

Mrs Fizzes.

A solitary figure emerged from Bank station. Behind him, the Underground wind sucked greedily at the flaps of his suit as though unwilling to let him escape.

A page from the evening paper skittered across the road in the watery light of early morning.

Another sheet, caught in the back draft, swooped in on him without warning, spreading itself across his face. Simon Collins flailed wildly, like a drunk berating the heavens. The page came loose and was blown into the station; another piece of garbage vacuumed away by the self-cleaning City.

Marco's was directly across the road. If he could just get to Marco's he'd be fine. Buy a coffee; a good, robust Italian roast. Two quid for an espresso - daylight robbery to be sure, but really, how much was a shot of intellectual Kryptonite worth? Especially today; his big day.

A couple of sips and he'd be able to think straight. And he'd have the energy to face the envious Viner.

No doubt, Viner was already hard at it, up there on the eighteenth floor of Kleiner Weiner.

Viner - from Kleiner Weiner, for God's sake.

Simon had taken the first available train, yet somehow Viner would be at his desk before him. As always.

How the fuck did he do that?

Viner slept there.

No he didn't.

Viner never slept.

Ever.

Viner was the undead.

Simon ducked his head, cuddling the steaming wax cup against the wind as he approached the monolith of chrome and smoked glass.

He could do without Mrs Fizzes this morning. Mrs Fizzes lived somewhere in amongst the detritus around Kleiner Weiner Tower; an aberration in this temple to Mammon. When each day, thousands of salary-men and women chased the Petro-Dollar and made millions on the turn of a percentage point, Mrs Fizzes chased pennies and fluttering plastic bags.

Mrs Fizzes was the self-appointed toll-collector; a Charon on the dead shore of Leadenhall Street, who must first be paid by anyone wishing to cross.

At the pavement, Simon looked left and right for signs of the old woman. He was gratified to find the coast clear. A good omen. Today he was earlier than usual, perhaps Mrs Fizzes might still be sleeping off the ravages of a gin-binge.

‘Caught ya. Ya naughty boy, trying to sneak past Mrs Fizzes.’ The woman erupted from a pile of old cardboard boxes and waved a foul old nicotine-stained finger in his direction.

Simon froze, one foot dangling over the kerb, heart pounding.

Mrs Fizzes gazed at him with a combination of hostility and disappointment. ‘I know what you been doing. You been fucking my sister again.’

She didn’t look well today. But then, to be fair, she never looked well.

‘I’m sorry, I couldn’t help myself. But I was only using her to get to you.’

Simon had an answer to any of Mrs Fizzes’ random accusations.

He fumbled in his pocket for small change.

Mrs Fizzes smiled thinly. 'All right bollix, I'll take ya money.'

'And good morning to you too, Mrs Fizzes.'

Usually, at this point she simply accepted the donation and melted back into one or other of her boxes. But on this particular morning she held Simon's eye.

She winked. No, not a wink. A twitch. He could see the tiny muscles quivering up the left side of her face, as though someone had attached a battery. Her right hand flipped upwards and her entire body jerked and spasmed like a marionette with a madman at the strings.

And then it passed. She stared at him blankly and blinked twice before abruptly turning on her heel.

Simon shivered and hurried on.

'Nervous Simon?' Viner hovered over him with fish-breath.

'Go away Viner, I'm busy.'

'I'd be nervous.'

Simon gathered up the loose papers on his desk. 'I've had a couple of Prozac and I dropped an 'E' about ten minutes ago. So I'm feeling pretty mellow right now. In fact...I think I might be in love with you, Viner.'

Viner's rabbit eyes widened in alarm.

Simon grinned.

'You're joking?'

‘Of course I’m joking. You think I’d take any chances today? I’m sharp as a tack.’

Viner looked disappointed.

‘Don’t worry; I’ll still love you when I’m a partner.’

Viner scowled and mooched back to his desk and his fish-paste sandwich, muttering under his breath.

Viner and Collins were all that remained of the Nineteen-Eighty-Four Graduate-intake scheme. The other twenty or so bright young things, winnowed down by corporate Darwinism over the years. Viner had survived through a combination of Machiavellian manoeuvring and mulish persistence. He loved his job, Kleiner Weiner, and everything it stood for.

Collins on the other hand, loathed it all with a passion and had never made any secret of the fact. One day he would escape from this pinstriped cage. When he had enough saved. But by one of those paradoxes of human nature, Simon’s aggressive cynicism and lack of respect had been the very attributes that so appealed to his superiors and were propelling him even now up the corporate ladder.

And so today, it was Collins not Viner who had been given the brass ring; an opportunity to present to a major potential client worth millions in revenue. There was no doubt in any one’s mind that a successful outcome would lead to an instant partnership.

The boardroom was sultry, the heat of too many corpulent florid men crammed together for too long. Simon tried to focus on the projector screen, he was sweating now, tiny droplets converging on his forehead like a fresh Martini glass. The crucial numbers had

somehow slipped out of focus. Concentrate. There was so much riding on this presentation. He could detect Viner at the back of the room, willing him to fail; could feel the envy and resentment emanating from him like a damp fog. ‘...so when you factor in the dollar cost averaging, you’ll see that year-on-year, Kleiner Weiner has actually achieved...’

For some reason all he could think of was Mrs Fizzes. She’d been on his mind all morning; the bizarre facial tic and that sudden weird seizure.

He gazed down at his notes. And now, oddly, his own left eye had begun to twitch. A series of mild tremors washed coruscated across his torso like soft wavelets of flesh. He fought for control until a final, savage electric shock convulsed the muscles of his left arm flinging it high into the air. Typewritten notes fluttered to the ground scattering like so much confetti as his legs suddenly and grotesquely gave way. In spasm he sprawled on his back staring helplessly up at the ceiling tiles. Viner’s concerned moon-face loomed overhead. ‘Just relax, Simon. I’ve called the paramedics. They’re on their way...be here any minute.’

Simon was conscious of his notes being gathered up around him. Viner’s pallid face floated into view once more, closer this time. Close enough to whisper: ‘Oh, and don’t worry about the presentation. I’ve got it covered.’ This time Viner couldn’t resist an small ironic smile as he exhaled a triumphant gust of stale salmon-spread.

Viner crossed a pin-striped leg. He took the opportunity to snatch a quick peek out of Peppiat’s thirtieth floor window. He could see the dome of St Paul’s in the distance. It was like being God up here. And the partners of Kleiner Weiner were gods. They could

make or break entire countries. And in a few minutes he, Paul Viner, would become one of the anointed.

‘So when do you think he’ll be back Mr Peppiatt?’

‘Henry, call me Henry.’

‘Henry.’

‘Who knows? Weeks, months, years? Who knows? Hard to say with this kind of thing. Maybe never.’

‘Stress Viner. Some can handle it,’ Peppiatt shrugged, ‘some can’t.’

Viner nodded sagely.

‘But we’re all impressed with the way you’ve picked up the ball and run with it after Collins’s little...episode. Very impressed. In fact, the department’s performing better than ever.’

Viner flicked an imaginary piece of lint from his knee.

‘And as you know, we do like to reward performance here...’

Viner smiled inwardly and envisioned that new Mercedes SLK.

But Collins kept invading his thoughts; Collins convulsing like a gaffed fish. The odd, wobbly thing he did with his hand just before...funny, he could feel his own eye beginning to twitch now...