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OVERWEIGHT

So Whose Fault is That?

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For Ruth and Robert

The debate we should be having about the food we eat...

1

THE GREAT PASTRY MYSTERY

The almond croissant's seam of sweet marzipan and crust of flaked nuts complements, perfectly, the creamy cappuccino with its sprinkling of bitter chocolate. Usually there's time to savour it. Emma swivels her chair, turns her back on the PC screen then slowly takes a bite; just large enough to reach the sweet sticky filling deep inside the freshly baked pastry. A sip of coffee while she gazes out over London's skyline. Glass towers rising out of an orange sodium-lit mist; a city still half-asleep. And usually there's time to complain, to anyone who will listen, that it was standing room only on the Cambridge Flyer and queuing for the underground at Kings Cross Station.

Except today the croissant leaves Emma's life as quickly and mysteriously as it entered it. There, next to the waxed cardboard cup with a plastic lid, when she started downloading her emails but gone now. Stolen? Apparently not. There's a trail of icing sugar from the paper bag to the keyboard, and a greasy finger mark on the return key.

The coffee is still there. A quick gulp because there's no time to gossip today and anyway the journey into

work was fairly unremarkable. An early train with plenty of empty seats. The girl sitting opposite asleep. A young man across the aisle, glued to his laptop. Everyone else in the carriage either prodding or talking into their mobile phone. Whatever happened to newspapers? Or perhaps the Metro didn't get to Cambridge this morning. The girl's head sinks lower then jerks upright again without her waking. Exactly what Emma should be doing; catching up on much-needed sleep. The marvels of modern communication, and a crisis that lurked undetected in her email inbox until yesterday evening, conspire to keep her awake. Another overworked employee in another London-bound office on wheels.

It's obvious where the croissant went. Emma wipes her fingers on her handkerchief. Where it came from, though, is still something of a mystery. It wasn't Cambridge station, or on the train itself; there was definitely only a cup of coffee beside her laptop as Hertfordshire's garden cities slid past the train window.

Steve got up early to drive her to the station. Understanding as always. Heard the crisis unfold the previous evening. Emma's expletive as she read the email.

'Hi Emma.

Sorry about the short notice but gone down with flu. Trying to find someone else to give the presentation. Will be in touch.

Dan'

Always a problem when a speaker drops out at the last moment. Not necessarily insurmountable but this is the keynote speaker for the afternoon session. Emma's session; the one she spent 6 months planning. Regretting now not reading her emails on the way home – decided instead to thumb through a couple of lifestyle magazines. Assumed the health and nutrition conference was in the bag. Planned down to the last detail. Plenty of time for some background reading; ideas for the next event. Never assume. 'Assume' makes an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me', as her old boss used to say. Tempting to wait and do nothing; Dan may come up with a replacement. Deep down Emma knows he won't. 'Will be in touch' was probably the last thing he typed before his wife confiscated his iPhone and drugged him up with Night Nurse.

The aroma of coffee wafted along the platform from the Upper Crust kiosk as Emma stood waiting for the train. She remembers that. But just a latte from AMT Coffee before catching the 6:20. After all it was only an hour since breakfast; orange juice, two slices of toast; one with honey the other with peanut butter, fruit salad and yoghurt with muesli. A good breakfast sets you up for the day, her father used to tell her. An eggs and bacon man. Forty years a machinist at Cambridge Instruments. Two rashers, eggs sunny side up before setting off for work, leaving a kitchen full of stale cigarette smoke. In part why Emma doesn't smoke; although that film they showed at school when she was thirteen convinced her to quit. Quit before the two or three drags behind the bike shed turned into a habit. So

upset by the image of a late middle-aged man unable to climb three stairs, she tried, in vain, to persuade her father to give up. “Something will get you in the end, Emma,” he said. ‘Something’ turned out to be chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Breakfast at 5 am is eating with your fingers crossed behind your back. Emma was awake but her stomach was still asleep. Only as she reached Cambridge Station did it begin to stir. The smell of freshly baked bread. Tempting, but she resisted. She’s sure of that.

Forty-five minutes of frantic emailing and web browsing during the journey to London achieved nothing. The rest of the world still asleep, but she felt compelled to do something. Prepare herself for what would hit her when she walked into the office. An email to Jackie of course. Emma saw herself as blameless in this. OK, she hadn’t picked up her emails as promptly as usual but, even so, none of this was her fault. That wouldn’t stop Phillip making a meal out of it. An opportunity at last to deflect some of the criticism levelled at him over his lacklustre contribution to the event.

“Let’s broaden the scope.” Phillip came across as pushy and arrogant from the start. Had only been with the company for eighteen months; Jackie’s second recruit after taking over as Emma’s manager. Jackie marking her territory. Bringing new people on board because, apparently, over the years Emma has built herself a little empire. ‘Is operating in a silo’, to use the corporate speak that had proliferated in the office since Phillip arrived. The Women’s

Health Conference was Emma's pet project; a one-day event she built from scratch. One of twelve events the company had planned for 2015. Phillip came in over her head; over his head as it turned out. Broaden the scope and rename the conference 'Diet and Nutrition'. Really a bit late in the day for this. Rebranding was one thing, repositioning altogether more ambitious. Emma points this out; not politely either. Making it clear she wasn't happy having her idea picked apart and rebuilt to suit Phillip's plan for world domination. Well, that's how it came across. Phillip trying make his mark. Well, he's certainly done that now.

"We'll delay it until the beginning of 2016. There's a lot of media interest in dieting after Christmas. Let all the supplements and diet plan companies do the marketing for us." Emma remained silent. Just a sideways glance at Jackie as Phillip enthuses over a public debate on the nation's diet. Health providers on one side, the food industry on the other. This was going to be the gateway into the post-Christmas diet news cycle; mentions in the broadsheets and lifestyle magazines. A campaign kicking off early in the new year with a final push a week before the conference itself. An eye-catching, click bait, story with a controversial twist. Fed to journalists on Sunday broadsheets then picked up by Radio 4's Today programme on Monday morning. Every other media outlet running with it in the days leading up to the big debate itself.

Not Emma's place to point out flaws in this grandiose plan; that was Jackie's job. No 'upside', another word from Phillip's newspeak dictionary, to speaking out. Accused of

having a negative attitude if she's wrong. Marked out as a bringer of bad news if she's right.

Confrontational just that once. When Phillip presented his masterplan with the aid of a PowerPoint and spiral-bound marketing plans. Predictions that the front two rows of the conference would be packed with journalists; articles already half-written, only there to gather quotes and soundbites. Companies hammering on the door for speaking opportunities. Exhibition space sold weeks, even months, in advance. Everyone eager for their fifteen minutes of fame. Product placement opportunities to die for.

"Fat chance," said Emma.

"What?" Phillip snapped. Perhaps the exuberance masked a lack of confidence.

"*Fat Chance*, the book by Robert Lustig. It might have some useful facts and figures we can include in our promotional material," replies Emma, feigning wide-eyed innocence. "I'll email you the Amazon link."

Jackie glared at her. After all, mocking Phillip was, by extension, challenging her authority.

After that Steve was the only audience for Emma's cynicism. "Resistance is useless," she would say, imitating a Dalek. Making light of having her conference stolen and trashed. A sigh and shake of the head as she asked what food company in its right mind would join a public debate on obesity and expose itself to primetime mudslinging and finger-pointing. Then she stopped talking about it altogether because Steve tired of the subject. Became

fed up with Phillip elbowing his way on to the settee every evening.

Three months 'flying under the radar', yet another tedious expression Phillip is fond of using, has paid off. Emma's Woman's Health Conference remains intact. Hidden, but still there. An event within an event and its own keynote speech from the editor of a leading health magazine; one of the few sponsors who stayed on board. At least, it had remained intact until yesterday evening.

In the absence of major players from the food industry the morning session will now be dominated by speakers from the Department of Health and the NHS. None of the speakers in Phillip's afternoon session are food producers or retailers. Two are from standards organisations, the third from a food testing laboratory, and the fourth from a company that manufactures labelling equipment. Someone from Brussels is flying in to explain the workings of the European Food Safety Authority; they will also chair the afternoon session and give the keynote presentation for Phillip's stream. Only one person has come forward with a presentation that touches, even remotely, on the food industry's responsibility for the growing levels of obesity. An academic; two years working with a large commercial grower but his current work, and the subject of the presentation, a campaign for the responsible use of agricultural land. Not a good fit with Phillip's master plan and so passed across to Emma. No complaints. Keep a low profile. Emma has tagged the presentation on to the end of her stream.

Phillip's influence waned after a couple of stand-up rows with Jackie. Now he stays well clear of Emma. But he's still there, on the horizon circling like a shark; waiting for blood in the water. Has he heard Emma's keynote speaker has cancelled?

A mouthful of cold coffee as the train pulled into King's Cross; a bitter taste in her mouth because somewhere between Stevenage and London Emma gave in and slept. Legs and arms stiff, eyes stinging; stretching and blinking herself awake. Everyone rushed past as, confused and disorientated, she slowly got to her feet. Groundhog day; the second time she'd woken that morning. The station another assault on the senses. Not the grimy soot-covered building stinking of diesel fumes she remembered as a child. Avoided touching handrails back then, and precious little to stimulate the appetite. Everything glass and steel now. Clean, you could be walking down the deli aisle of your local supermarket. The cafés and pop-up food shops just a blur in her peripheral vision. Most were on the mezzanine, tempting passengers waiting for trains to take them out of the city. "See you this evening, Emma," they shouted down to her. Just Caffé Nero, couldn't avoid that, in front of the gates to platforms 9 to 11, reminding her stomach it was awake and suggesting breakfast may have been a dream. No time to stop though. Emma was dragged through the station by the flow of commuters until an escalator sucked her into the underground.

The last leg of the journey; that's when Emma succumbed. The clue on the side of the waxed paper coffee

cup stood on her desk. A Starbucks and Costa Coffee, within yards of each other, on the short walk between the underground station and the office. Then that restaurant serving all-day breakfast. People eating alfresco under space heaters in March. The Queen may live in a world that smells of paint; for everyone else it smells of coffee, fresh baked rolls and bacon sandwiches.

In the 1960s, when Emma started school and her mother joined a rapidly growing female workforce, people rarely ate between breakfast and lunch. A couple of digestive biscuits, perhaps a Wagon Wheel; it really depended what was on the tea lady's trolley. For Emma a packet of crisps from the tuck shop. No shortage of food, not then; rationing ended ten years earlier, just it wasn't always in her face.

It was still possible to avoid the fast food vendors in the morning, but only if Emma drove to work. Some days she did, for events at the ExCel centre in London's Docklands or the NEC in Birmingham. A journey devoid of temptation. Well, unless she filled the car with petrol because there's a Costa Coffee in the service station. Cars once had ashtrays, now they have coffee cup holders; coming soon microwave ovens in the dashboard. By car or train there's always one last hurdle; the vending machine in reception. Unlike the tea lady it replaced, the brightly-lit cabinet dispenses carbonated drinks, sandwiches and chocolate bars 24/7.

Emma is fifty-three and has been working for the company for twelve years now; organising conferences

for corporate clients and government departments. ‘M’ to Steve and close friends, even though her eyes are brown not blue and her hair is black not blond. In fact, the only similarity between Emma and M from the Bond films is her build. Five-foot five tall and weighing 78 kilos; not obese but overweight nonetheless. She passed 73 kilos a couple of years ago and despite several attempts at dieting her weight continues to creep upwards. It peaks at Christmas then falls back in the months following; reaching an annual low at the end of a desperate attempt to lose a few pounds before she and Steve fly down to the Mediterranean. But each Christmas sees a new high and 80 kilos, the point at which Emma becomes obese, looms on the horizon.

“Have you got a minute, M?” a voice calls out across the office. Close-cropped mousy brown hair, heavy-rimmed glasses and a tendency to stride rather than walk; gives the impression, false as it turns out, that Jackie is aggressive and impatient. She’s carrying an armful of folders and propping the door open with her foot. She sounds breathless and looks flustered. “We’ll go down to the meeting room,” she says.

The sun has risen above the mist, fading to a watery yellow. Emma pushes the conference file into her laptop bag then, taking a tissue from the box in the top drawer of her desk, wipes away the trail of crumbs and icing sugar.

2

REORGANISATION – A SANDWICH SHORT OF A CONFERENCE

Called the fish tank for obvious reasons, the glass-walled office leaves its occupants on view to the world. Mainly used for client meetings, it also serves as neutral territory during a crisis. Emma guesses today it was chosen because of its proximity to the main entrance. Jackie intended to go straight to the venue this morning and is only in the office to deal with this ‘last minute glitch’, her description not Emma’s. Once convinced Emma can sort this out, no doubt Jackie will be on her way. Really there’s no need to involve herself at this level, after all Phillip is still the conference manager. But Jackie has got very hands-on recently. Perhaps this ‘glitch’ is a distraction worry; another trivial issue to take her mind off bigger problems elsewhere.

“Oh, well,” Jackie sighs as she pours a glass of water and picks up a packet of biscuits from a tray midway down the long beechwood and chromed steel table. ‘Oh well.’ Because losing a speaker, even at this late stage, is no big deal. They get caught in traffic, marooned on trains or snowed in at airports. Perhaps ‘Oh well’ because she’s