

MARK LAWSON

THE DEATHS

PICADOR

ONE

THE COFFEE GUY

The deaths are discovered because of the country's sudden obsession with perfect coffee.

After three years of studying History and Politics, Jason hadn't expected to be driving a van, but it was one of only two interviews he got (the other fast food) from 200 applications. And it can be argued that delivering expensive caffeinated drinks is vaguely relevant to his studies: at what point, in its politics and history, did England become Italy and why wasn't he told?

Because he's young-looking, customers often assume he's on a gap year and he doesn't correct them. The company, run from a trading estate off a junction low on the M40, is called CappuccinGo. The fun of the pun, Jason worries, results in missed web sales from customers uncertain of the spelling. He delivers capsules, advertised as compressing the essence of the finest Italian and Brazilian beans, to members of Club CappuccinGo, who possess a black-and-chrome machine that crushes the colour-coded bullets with water, convincing the drinkers that their English homes are actually Florentine restaurants.

When the government declared Britain bankrupt, Jason feared for his job; in a recession, posh hot drinks seemed an obvious candidate to be judged a luxury. But his clientele stubbornly refuse to condemn their taste-buds to the jar or even – Jason can remember his parents' excitement about these – that previous post-dinner status symbol, the cafetière.

He relishes the empty motorways this morning, an advantage of working Saturdays, if you get ahead of the football traffic (although most matches at the moment are frozen off), and as long as it isn't half term, which seems almost a religious holiday now, at least among people like this.

Jason checks on the dashboard clock that he's ahead of target time. It is part of the firm's smart marketing to inject a sense of emergency into every purchase. Calls to the Hotcoffee-line promise delivery within twenty-four hours, with Christmas Day the only date on which club members are left thirsty or to slum it. The consignments are rushed around the country in zipped bags, as if they are drugs or transplant organs. At some drops, he will be handed a pouch of spent pellets for recycling; a service the business offers to convince club members that their pretension is ecologically sound.

The lapel badge and his contract identify him as a 'coffee courier'. He is just happy that the title is not cutely Italianized – *couria* – with its dreadful echo for his employment generation of *barista*, another manifestation of the nation's late-found coffee mania.

Numerous drivers are off – this new 'killer bug', in many cases, is the rumour at the depot – and Jason has worked eight days on the spin, but is happy to take this weekend early shift as well because, since Dad lost his job, his folks have talked about having to charge him rent.

Although his patch forms a wide loop round London, the areas and even the addresses are repetitive. In seven months, he has not yet made a delivery to a house that shares a wall with another. CappuccinGo's natural territory is the sweeping green stretches between London and Brum, where bankers, lawyers, surgeons and CEOs live in what used to be farmhouses, bake-houses, schoolhouses or post offices, from which they drive a dozen motorway junctions or ride a high-speed train for thirty minutes to the capital to work.

Middlebury, where houses seem to have a minimum of six bedrooms and at least two cars, is scattered among fields and

hills that give the lie to the radio-phone-in moan that Britain is crowded. Every home is almost a village of its own.

He has four regular clients round here, but this morning it's only the one: a last-minute dinner-party panic, probably. These minted women all look pretty much the same to him, but he thinks this is the fit, flirty one, which would be sweet, although he doesn't really believe the banter in the drivers' room about the customers who don't just want their coffee hot and wet. There's a glummy nanny here as well, although Jason mainly seems to hit her mornings off. That sort of tail is untouchable for him, anyway.

Having almost skinned the side last time, he takes the turn through the lower gate carefully. Looking up the hill, he again thinks that he should have gone into crime rather than driving. His folks talk about him getting his own place one day – and mentioned helping with a deposit, at least when Dad was working – but the idea seems increasingly like fiction.

What did you have to do to get a house like this? A winding, white-gravel drive, screened on both sides by trees, leads to a honey-coloured stone house, two-storeyed and three-sectioned, with substantial wings flanking a central block. Some of the window spaces have been bricked up, a relic of the period in English history when access to daylight was taxed.

These guys have a cylindrical post-box, American-style, at the bottom of the long approach, but, because they are either caffeine addicts or crazy entertainers, their CappuccinGo boxes are always too big to fit. The section of his chit headed 'Delivery Instructions' tells him to take the package up to the house and, if Mrs Snooty-Booty is out, leave it inside the green-doored barn, first on the right in the courtyard. But they won't be out on a Saturday morning which, if his mum and dad are any guide, is when old people do sex.

Opposite the post-box at the entrance to the property is a shield-shaped sign speared into the ground, advertising the name and number of the company that runs the security systems: Rutherford Secure. Matchingly branded metal boxes

flash from beneath the eaves of the main building. Robbers are obviously supposed to see the first logo and abandon the blag.

Glancing sideways, Jason checks that his lanyard is on the passenger seat. A few weeks previously, the company's couriers were given new, more impressive identity necklaces. Apparently, some of his colleagues had been turned away by club-members convinced they were a front for something else. With the have-nots increasing in number, the haves are panicking.

It is one of the dogs he sees first. Turning the final curve, the house now in full view to the left, he spots the woolly shape on the verge and suddenly, stupidly understands why this delivery feels different: there has been no little yapper screeching warnings from the house, enjoying his game of comically improbable guard dog. Normally, you can hear barking from the bottom of the hill.

In this job, road-kill becomes as familiar as traffic lights. He gets out of the van and approaches the shape, which looks like a rug left on the grass after an abandoned picnic. The dog's body has lain there long enough to be frosted. An ice-streaked tennis ball lies just beside it. Although British Summer Time begins next month, the mornings, after a stubbornly unfinished winter, are still raw.

He gently lifts the head, but it falls back, the weight and torpor confirming his stomach-pinching suspicion. Unlike many of his mates, Jason is not obsessed with the forensic shows, watching them only when he is in and there is nothing else on, but he is enough of a sofa pathologist to identify a bullet wound to the head; a single hit, he guesses. The back of the skull. They have Labradors at home, but he is vague about dogs: a westie, is this?

The smack of sadness surprises him. He almost wants to stroke the coat, uselessly thick, white with interlocking whorls of black and ginger. He is imagining it being one of his mum and dad's dogs. That must be how grief works until you have losses of your own.

So he is slow to see the implications of the killed animal.

Catching up, confused, and frightened for himself, he looks towards the buildings for an explanation or reaction of some kind.

Apart from the nearby neighing – no, almost roaring – of a horse, everything is silent, not only here but across the whitened fields and hills around. From this house can be seen three others that are almost identical, presumably the result of a landowner or architect's pattern two centuries or so ago. They form a wide square, each positioned on a high rise, facing towards each other, like some massive amp system made of stone. The residents are all his clients now, which is no surprise because they seem to have the same kind of stuff. He hopes he never has to pick out the wives, cars, dogs or children in an . . . identity parade. The realization that he may be in a crime scene finally strikes.

He fingers the phone in his pocket, a surrogate gun. Then, out of instinct, or perhaps some buried memory of how a hero behaved in a thriller he watched, he locks the vehicle with a squeeze of the key ring and walks the last part of the drive. In a garden at the side of the house, a rugby ball, a goal-keeper's glove and a basketball are frozen in the grass, like an advert for a Nordic sports channel.

As he walks closer, there's a dark mound beside a flowerbed. He's trying to work out which piece of sports equipment this might be, when he sees that it's the family's other dog, a Labrador, flat and still against the strip-mown lawn, the morning sun catching its black pelt and, like a torch, picking out the ragged red circumference of the bullet hole in the back of the scalp.

All his previous deliveries here have been weekdays, timed for 9.30 a.m., when, the delivery notes told him, the school run was finished and there would always be someone in. He has never seen the husband: probably killing himself to pay for all of this. So he has no idea how the house should be on Saturday morning. He wants to believe that they are sleeping in after a late night with lots of his coffee, and will wake up to discover

that burglars have shot their dogs. But don't you have dogs to stop that happening?

Television has made everyone a semi-detective and he notices that there are three cars – a 4x4, a saloon and a soft-top – on the expanse of gravel beyond the courtyard. Surely even people as fuck-off rich as this wouldn't have four cars, would they? Stepping closer, CSI Jason observes that the windscreens all have the sugar-scattered cake-top look of overnight chill. They have not been driven this morning.

He thinks of banging on the door, but he is an under-employed graduate, a coffee guy, not a cop. Changing his phone contract a month ago, he vaguely read that 999 calls were free. But, until now, this inducement has been irrelevant to him as a consumer.

TWO

MEMBERSHIP QUESTIONS

The coffee they serve is horrible – over-stewed and with a strange whiff of piss off it – but Simon drinks it because, on such a short journey, it is the only real perk of First Class. Without his ‘complimentary refreshment’ – even on these super-fast new trains, the language is redolent of the Orient Express – the cost of the tickets on his Visa statements each month would feel even more like theft.

Simon is happy to travel scum class when he’s on his own and even sometimes deliberately aims for the 6.25, knowing the others favour the .38. But today the .25 is delayed to 6.44 by signalling problems at Crewe and so Jonny Crossan finds him on the platform.

‘Good man, yourself.’

Jonny’s standard greeting at the moment involves, for some reason, a hideous attempt at an Irish accent, although Simon is from Northern England, which led his friend for many years to hail him with ‘Ow do?’

‘Jonny,’ he replies.

This is the almost daily station-ritual between them, accompanied by a mutual head-jab.

‘So, what’s this, Lonsdale? Have they Daleked that it’s in reverse formation this morning?’

Simon knows exactly what Jonny is getting at but says: ‘What?’

‘You’re standing down the pleb end, chummy.’

‘What? Oh, yeah. Bit of a fight with the alarm clock this morning: not quite in gear.’

‘The prosecution accepts this submission. If one had spent the night in bed with Mrs Lonsdale, one would not have slept much either.’

Jonny’s coveting of his friends’ wives is such a part of his repertoire that Simon merely rolls his eyes and follows him to the Gold Zone, where they are surprised to find Max Dunster. Max doesn’t often travel with them because his factory is a ten-minute drive – five at the speeds he likes to go – from Middlebury.

‘Your Highness!’ Jonny Crossan booms up at Max. ‘What matters in the capital?’

Max is standing with his mock-military stiffness at the place on the platform where the First Class carriage closest to the buffet car is most likely to open its doors. It is the mark of alpha commuters to know the stopping spots, although there are mornings when they have to keep their nerve when a sizeable queue forms beside an unexpected section of the yellow safety line and the fear sets in that they have missed an announcement that others heard. But, generally, barring a late switch of train-stock, their positions will be vindicated.

‘I’ve a meeting at the bank,’ Max tells Jonny, who asks: ‘Oh, dear. Smacked-botty time?’

‘On the contrary. I wouldn’t be surprised if the buggers want to borrow money from *me*.’

Jonny looks around the platform, his head swivelling as ostentatiously as a presidential bodyguard, then declares: ‘Missing member of the Monday Club alert! Where’s Tom Rutherford? Has he texted excuses to anyone? Certainly not to me.’

Simon and Max shake their heads. Max’s careful anticipation of the length and formation of a Virgin Pendolino pulling in at platform 4 puts them on the train first and, though the red-eye from Manchester can be crowded, they nab an empty four with a table. Simon, who is prone to claustrophobia in trains, planes and theatres, stands back to let Jonny take the window.

Max, because of his height, also likes an aisle and so they leave the other window seat empty.

‘Room for a small one?’ asks a voice from beside and above.

‘Speak for yourself, cock,’ says Jonny. They all look up to see a squat, stocky guy who is not a regular member of the travelling squad, but an occasional sit-in if the seats fall that way. Simon can never remember his name: Nicky something? Max stands, as usual cracking his head on the luggage rack, to let past the mystery voyager, whose shape gives him no plausible claim to leg-room.

‘Shouldn’t you lot be travelling in the chav carriages to show us all you’re sorry?’ Jonny teases the new arrival, who good-naturedly parries: ‘Yeah, yeah. Could we have a Be Nice To Bankers Day? I’d be surprised if any of you lot are going to be *Guardian* Person of the Year.’ Sardonic vibrato on both *Guardian* and *Person*. Then, holding out a hand to Max: ‘Nicky Mortimer. I think we’ve occasionally met here on the dawn treader.’

‘Max Dunster,’ comes the confirmation. *Nicky Mortimer*, Simon thinks. Copy that for future reference. Silent, he imagines himself as a camera, cutting between the speakers.

Jonny: ‘Max is going for a spank from the bank. Don’t know if it’s yours?’

Nicky: ‘Oh. Who are you with?’

Max: ‘Well, in this instance, Cooper Macauley.’

Nicky: ‘Classy. Want to split a taxi to Belgravia?’

Max: ‘Oh, er, yeah, sure. You’re in Belgravia as well?’

Nicky: ‘HQ is.’

Max: ‘Who are you? As a bank I mean?’

Nicky: ‘Well, more corporate finance, really. Robbins Schuster Geneva.’

Max: ‘Right. Nice.’

Jonny: ‘Is it just me or has this train *stopped*?’

Like lab rats, the commuters have learned to distinguish the meanings of different sensations. A repeating screech is the result of someone pressing the disabled help button in the loo,

usually an able-bodied person trying to flush the bog or dry their hands; a single ping followed by static indicates an announcement from the artist formerly known as the guard, now the train manager.

Who says: ‘As you’ve probably noticed, ladies and gentlemen, we’re currently held by a red signal. And I regret to say that we could be here for quite some time.’ From along the carriage, the sigh of meetings, deals and earnings stalled. ‘The reason, I’m afraid, is a person under a train at Watford Junction.’ Another low moan of disapproval at the thoughtlessness of the corpse. ‘I’ll keep you updated when I have any further information. In the meantime, thank you for your patience and cooperation. The buffet is open in carriage G and a complimentary beverage and hot-and-cold-breakfast sandwich service will be coming through First Class.’

‘I’ve got a case conference at eight,’ complains Jonny.

‘I am right, aren’t I,’ Simon asks, ‘that they used to say “an incident” or a “fatal incident”? I think “person under a train” is quite recent, isn’t it?’

‘Very much so,’ Max agrees, only half-lowering his *Financial Times*. ‘I assume it’s to stop people abusing train staff in the way that those posters at stations ask us not to.’

‘I’ll tell you why it is,’ Jonny joins in. ‘One is supposed to feel sympathy for the fucker who jumped under the train. Which, as you can probably guess, one doesn’t. It’s absolutely their *yuman right*’ – the words satirically inflected – ‘to do themselves in, but I propose this: they stick to pills and whisky, we get to London in the advertised thirty minutes.’

‘Am I right in thinking you’re a barrister by trade?’ asks honorary club-member Nicky . . . (shit, he’s forgotten his surname again – early morning or something worse?), in the tone of probing an improbability.

‘He is,’ Simon smilingly confirms. ‘I always say, if I ever kill anyone, I wouldn’t ask Jonny to defend me and pray he wouldn’t be prosecuting. Actually, I met a British Transport Policeman at a dinner party . . .’

‘Exciting social life you have, Si.’ Max from behind the paper. ‘Thank the Crucified Christ you didn’t ask us to that one.’

‘No, seriously . . .’ Simon blames *Top Gear* for the fact that so many British men now regard conversation as violently belittling banter. ‘What he said was really interesting . . .’

Max makes snoring noises from behind his pale-pink barrier. Jonny says: ‘I’ll be the judge of that, Lonsdale.’

Simon continues: ‘According to him, Monday morning and Friday evening are the hot-spots for railway suicides. They’re the rush hours that cause maximum disruption. I suppose because people have more to get in for or more to get home for. So it’s a sort of last swipe at the world you hate.’

Nicky Who, a far better audience for Simon’s story than his usual co-commuters, nods: ‘So you can bugger up thousands of people for a couple of hours. I wonder if that’s true across the world or if it’s a British thing.’

‘I’m only interested in the ones on this line,’ Jonny says, with that little flicker of camp he has when rattled.

‘The Virgin suicides!’ declares Max.

Simon is surprised and impressed by the reference: ‘I didn’t know you read books.’

‘What’s that?’ Max lowers the paper. ‘I didn’t know it *was* a book.’

‘I wonder, though. Do you think it *is* that?’ this Nicky asks.

‘Do we think what is what?’ barks Jonny.

‘That people jump under trains on Monday mornings and Friday nights to inconvenience other people? What if that’s when someone feels most vulnerable? Another Monday morning without a job; another weekend to be spent alone . . .’

‘Interesting,’ says Simon, who thinks it is. But Jonny mocks: ‘Thought you were a banker, not a social worker!’

The tannoy peal again, then the train manager crackling: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I’ve just been informed that we can expect a delay of at least another hour, while the body is removed from the track.’

‘The body!’ Max says. ‘What is this? Snuff Rail?’

Mentally rewriting schedules, most passengers groan, then, as they alert their workplaces, the carriage fills with finger-tapping and ear-splitting voices, amplified by mobile over-projection and hands-free headsets.

Once more, the tocsin and the boxy sound: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, train manager again.’ The callers pause for more information to relay. ‘Okay, we’ve had a message from Control. We’re going to be pulled backwards to Leighton Buzzard and then come into London on the slow track. We’d hope to give you a revised arrival estimate in the station . . .’

His apologies for any inconvenience caused are drowned out by passengers bellowing revised arrangements into phones.

‘They’ll probably charge us extra for the backwards leg,’ the guest member predicts.

It is at this point that Simon realizes he has a second-class ticket. Surely, though, there will be no inspections on a train that is travelling late and in the wrong direction.

Max has scrunched his newspaper under the seat and opened up his MacBook Pro on the table. The latest model, of course; he goes through laptops as others change socks. Its lightweight frame looks fragile under his huge hands. Jonny is pulling the ribbons off a legal brief, until Max says: ‘Oh, Jonny. Message from the Management. A feasibility study has been done on Marrakesh.’

Spinning on the shiny table-top, the computer reveals a screen scattered with rectangular images of blue skies, pink sunsets and red-bricked palaces.

‘Bit steam-age that, isn’t it, Max?’ Jonny teases. ‘I expected you to have an iPad Retina wotsit.’

‘Oh, I have. Shipped one in straight from the States. Just, boringly, the figures for today are on this and I haven’t zapped them over. According to blogs, and people who’ve been, the smart move is to stay in what they call a *riad*.’

‘That’s exactly what *we* did,’ says Nicky is-it-Morton? but is ignored as Max continues: ‘What used to be top wallahs’

villas turned into small private hotels. Pop out Friday lunchtime – three hours down the same time-zone, so no lag – stay in one of these and come back Sunday.’

Jonny nods vertically, chin up and down very straight, like a boxer being knocked about: ‘Looks just the ticket for Libby. Shop until she drops in the souk and so on, while we chaps seek out the belly-dancers. Are there *lap*-belly-dancers, do you reckon? Libs has got a thing about bringing carpets back. I said we’ve already got them wall-to-wall, darling, and we’ve only got two feet each, but you know.’

Simon tries to look uninterested, skimming through his roll of newspapers, but that old word ‘clubbable’ was made for Max: ‘Hey, Simon, why don’t you and Tasha come along? The Rutherfords are already signed up. It’s the last but one weekend before Christmas.’

‘For some reason, those dates ring a bell,’ says Simon, although they don’t, adding, ‘I’ll talk to Tash tonight,’ although he won’t.

‘Come on, Simon,’ Jonny yells at him. ‘You – and especially Mrs Lonsdale – must be there. It’s a state visit of The Eight.’

The sensation of being pulled backwards, even slowly, is disconcerting, like the reverse leg on a theme-park dipper that sets you up for the dizzying drop.

‘Tickets and passes from Milton Keynes, please,’ comes the voice from behind them. Like all those who speak for a living, the train manager has a variety of tones: clear but contrite for the delay announcements, courteous but firm for what is now called ‘revenue protection’, previously the inspection of tickets.

Jonny and Nicky flash their First Class season tickets quickly and coolly from their wallets, as if they are police IDs. These are received with gentle gratitude, as is Max’s machine ticket, although it is scribbled on to prevent him re-using it fraudulently. Simon is already muttering ‘I, er, need to . . .’, hoping for deafness or discretion from his friends, when the ticket guy says: ‘You’ll need to upgrade this, sir?’

‘Er, yes. I realize. How much is it?’

Jonny and Max stare with icy surprise at the imposter. Simon has a sense of how South Africa and Berlin must have been in their decades of division.

‘The difference is sixteen pounds, sir. How will you be paying?’

He reaches for the credit card first but it has been used already once at the ticket machines that morning, and payment for a second journey so quickly is the sort of ‘irregular spending pattern’ that might trigger a stop on payments. If his card is rejected in front of Max and Jonny, and even the relatively disinterested Nicky Mortimer, Simon will need to become the line’s second suicide before breakfast. He is not, though, completely sure how solvent the debit account is.

He risks it. The gap as it bleeps through the reader feels like waiting for the opening of the result envelope on a TV talent show.

‘That’s fine, sir. Here’s your new ticket and receipt.’

With the revenue-protection officer gone, the pack-leaders yap at him.

‘A steerage stowaway!’ hoots Jonny. ‘Explain yourself, Lonsdale!’

‘I’m not angry, Si, just disappointed,’ adds Max, mock-headmasterly.

‘I was getting the earlier one, but it was delayed. I knew you guys wouldn’t be around, so what was the point of being here? To be honest, I only travel First for the company, not the coffee.’

‘I’ll grant you it’s not Club CappuccinGo,’ says Jonny. *Please, Simon prays silently, don’t start up about the fucking Rajasthani macchiato you’ve got on trial.*

‘Work hard, play hard, travel fast but soft,’ says Max. He has a way of speaking like a sports coach or motivational guru.

‘I do keep thinking it’s a ludicrous expense,’ says, yes, got it again, Nicky *Mortimer*. ‘On a run as short as this, what are you really getting for your buck?’

The others look at him as if he is a foreigner who doesn’t speak the language.

‘Bugger this for *un jeu de soldats*,’ announces Jonny. ‘I’m going for a Smedgewick, if I can work the damn doors.’

Simon stands to let him clamber out.

‘What’s a Smedgewick?’ asks Mortimer. ‘Some sort of sandwich?’

‘Good Lord, I hope not!’ guffaws Max. ‘It’s what Crossan calls a number two. He’s one of those chaps that has his own words for things. A tip from me: if you happen to know someone called Dobson, don’t ever tell Jonny you’ve shaken his hand.’

After travelling several miles backwards, they are shunted, spilling the disgusting free drinks across the table, across to the slow track for another assault on London. If the person under the earlier train chose their time of death in order to bugger up the lives of those who survived, the strategy has been impressively effective. Simon texts the office that he will definitely miss his nine and will let them know about the ten.

*

There was an article in the *Telegraph* about one of the smarter supermarket branches somewhere banning shoppers from entering the store in their pyjamas. Apparently some people – from an estate, you’d guess – were coming to the shop direct from bed or, more likely, staying in their sleepwear all day, trackies and hoodies a 24-hour outfit now. Even the nuns at school were rumoured to change into a different shapeless garment at night.

So Tasha’s just a little worried about going into her shop in her gym stuff. Even though she’s wearing a smock dress and cardigan over her shorts and t-shirt, she has got her trainers on (too much hassle to be changing in and out of heels at the club, although some of the other girls do) and, while they’re clean and white and Nike, they are still just, as they used to say at school, pumps.

Actually, the more she thinks about it, how are estate trolls who spend all day in their pjs able to afford to go to a shop

with a dress code, anyway? Benefits, it will be. Shocking when you think that even she, when Simon has been giving her an especially hard time about the finances, sometimes has to do the weekly shop in Tesco for a while instead, which just isn't the same, although, oddly enough, it's the only one of the super-markets to have baguette-holders on the trolleys as standard.

From the long shining line under the porch beside the cash-points, she takes a trolley. Unlike the other food shops, hers doesn't chain them together or require a pound coin as deposit. It's a sign that the shop trusts its patrons and the community, although you do sometimes see one abandoned on the grass beside the bypass, ridden as a pikey-bike through the night.

The guilt tin at the door today is holidays for disabled children. Officially, Tasha's deal with God is that she donates for diseases she might otherwise get and becoming a disabled child is one of the few medical plotlines definitely closed off to her. *You could still end up with a paraplegic kid, though, with Josh and Henry playing rugby, and Polly driving now.* She drops in a pound coin, and then a second because one of the alternative lives she has been most grateful to avoid is as the mother of a son or daughter with something wrong. God forgive her, but she flinches when she sees some mum wheeling along a great lolling teenage lump. How do they keep up those brave smiles?

'Bless you,' says the collector. Tasha wonders if she has a crippled child herself.

The double entry doors slide apart. Tasha stops at the Shop-and-Scan stand and swipes the joint-account debit card smoothly down the black plastic slot on the right. After a few times now, she's got the angle of entry and the speed just right – the newbies stand there frustratedly putting the card back in again and again, like those elderly American tourists you see looking baffled outside hotel rooms with plastic keys – and, at the first time of asking, the screen in the middle scrolls out the greeting GOOD MORNING, MRS NATASHA LONSDALE and one of the hand-sets at the bottom of the rack starts to flash and

vibrate. It always reminds her of the moment in a sci-fi film when the astronauts board the spaceship.

She frees the price-reader and pushes it into the custom-made soft grey plastic slot they've just added to the front of the trolleys, then places in its base the three green branded canvas bags given to her when she subscribed, patting them open ready to receive the goods. Standing in his gleamingly clean apron in company colours, in the middle of his island empire to the right of the newspaper rack, the meeter-and-greeter beamingly lives up to his job description or, anyway, the one she has given him.

'Good morning. Mrs Lonsdale, is it?'

The shopper as celebrity. 'Er, yes.'

'You've used Shop-and-Scan before?'

Though he will know this from the bespoke bags in her trolley.

'Absolutely.'

'Excellent. Any problems, though, don't hesitate to ask me. Enjoy your shopping.'

What genius this is to make a mum on a food run feel like the Duchess of Whatever in Fortnum's in the forties. The floor-walker is the elder brother of a boy in Josh's Sunday-morning rugby team. Tasha knows the family slightly from fund-raising race nights and barbecues. The name badge pinned to his apron says Andrew, although he's always Andy at the rugby club: such touches make the shop feel like the BBC of food retailers.

With Shop-and-Scan, the awful chore of the big weekly grub run is suddenly exciting. Feeling like her boys with those endless PlayStation games, she zaps each bottle or packet (or the printed label at the self-weigh fruit-and-vegetable section), expertly placing the green laser line in the dead centre of the barcode and then clicking ADD. Sometimes an item – this morning, the Colgate Total Toothpaste and the couscous – surprises you and the hand-set plays a little tune, like the right-answer jingle in a TV quiz show. 3-FOR-2 OFFER, reads a box that appears on the scanner's screen, blocking out the rolling summary of her purchases.

She always feels slightly mugged by this – knowing that it's no more than a posh version of the spivs on Oxford Street with one eye on the cops – but Tash submits to the machine's greediness because, in a recession, it seems wrong to miss a bargain, although she can hear Simon's voice saying: 'But they made you spend more than you meant to, which must be a pretty eccentric way of saving money.'

In the Health-and-Wellbeing aisle, Tasha takes a packet of Super-Plus (her periods, though less regular, are getting heavier, a warning of the menopause, she supposes) and a box of Regular for Polly. Then she adds a pack of Durex Pleasure Me. Ridiculously, she still has to resist the urge to look guiltily round, a throwback to when she first bought contraceptives as a teenager in her home town, terrified that the priest or teachers or a family friend would see her.

Tampons and condoms: an example of contradictory shopping, like food and loo roll. No, actually, those are complimentary. Even so, she always tends to stand the toilet tissue – two sixteen-roll packs, how full of the stuff a big family is – separately in the trolley outside the bags, disliking the reminder of how all this meat, fruit, bread and vegetables will end. The sanitary products click on to the list under their brand names, but the contraceptives are recorded as Chemist Goods, a residue presumably of the religious opposition to selling them, although more likely, now, intended to allow teenagers (or adulterers?) to buy them without the evidence showing on a crumpled receipt.

She used to rely on Simon to get them, until, a couple of years ago, he started to use not having any in the bedside drawer as an excuse for not doing it. Not that providing her own supply guarantees a shagging these days.

There's a South African Chenin Blanc at half price, so she takes six bottles. Flinching slightly at the final total, Tasha wheels her trolley to Andrew's private Shop-and-Scan island, enjoying the superiority over the lines of shoppers waiting to have their items scanned in the old way, and then laboriously

pack them. She relishes the sense of being trusted to tot up her own bill, like honesty bars in smart hotels.

Although you couldn't call it a queue, it's mildly annoying that, just as Tasha's eyes meet Andrew's welcoming smile (he's working here on a gap year, she thinks, but it wouldn't be very surprising, as he was Head Boy at Eastbury Manor, if they put him on the management fast-track), another self-billing customer emerges from the bottom of the Refrigerated-Items aisle and cuts in front of her towards the desk.

'Find everything you were looking for today?' Andrew asks the pushy woman. 'And everything scanned okay?'

'I think so. It's really convenient.'

But suddenly there's a sound Tasha hasn't heard before in the shop: a jumble of rough percussion, not unlike the alarm call on her BlackBerry, and indeed a couple of people nearby scramble for their phones. The noise is coming, though, from the woman in front's scanner, which is also flashing red, rather than the cool green of the bargain alert.

'Oh my God!' she gasps. 'What's it doing?'

'Nothing to worry about, madam,' soothes Andrew. 'You've been randomly selected for a verification scan by hand. We're looking out for teething troubles during the trial period.'

The cutter-in blushes like she's been caught with a trolley full of vibrators and Vaseline. 'Really? But why me?'

The voice of someone experienced in answering back to officialdom: middle-class, definitely.

'As I say, madam, it's purely random.'

He brandishes his own scanner in the sensitively competent manner of a radiographer. 'If I could just start unpacking your bags, madam.'

This early in his retail career, there's already a hint of 'modom', like Captain Peacock in *Are You Being Served?*

The blushing queue-jumper turns her trolley towards the fresh-produce section.

'Look, do you know what?' she tells Andrew. 'I think I've just forgotten some stuff.'

Blimey O'Reilly, a shoplifter! A high-tech, keeping-quiet-about-one-of-the-bottles-from-the-honesty-bar type shoplifter, but a thief nonetheless. It would be so easy: just 'forget' to scan a few items, either not realizing that a checking system exists or gambling that it won't be you.

Tasha raises an eyebrow but Andrew is too corporately responsible to reciprocate, busying himself with tapping on a keypad. Is he summoning a store detective to apprehend the blushing culprit as she hastily scans the stolen food and drink? Or will the woman simply be barred from self-pricing ever again?

Tasha centres her green line on the barcode at the exit station that declares her shopping finished. The total (she calculates how long until Simon's payday) ghosts up on the screen and she swipes her card to settle the bill.

GOODBYE, MRS NATASHA LONSDALE. WE HOPE TO SEE YOU AGAIN SOON.

She likes the fact that the screen greeting even includes the vocative comma, just as the quick-service tills here are marked FIVE ITEMS OR FEWER, rather than LESS, as some of the less-classy supermarkets have.

Wheeling her trolley towards the car, she feels honoured and privileged to have the trust of the shop. But Tasha just hopes, startled by the echo of teachers' words from long ago, that one wrong-doer doesn't spoil the system for everyone.

*

Marry a chef and you get the scoop on new recipes. And, if your spouse is a concert promoter, there is surely a supply of complimentary tickets. But living with a doctor is what it must be like if your partner's a prozzie: they came in from work determined not to do more of it at home.

If Tom had turned up at the surgery of Dr Emily Rutherford as a slightly overweight, asthmatic man of fifty-one complaining of a wheeze in his breathing and aching in his arms and legs,

there would be tests and ECGs and, which is really the point, a flu jab as a precaution.

But turn to the very same Dr Rutherford at 6.45 a.m., with the alarm squealing like the life-support machine of a flat-lining patient, and report the identical symptoms and you get this brisk examination: ‘Any central chest pain or discomfort?’

‘Er, no. But I don’t think I’m having a heart attack. I think I’m going down with this new flu.’

‘If you had flu, you wouldn’t be able to get out of bed.’

‘Well, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I haven’t.’

‘Rubbish. You went for a wee twenty minutes ago. And don’t start up about your prostate. Once in the night is fine at your age. Look, if there were a fifty-pound note on the lawn outside, would you be able to go and get it?’

They have been married so long that he remembers when Emily’s test involved a five-pound note.

‘With the amount they pay GPs now, I wouldn’t have to.’

She elbows him in the ribs with affectionate violence.

‘I do have a very slight, burning isn’t quite the word, sensation, here, in the, is this the gullet?’ he persists.

‘How much did you drink last night?’

‘Two medium-sized glasses of red.’

‘Tom, there’s no point lying to the doctor about how much you drank when you were drinking it with the doctor. You had two-thirds of the bottle at least. I saw you tip half of my glass into yours when I was at the Aga. And, when I was taking the dogs out, you took another sneaky splash into your study.’

‘When I woke up in the night I was wheezing.’

‘Let me listen.’

She leans across him in the dark. Both of them are holding their breath from sensitivity to morning halitosis.

‘Give me your hand,’ she says.

‘Em, I’m not well enough to do anything like *that*.’

‘Ha ha. Remind me not to break a rib laughing.’

Her fingers brushing the tips of his in turn, her ear against

his chest; a parody of romantic intimacy. One reason, presumably, that doctors are not supposed to treat their own families.

‘The finger thing’s to check my circulation?’

‘Do I tell you how to be a security consultant?’

He anticipates the diagnosis because he has heard it so often before: ‘You’ll live.’

‘You always do that. When did I ever suggest I was dying? I’m worried I’m going down with something.’

‘It’s probably acid reflux. Make an appointment with Surinder.’

‘Em, if you just gave me a flu jab, I’d stop worrying about it.’

‘I’ve told you I can’t.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you’re not in an at-risk group.’

‘Nor were some of the people who’ve died in this epidemic.’

‘It’s not an epidemic and there are always anomalies.’

‘The relatives accept that, do they? I’m so sorry, Mrs Widow, I’m afraid they were an anomaly. How do I know I won’t be one?’

‘It’s statistically very unlikely. You’re more at risk going to London this morning.’

‘I’m not going. I’ll work from home.’

‘Up to you. But I wouldn’t sign you off.’

‘Em, isn’t there something you can give me?’

‘Oh, alright, yes, I suppose there is.’

Her rapid back-down surprises him. ‘Seriously?’

‘Yes. An Oscar. For this extraordinary portrayal of someone who’s got something wrong with them.’

The alarm trills its five-minute reminder. Tom lies and imagines the day ahead. He can deal with the intruder reviews for the department store and the art gallery on his laptop and prepare for the presentation to the university just as well at home as in the office.

Without the irritations of colleagues, he can have those done by noon and, after lunch (sushi from Waitrose?), while watch-

ing the week before last's *Mad Men* on Sky+, he could crack on with his history of the village. With all the weekend chauffeuring (Felix's volunteering at the hospice, Phoebe's cross-country, Henry's U-14 county running and rugby), it has been three weeks since he wrote a word.

He left off in the middle of the section about the Middlebury church and graveyard. Even thinking the word, he shivers involuntarily. He has reached an age when, driving past a cemetery, it is impossible not to imagine the procession you will one day lead.

Time. That is why he can't face London today. When you are young, old people warn you of the awful speed at which life passes, but you don't believe them until the day when you feel a desperate need to grab the hands of the clock and force them backwards, like Richard Hannay at the end of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.

His father, a civil servant, used to talk of a system by which, twice a year, an employee could ring up and say that they were not coming in. Although, realistically, the organization must have been vastly over-staffed to make this benefit work, these sudden leave days were presumably intended as a protection against exhaustion and depression. Human beings are not built for treadmills. Duvet days, people had started to call them, once the quick-make bed had come to busy Britain.

While Emily showers, he listens to the news in the dark. The number of New Variant SARS cases has risen again; an MP is calling for a mass-vaccination programme. When the water stops running in the bathroom, he starts to cough loudly.

*

Their Monday-morning Pilates, Libby often tells the others, makes no sense. They exercise for an hour and then eat pastries: a perfectly self-cancelling arrangement, like an umbrella with a hole in it. Jenno Dunster, a yo-yo dieter who never quite shifted the baby fat the last time and so maybe they need to be careful with the weight references, always reddens and says that she

hardly ever eats afterwards, anyway. ‘I never really feel hungry after Pilates,’ is her line, although she always seems to have room for a forkful of what other people order.

But, while Libby won’t be complaining if she loses a few pounds before Marrakesh, her trips to Middlebury Spa are more about friendship than fitness. She would never want to be busy like the blokes are – never seeing their homes in daylight or their children in any light for much of the year – but she likes the idea of a full though varied diary: that she and the other three are fitting in the gym between work (Emily, Tasha), shuttling kids around the county (*toutes les femmes*) and presiding as a justice of the peace (herself) or volunteering at the CAB: Jenno.

Libby tries, across the week, to get a balance between things she ought to do – presiding on the bench, fetching Deirdre Leeson’s shopping, chairing the Parish Council – and the stuff she likes to do: shopping, walking the dogs, tennis, getting The Eight together for a meal on a Friday or Saturday, or sometimes one night at someone’s and the other at someone else’s. Pilates – like the school-run and sex with Jonny (joking, joking) – occupies a middle-ground, containing stuff that is obligatory but can also be enjoyable, especially if you include the gabbing together after the exercise. The Pilates she is talking about, not the sex!

Of course, when you look at it coldly, what we call love and friendship is just a matter of who you happen to meet. She and Jonny were quite a chance couple – when you think of all that had followed from meeting in that bar in Hong Kong – but most of the people she knows had hooked up through college (Tom and Emily) or work: Max and Jenno. She isn’t sure about Simon and Tasha. Even so, there is a difference between the friends you make at school – where it tends to be types and shared interests – and the ones you add later, which is just geography. If they lived in another village – if they hadn’t bought the house in Middlebury from Jonny’s dad – she wouldn’t know any of these people.

She goes and squeezes a ball between her thighs with these three ladies every week because they live in the four big houses

on the hills and all have kids at Westbury Park. A friendship of convenience, you could probably say, and it is Pippa and Pongo from Tudor Hall she'd want to speak at her memorial service, but she is really quite fond of this lot, particularly Emily and Jenno. Tasha can be tricky because the Lonsdales are a little, how shall she put it?, lighter in the pocket than the others. Tasha always says they couldn't have afforded a private prep, which is why her three went to the church school in the village until eleven, which, frankly, must have put them at a disadvantage, but it is all a question of priorities.

Tasha is also given to moaning that they do the same thing every Monday and should try to be a bit more spontaneous one week but, in Libby's opinion, one of the best things about Middlebury Spa is that you know exactly where you are. In her view, change is generally a mistake, although, when she mentioned that at one of the dinner parties, Simon Lonsdale went all *J'accuse* on her and said, in that way he sometimes has, as if he is being really reasonable when actually he is being mean: 'Nothing should have changed? Child chimneysweeps? Slavery? Women voting? Well, actually, in some cases, the latter . . .' Tasha and Emily had to tell him to stop being like that.

It's a funny thing about men and women, at least in their circles, and certainly among The Eight, that, if you showed most people photos, they'd say that the man was lucky to have landed the woman. Not the other way round. Jonny is handsome obviously and Max keeps himself trim, but the only way poor Simon Lonsdale would end up in an art gallery would be if Damien Hirst starts pickling human heads.

Her hubby's view is that the men look older because they are worn out paying for the women to look younger. The blokes accept the march of death, he says, while the women coat their hair in creosote, as he calls it. Emily, who has this whole glad-to-be-grey flapdoodle, says there are studies suggesting that hair dye might cause brain tumours, but Libby joked that she would rather die young and raven-locked and the other girls agreed with her.