading shopping into the boot of her car. She had tied her beagle to the trolley by its lead and was restraining him and the trolley by holding her foot on the wheel. Daniel rephrased his question.

'Hello! I'm looking for an elderly lady with a bright blue hat and gloves!' That sounded even worse so he added quickly. *'She's wearing pink and has a yellow scarf!'* The woman raised her head from her nearly full car boot, looked at him quizzically for a moment, then replied with a firm *'why ask me?'* glare. *'No!'* She straightened up in a manner which told the world of all her arthritic back problems, looked all around her and relaxed her foot from the trolley wheel. At that moment a huge gust of wind swept across the car park, snatched the cucumber list from Daniel's pocket to play chase with it between the cars. The beagle, now free, and no doubt bored with Supermarket shopping, barked excitedly and made off in pursuit dragging the trolley behind him. Daniel was to regret that one of his first innovations as the new manager was to have all the trolleys serviced to put them into easy-handling condition. Handling had not included paws.

'Catch him! Catch him!' the woman shouted at Daniel in a voice which suggested blame. Daniel set off after the trolley, the beagle and the cucumber list which the wind soon lodged under the tyre of a small purple car closer to the supermarket entrance. It could wait there. The dog and the trolley were a hazard taking priority. Fortunately the store trolley attendant intervened by pushing his long line of vehicles at an angle to intercept the beagle.

Missing a hold on the trolley, Daniel grabbed the dog's lead and in doing so pulled the trolley over against himself. It remained upright but unfortunately someone had left the remnants of a broken flour bag in it. Daniel's dark suit looked like a well sugared Black Forest gateau. He felt someone grab his arm.

'Don't rub it! You'll make it worse. I'll brush it when you get inside. The wind will take some of it away.' Diane had come out to see where he was. Her grin widened into an ear to ear smile before she surrendered to laughter. Daniel was unsure how to react at first, but quickly joined in the fun. The beagle's owner limped towards them. Taking the dog's lead from him her added laughter took away any suspicion of blame. *'Thank you!'* she said. *'Thank you for catching Peel .. and for the entertainment!'*

'O K'. Daniel brushed the thanks aside. *'I have to get on now.'* He turned to Diane. *'I still have to find the lady in pink ... and your list.'* He was determined to recover some of the respect due to a store manager.

'I'll help.' Diane joined him. *'And then I'll help you clean up.'*

The little purple car was still in its place and so was the cucumber list. Daniel pulled it free and straightened up to see Diane pointing into the car. Inside, in pink suit, yellow scarf and bright blue hat, was an elderly lady and she was sobbing. Daniel pulled open the door and blurted out, *'Don't cry. We've found it!'*

The woman stopped crying, wiped her eyes on a blue glove and stared at the wad of twenty-pound notes which Daniel held out to her.

'Oh,' she gasped. 'Did I lose that too? Thank you.' She looked about to cry again. *'You didn't find a ring as well did you? I looked but it wasn't there. I've lost my wedding ring. It must have slipped off my finger. It's never been off in fifty-seven years! Jim and me .. we were together for fifty-three of them.'* More tears rolled into wrinkles.

Diane suggested that she could have dropped it into her shopping bags while she was packing them.

'I looked,' replied the woman.

'May I look again for you?' She was glad of the help and it did not take long for Diane's sharp eyes to find the ring wedged in the leaves of a cauliflower.

'Come back inside we'll give you a cup of tea in the restaurant.' Dazed with relieved happiness, the pink lady who now introduced herself as Jennie was ready to accept Daniel's invitation.

'Can I leave her to you?' Daniel asked Diane once they had got Jennie seated with her cup of tea. *'I've just remembered, I've got a store to run.'*

'No problem.' Diane gave him a long broad-horizon smile - a smile with a future.

It turned out to be a very long day before Daniel closed down his computer to leave the store. Robert was on the steps of the Engine Room as he went in.

'Was it a longer day then?'

'Certainly was,' Daniel replied.

'So you cheated the sun?'

Daniel thought for a moment. He pictured an elderly lady's happy chatter over a cup of tea laughing about a paper-chase with a dog and a cucumber list Diane literally brushing him down and her smile - a smile full of hope.

'No. He took Robert's arm, turning him back inside. Come on. I'll buy you a drink and tell you all about it. I don't know about the sun, but I certainly cheated the darkness!'

