

EIGHT STRANGE SHORT STORIES
June & July 2016

KEY

MAGICIAN

UGLY CHAET

SELF IMPROVEMENT

THE ART OF READING MINDS

GAS METER READER HORROR

MAKING A GO OF IT

THE KIDNAPPERS

KEY

1

Being an observant sort of person Tony had noticed that she put her coat and keys in the same place every day when she came into the gym. He'd woken up this particular morning and pinned to his window by the wind was the word 'NOW'; a torn piece of a newspaper advertisement. When she'd arrived he'd kept one eye on her surreptitiously. As she headed upstairs to use the cross trainer as usual, he skulked over to the open faced locker and without waiting took her keys. The Greek chorus who have been occasionally following Tony around for a few months - made up of three women in white robes - seemed to nod approval.

He didn't look up as he headed out and into the street. He immediately headed to the small key cutting counter of a customer-less local dry cleaners. They cut the two keys without a hitch and pretty much without a word and he had more than enough cash to cover it. Heading back into the gym a few minutes later there was no issue and he nodded briefly at the receptionist as usual before heading back to the girl's locker to put the keys back. Once the keys were back where they belonged his heart rate began to slow but not by much. Forty five minutes later the girl reappeared and Tony turned what he felt must be bright red and a loud ringing noise filled his ears which got louder and louder. The chorus started to sing words of affirmation and approval. Tony found himself thinking it was pretty cool.

He casually put his jacket on and as the woman left the gym he sloped out after her. He kept a reasonable distance from her – just like he'd seen in the movies. He hoped she didn't live too far away and hoped she had a regular front door as he didn't need the extra headache of figuring out which flat she lived in, if she lived in a block of flats. There was a sudden moment of panic as he imagined her walking into a high-rise building! Still, he could always try to find out more about her address from the gym, he was certain he could think of something. As the fates would have it, she walked up a small pathway to a small house on a quiet mews off the main road and Tony watched her turn the key into the front door and enter No. 5 Mulberry Place. He committed this to memory. His fingers were curled around the newly cut keys in his pocket without him realizing it and he stroked them without realizing it and then gripped them firmly and headed off back to his own flat.

2

A few weeks later Tony feigned a sick day at work on the day he decided he would go round. He'd grown a beard which he planned to shave off after looking around, but living in a busy city there was no real need to take this kind of step: it was the type of place where occasionally a group of burglars would get together and walk into an office and mutter something about being from the re-conditioning department and would clear the office out and no-one batted an eyelid and then they would find out two days later that there was no such department and the stuff was gone.

Tony had noticed that CCTV footage tended to be totally useless, usually a bunch of blurry stills of some burly looking men. Tony thought it was funny the things you could get away with if you just kept your nerve and didn't say too much about it, and this thought flickered through his mind as he stood on the main road weighing up what to do next. The idea of more planning and surveillance was not really Tony's style: he was a firm believer in taking *action*.

He had a few minor reservations as there was very little he could do if she turned out to be at home, or if someone else was. He spat on the ground and swore and told himself to stop being such a baby and to get on with it. He strode confidently up the path to the door and turned the key and it didn't fit and he tried the second key and although it was a little too new and too sharp he moved it fractionally in the lock until it felt right and turned it and the door opened. He stood very still, listening. Tony could tell that no-one was home because the house just had that empty kind of feeling. Who's in on a Thursday morning anyway? Tony's heart rate was not slowed by this instinct. He was more aware than he ever had been his entire life and every sense was on high alert. Being caught would take some explaining, and he didn't imagine that it would be easy, though it wouldn't be impossible: he was a pretty good liar and had a decent grasp on how to be believable, how to deceive people. The chorus, who had come and gone during the time since he'd taken the keys, turned up, singing quietly and pulling faces and mimicking him. They were always impressed with lies and deceit. Tony didn't know why.

Stood in the hallway/ living room, internally he remarked on the tastefulness of the décor, and in particular one standing fluorescent floor lamp - it looked authentically 60's and had a creamy looking tube. But, he wasn't here for that. Asked what he was there for, Tony wouldn't have been able to explain.

For some time, Tony had lost interest in knowing the difference between right and wrong and was in fact less sure than ever that there *was* a difference. Wasn't everything relative? Hadn't that been what being with Sarah had taught him? She'd left some time ago and Tony had never figured things out without her, as evidenced by his regular use of drugs and the other addictions which Tony had consciously ignored while getting on with them. The chorus had first started turning up around that time. They would mock Tony from time to time but overall they seemed to just offer non-stop commentary in song form on everything Tony did or didn't do.

He headed to the back of the flat, the door on the left opened onto a small but tidy bathroom and the door right at the back of the room opened onto a small double bedroom, the curtains half closed. The room smelled like a girl's room and Tony's eyes closed a little in the half dark and he thought of Sarah again. The chorus struck up again: "Tony, be brave!". Strange that Sarah should come into his head at times like this, he thought to himself. Tony snapped himself out of it and began to rifle through some drawers, looking for anything interesting. There was no end game, Tony hadn't planned out the next steps – sometimes he found the best thing to do was just to 'go along' with things and see where they headed – it was always interesting if not ideal. How he had first met Sarah was a good example. The time he'd accidentally slow-danced with a transvestite before being propositioned by her was a less-good example but he had to admit it had been an *experience*. He checked the top drawer of the dresser and in the corner, at the back of the draw, came across a book which somehow felt interesting, largely due to a big clasp which was closed to keep the book from opening.

The chorus sang, 'Tony, read the book but don't get caught!'. Tony scowled at the chorus and told them to shut up and he carefully extricated the book from the drawer. He stood totally still for a second but heard nothing at all: the only sound was the sound of an empty flat. He sat down on the nearby bed and checked his watch and said out-loud to himself, 'Keep an eye on the time won't you'. The chorus all 'shushed' him, at once. Tony began reading. The first page had been neatly filled out with various personal details – like a child's diary thought Tony – things like Name, Address, Date of Birth and Phone Number. The first thing which struck him was her name was Sarah. The second thing which struck him was there was only one single diary entry.

“

Dear Diary,

My therapist has convinced me to write this all out otherwise I wouldn't have. He's insistent that to be able to forget about Harry or Harriet, that I need to find some way to accept what happened and move on with my life. I knew Harry when I was 12 or 13 and he was a good natured kid; terrible at school and the kind of kid your mum and dad think is a bad influence. He wasn't a bad influence because as it turned out I was just as crazy as he was. Harry spent 8 years in prison because of the fire we lit together. The same fire killed two firemen and injured about 8 other people, when the building collapsed. The worst thing about it was that one of the firemen who died was Harry's much older step-brother. I don't think Harry's stepfather ever forgave him for that. The second worst thing was that I wasn't ever questioned and because of that, Harry was sentenced alone. He never mentioned an accomplice, and I don't even think that's the right word for it because I basically made it happen – it was my idea to get out of the school play rehearsals, and it was me that stole the matches and the lighter fluid and I was the one who dropped the match.

I'd moved away by the time he was out of prison and I didn't remember anything about it. I still regret ever going home on New Year's Day and not Christmas Day because he wasn't around for Christmas but had returned by the New Year. But I did go home for the New Year instead of for Xmas and he was homeless at that point and when I saw him in the town centre I panicked. When he recognized me I could hardly establish the connection because he'd been on some kind of hormone replacement drugs during one of his spells in prison, so his face was sort of softer than I remembered it and he had a really strange straggly beard for the same reason.

He wanted to go for a drink, he asked me if I'd take him for one. It was early in the day but guilt has a funny way of making you feel. We went to an empty-ish bar and that's where things took a turn for the worse. The first thing he said was how much did I think a year of his life was worth. The second was he noticed my engagement ring from Paul and said, 'That must have cost quite a lot'. My heart sank. I was thinking the worst thing is that Paul doesn't know anything about Harry, or the fire.

Harry said he needed some money because he was homeless and he said he needed more money to complete the Hormone Therapy course. My mind was racing at this point and I was massively regretting ever bumping into him. I had some money with me, just a little cash, and I figured I'd give him all that and get out of there. I was about to leave and that's when he said could he take my phone number so I gave him my number but changed the final digit from 7 to 8. He pulled out a phone and dialled my number. Just before he finished dialling I corrected the number and he looked up at me and paused for five, ten seconds. He didn't look happy, and he tested the number, waiting for it to ring through. He said he thought we should meet up again in a couple of days and I was just pleased to get out of the situation.

The next time we met I brought him more money without being asked and it was at the second meeting that he began threatening me; I was expecting it pretty much but I hadn't mentioned anything about it all to Paul. I have to tell him, I know this much. Writing it down makes it real. I have to tell Paul before this gets too wild”.

Tony turned to the front page of the diary and wrote the phone number down twice and then took a picture of the first page with the camera on his mobile phone. The chorus sang, loudly, 'Smart move Tony! Maybe you're not totally useless after all!' and all three of them giggled and looked at each other, smirking. Tony ignored them, and figured the best thing to do was to get out of the flat while he figured out what to do next.

3

It was nearly midnight and Sarah was in bed, just dropping off to sleep when the first message arrived on her phone: "I know about Harry and the fire. Send me a photo and let's talk". Paul rolled over and asked her what it was while her heart rate tripled. "Just... work" she said, her fingers trembling and her hands shaking. She figured for now she'd just ignore it, but three hours later, her eyes wide open and staring at the ceiling she still had no idea what to do next, and no idea who it was who had sent the message, or what they knew and how they knew it, and what they really wanted.

Sometime in the morning she messaged a reply, 'Who is this?'. She noticed immediately the person she'd sent it to typing back. 'No questions. How's ten thousand to stay quiet? :)'. About a minute later, a photo of her bedroom. About a minute later a picture of her underwear laid out on the bed. About a minute later, a man's hand in the air in the middle of her living room. When the third photo came through she could hardly breathe and dropped the phone on the floor.

The next day, the same messages - more or less the same, though this time, each one had been taken at night. When the third photo came through she couldn't talk for six hours, forcing her to lie to Paul and feign illness.

4

Tony agreed to meet her to collect twenty thousand which was where the negotiation had ended up. He'd told her the money would buy his silence though he hadn't thrown much else in with the deal – why admit about the keys? – he felt the less he said the better. He was a little nervous as ransom and blackmail is always a risky business, you just need to watch a few films to learn that. The Greek chorus have been softly reassuring him that everything is terrific and that this is a great idea.

Tony turned up to collect the cash in a badly lit car park, the best place he could come up with. He could sense something wasn't quite right and sure enough the Greek chorus quickly changed their minds and offered words of warning. Tony told them to shut up and they shrank back.

From behind a nearby pillar Harry – Harriet as he's now insisting on being called now that he's out of prison – stumbled towards Tony waving a small knife, high on a mix of strong cider and anti-anxiety medication and slurred, 'She's paid me to warn you off you cunt, now fuck off'. This isn't true, but when Harriet found about the ransom from Sarah, she figured the additional money would come in useful.

Tony stepped back and Harry waved the knife through the air but he was already wavering a little on his feet. There was a sudden noise as a car wheeled up to where Tony was stood, next to where Harry was sort of unsteadily swaying.

Paul killed the engine and stepped out of the car and said, 'Which one of you is Harry?'. Harry said, 'That's me' and Paul reached for his gun and aimed and mumbled quietly, 'Sorry' and shot Harry twice. Harry promptly collapsed and crumpled to the ground and blood began to leak across the concrete floor. And then Paul said, 'That means you must be the prick who's demanding money and taking really creepy photos and generally being fucked in the head?'

Tony smirked and said, 'Well, I mean, you put it like that...' and he laughed lightly, and the Greek chorus raised their collective eyebrows and one of them visibly winced. Tony said, 'You can't shoot me unless you want to go to prison, this isn't *self defence*'.

Paul looked steadily at Tony and without breaking eye contact cocked the gun with a click and said, 'This is self defence, you creep!' and shot Tony once, through the forehead.

MAGICIAN

He'd been staying at the hotel for three weeks now. The small hotel was upscale, and was clean and comfortable and a little stuffy but after a week he'd felt quite at home there; after two weeks he was friendly with all the staff and now he just wanted to go home. He sort of half-slumped at the bar, with a whiskey sour, and was watching the TV; the sound just about audible if he concentrated and watched. The bar was not too empty, not too full, but it was a Wednesday night so this was no surprise. At the other end of the bar was one other person, wearing an old fashioned black hat, with a battered black briefcase. He had a bright flower in the lapel of his jacket; it was evidently fake as the stem was bent and mangled and the flower was protruding strangely from the jacket, at an unusual angle. The man was slowly drinking a glass of red wine and seemed to be sort of softly muttering to himself every so often. He occasionally took out a red spotted handkerchief and dabbed at his forehead, though as with the rest of the hotel, the bar was neither hot nor cold – just that sort of unnatural middle ground which is common in many hotels.

He swirled the ice round in his drink; he liked the sound of it and liked the way the ice would keep turning for a short while when he stopped swirling it. He took a last gulp and motioned to the bartender, 'one more'. They weren't particularly strong and they were still in the full flower of the evening, drifting towards the night proper. He watched the TV but nothing really registered and his mind wandered towards thoughts of an ex-girlfriend and an evening in Paris they'd spent once, a long time ago, and it struck him as strange how things which once seemed desperately important were reduced to footnotes after some time.

As his mind drifted away and his eyes lazily followed a sports item on the news, he noticed the man in the black hat looking at him. He flicked his eyes away and then looked up again and the old man was still looking at him. He raised his eyebrows and looked away again. Peripherally he could sense the man's eyes still on him and then he sensed that the man was coming over towards him. He didn't look up until the man was next to him. "Want to see a trick?" said the black-hatted old man and for a slight second his entire body screamed 'NO!', but he said 'Sure, why not'.

The old man put two cards on the table and showed the man his palms. He turned over the cards: the Queen of Diamonds and the Queen of Hearts. He waved his hands mysteriously over the cards and said, "Pick up a card". The man turned one over and it was a Joker, not a Queen. The man reached for the other card and the man said, "Ah ah ah! I said *one* card!" and playfully slapped his hand away. Both cards were face down again and the old man had not touched either. "Try again" said the old man. The man picked up the same card only this time it was a King. "Impressive" said the man, dispassionately. "Now that I have your attention, try one last time" said the magician. The man looked down and there were three cards on the table though he hadn't noticed a third card being added. He turned over the first; a Queen of Hearts. He turned over the second, a Queen of Hearts. He turned over the third and it was a Queen of Hearts. He looked up at the man. The old man in the hat said, "Check your pockets" and so he did and there were ten, twenty, thirty cards in there, all Queens of Hearts.

The man smiled, "Pretty good". The old man touched the edge of his hat and ordered another glass of wine.

The TV was on, it said "Police are searching for a gang who committed a daring robbery, escaping with expensive watches, jewellery and cash. The men are of Puerto-Rican, Mexican, Chinese and European descent – although CCTV footage was rendered useless by black paint thrown over the lenses, sound was still recorded and the accents of the men were distinct. Authorities are searching for the men, though the gang is

also to be nominated for an award as a shining example of ‘diversity in the community’ and ‘social integration’”.

The man gave a light laugh. The old man laughed a little too, then stopped.

“It’s not a laughing matter” said the old man in the hat with a suddenly deadly straight face. “You married?”

“Oh, women come and go” said the man, taking a sip of his whiskey sour.

“I see a lot of *going* but I don’t exactly see a lot of *coming*, if you know what I mean! AHAHAHAHA” laughed the magician.

“Well, that’s a *choice*” said the man.

“Yeah – theirs! AHAHAHAHA! How about you tell me a secret? I mean I don’t know you but I can tell Paris is a place close to your heart and I know you like the sound of the ice swirling around a good old whiskey sour’.

‘I don’t have any secrets’ the man said nervously.

‘Of course you don’t. Never mind, we’ve got a *long time together*’.

UGLY CHAET

As he sat there in his car alone for a split second he felt some sort of emotion and then it was gone. It was pretty clear that Jenny, his wife, wasn't going to take him back this time: she'd actually burnt his stuff – which he thought was pretty impressive. She'd set fire to a pile of his things in the hallway of the house they'd bought together and the hallway looked pretty fucked but it didn't really matter one way or another. He pretty much agreed he deserved it. He'd been on his 'last chance' for several years and finally with the help of a supportive group of friends and a therapist which he hadn't known about, she'd been able to walk away from this slow motion trainwreck relatively unscathed and with some of her dignity intact. He didn't really care.

When the new girl, Donna, had started at his office, like everyone else he'd paid her no attention. She was overweight, plain looking with a hooked sort of nose and eyes that were too close together. Sitting in the car he guessed he'd treated her pretty terrible. Once he'd come up with the plan – to have some kind of affair with her – there was a sense it was unavoidable and there were scenes which had to be played out. She'd asked to be left alone a few times and realistically he should have done that. Then again he realised that maybe the way things had panned out had in fact been entirely the plan after all. In any case, it was a shame that Donna was the collateral damage in this.

He and Donna had been meeting up regularly for around three months; from May to August. At first he had taken her out 'just as friends' because she was worried about the age gap; he was 17 years older than her. Over the course of three or four 'non-dates', he'd paid attention and he'd bought gifts, he'd given her compliments and told lie after lie. She was nervous at first because she'd never really had a boyfriend. Pretty soon he'd won her over and they messaged each other several times a day. He'd been able to play Donna off against his wife, and it had become very interesting overall. When he first kissed her she'd sort of struggled but he'd ignored this protest and although she wrote in her diary that it was a little bit unusual and didn't seem a particularly nice first kiss, she wrote that it was still very exciting and finally, dear diary, she had a boyfriend. A man twice her age, with a wife, but an undeniable boyfriend all the same, and he told her she was beautiful which she didn't really believe at first, but the earnest delivery and the persistence convinced her that it was ok to believe at least some of the words. It was especially ironic as Donna had actually had several admirers over the years – she was a great listener, easy to talk too and had a nice shape; she never realised that there had been several options. There were aspects of being with an older man who didn't seem very nice which sub-consciously resonated with Donna and it all seemed to make sense and it felt like her life somehow; felt somehow like she deserved it.

He would lie convincingly and Donna would believe him. She wanted to believe and he was okay with this arrangement. He would tell her how cute it was that she was nervous or that she would blush and giggle when he told her things she didn't know about. He would frame the seediest things as romantic and natural. She didn't know any better so she went along with it all.

Donna didn't really drink much, so from time to time he would slip various sleeping pills and tranquilizers into her drinks. She never guessed anything was up, just was shocked that sometimes she didn't remember much about the night before, and shocked that a single glass of wine could do that. He had realised that he could get away with pretty much anything as she was new to everything, not only that but she was prone to trust him.

When she found the obscene photos of herself on his laptop – photos which looked so crude and basic and unflattering that she could barely recognise herself in them; limbs pulled into place and the awkwardly arranged brightly lit mise-en-scene – she was shocked and horrified and mesmerised and terrified and excited. She didn't ever mention that she had found them and she didn't know what to do so she did nothing.

The way it had ended was unexpected. Donna hadn't meant to overhear the conversation at work, which took place on the other side of a simple wooden divider. She had wanted to not hear, to not listen but it was unavoidable. He spoke of her like an object or an adornment but worst of all he was heavily critical and mean: "not exactly attractive", "lets me do whatever I want", "inexperienced, naïve and vulnerable" amongst other things. She'd emailed him to let him know she'd overheard this, and asked him if it was all true and if he really meant it. He ignored the email. She began sending messages to his phone and he ignored those also. She never called so she was spared some of the embarrassment of being ignored by phone.

That was how things worked out and since then, Donna had told Jenny, his wife, everything, so now he sat, in a car – which, along with the clothes he was sat in, was about all he had – and the rain began falling heavier and heavier and it struck him that he'd inadvertently had a taste of his own medicine. For a second he felt some sort of emotion before he laughed at the memory of the last few months and said out loud to himself, "Christ, you're *such* a prick".

SELF IMPROVEMENT

Julie, on a 'good day', if pushed, would admit that she was a 'difficult' character, but she misguidedly believed this was a strength, not a weakness. She was wrong. She was prone to mood swings, she was massively over-enthusiastic about tiny details (say, the icing on a nice cake, or the performance of one of her favourite celebrities on a reality tv show), she was bad tempered, violent, ignorant, thuggish, foul mouthed. She was disloyal and petty and petulant, selfish and self-absorbed, immature and vicious.

Initially Danny had been so flattered that she would even speak to him. This was twelve years ago; Julie had been pretty and young and Danny had mistakenly believed he could turn things around. Every one of Danny's friends and every single family member had secretly taken him aside and with hushed voices gently hinted that maybe he deserved better, or that maybe she wasn't *quite right*. No one wanted to upset Danny but he was a bit of a dreamer and no-one wanted to see him make a mistake. They had married and it had seemed to Danny too late to back down. Things hadn't panned out for the couple; they hadn't been able to conceive a baby – an issue with Julie's hormones, which Danny had calmly and genuinely sympathized with Julie over. Julie had moved from job to job; at each one she would fall out with her manager, or a co-worker; either that or the company simply went bankrupt. With or without a job it never really made a difference to Julie; she was never very happy and she was happy to let people know this. After eight years together, Julie had had an affair with one of the managers she claimed to deeply dislike. It wasn't so much an affair as two or three casual meet-ups. The third time Julie had lost her temper in the restaurant when a waiter had brought her a bacon cheeseburger which was missing bacon. Not only that, but the waiter informed her that they had run out of ketchup and that was when Julie really saw red; she actually ended up throwing a plate at the wall, and the two of them got kicked out of the restaurant and pretty much everyone in the place looked sadly at them.

Danny found out about the affair. Where others might have used this as leverage of some sort, or at least made some sort of unreasonable demands or extracted some kind of wild promises, Danny asked if there was anything he could do to try to *re-connect*. Julie had sat in silence and eaten three scones and a chocolate muffin and then said "have we got any of that *spray cream* left?" and turned the tv on, tucking her legs underneath her bulky frame, resting her arm on her considerable stomach and breathing heavily.

Looking back on that evening later, Danny couldn't figure out if it was maybe a shooting star or a comet or perhaps an angel overheard him. There was no logical reason for the way things panned out. "I wish Julie could be happy" he'd said quietly to no one in particular. There was no rainbow suddenly appearing, there was no glissando of harp strings.

In the canteen at lunch, at work a few weeks later Danny spoke to his friend. "She's been in the gym, everyday, sometimes twice a day. She's started to iron my shirts for me each evening. She's bought tickets for a film she knew I wanted to see. She seems to listen. She hasn't hung up the phone on me in four weeks. The house is clean and tidy. She cancelled the subscription to the TV guide people, in fact, she watches TV less and less, cancelled the subscription to the trashy gossip magazine: a while ago I threw a recent copy out and she actually threatened to leave me and mentioned that guy she slept with. She's signed up for charities I didn't even know existed. She's volunteering at a local pet shelter once a week. She's helping to serve breakfast to the homeless on a Sunday morning. She's visiting her mum and her sister more, and regularly. She's made peace with her Dad, who she hadn't spoken to for five years, since he made that off-key joke calling her a dumper truck. She shaves her legs and her armpits, she's been showering at least daily, and she

actually apologized for a whole load of things, from not making an effort with my family to the way things went at my 40th birthday party'.

Danny's friend raised his eyebrows, 'I have to say, I never thought it was possible, but it sounds like she's not being a complete cunt anymore'.

THE ART OF READING MINDS

Greg was hanging out as usual, wearing his shiny red tracksuit as usual, sat next to Ben and Austin by the far left hand side of the petrol station, next to the entrance for the underground mass transit system. "I really needed that Bayside deal to come off man, I mean, I really needed that goddamn Bayside deal to come off. They promised me, man, they promised me and I really needed that deal." He took a swig from the can of strong cider. Austin nodded sagely though he was barely listening. Greg repeated, "I mean goddamn it man, that Bayside deal was *everything*". He hadn't noticed a man stood behind him. The man was listening, but only because he had no real choice. "Damn if that deal had come off...". Ben nodded and muttered something unintelligible.

Later in the day the same man came over to the petrol station and sat down next to Greg, real calm. Ben nudged Greg and scowled. The man sat still for twenty seconds and Greg was about to aggressively demand that he sit somewhere else. The man turned his whole body as best he could to face Greg. "I have information on the Bayside deal". Greg dropped his cigarette and swallowed hard. "Y-y-y-you *do*?"

GASMETER READER HORROR

Working as a gas meter reader he'd seen some pretty strange things. From the minute the fully grown man in a jumpsuit answered the door he knew there was something strange going on. There was a steam machine pumping out steam – it wasn't clear why. There was a man dressed in dark blue Lycra with whiskers stuck to his face like a cat, he was wearing a set of 'cat's ears' on his head and he was perched on a blue transparent plastic inflatable sofa. Next to him there was a woman who purred, 'Hey, kitty kat' at the gas meter reader, and he suspected it was actually a man but he couldn't be sure and wasn't about to stick around to find out.

He took the reading as quickly as he could and was about to leave when he turned around and said to the man dressed as a cat, 'You want to be careful with those claws on that inflatable sofa'.

MAKING A GO OF IT

No one was really clear about when he had really begun to believe that they were the solution but it was clear that there was little hope of him backing down and changing his mind. He hadn't worked for the last few months, much to the chagrin of his wife, who had picked up extra shifts where possible and had been delaying all kinds of purchases for things she really could use for the family.

Initially it seemed that the man just liked the idea of being on tv – for a while, he applied to be in the audience for as many different shows as possible.

Things took a turn for the worse when he became convinced that the way to achieve anything was via reality tv show appearances and gameshows. He applied for spots on the 'talent' shows; the skill-based shows, the shows about finding a partner - he would simply outright lie on the application forms, conveniently forgetting his wife of five years and his children. He would apply but would invariably be turned down; he was overweight and over-opinionated and had a short fuse which he could only partly hide effectively. Sensing this, the production team went with hot looking twenty-somethings who weren't about to lose it in an unattractive way on National TV. When he began to apply for gameshows and began to get accepted as a contestant, he thought he'd found his niche. After being on 24 different shows in 18 months, his wife finally asked him, 'What the fuck are we supposed to do with a fucking jet-ski, six coffee makers, a sofa that's too big for the house and the rest of YOUR FUCKING TV PRIZE JUNK?'

He sat still with his hands crossed, contemplating this for a couple of minutes, while his wife stood gently shaking her head. '...I'll win us a new house!'

THE KIDNAPPERS

To call them kidnapers was perhaps a little strong. One of them had previously successfully carried out an armed robbery, though it wasn't exactly that 'successful' - he had been covered in aluminium dye so he couldn't leave his house for 3 weeks, and had ended up with just enough usable un-stained cash to pay the bookies the money he owed them. The other guy had experience of burgling houses and robbing people who were smaller than him and likely to be intimidated by his size, which was not unsubstantial.

The plan was simple and straightforward, something which the armed robber noted was important: 'simple plans are less likely to go wrong' he had confidently said. They had the backing of a local gangster and the plan was to create a hostage situation. It was felt that this was a classic crime which should have a decent cash payoff and provided everyone plays along, no casualties. 'What are you going to do with the money?' asked the ex-burglar, "...I'm going to get a new BMW and just.... cruuuuuise". The ex-armed robber frowned at him, 'Don't count your chickens Gary - be cool'.

They had worked out the details in a corner in the local pub. The plan was to kidnap the business owner, make demands, then begin cutting fingers off one by one, and post them to his family. The ex-burglar had a real mean streak and swore he would chop the first finger, 'No problem'.

The details had been carefully co-ordinated, where they would pick the guy up, where they would take him, what they would say to convince him they were serious and they had an untraceable mobile phone he could call his family on to get them to get the cash together. The only mistake they made was that neither of them knew what the owner looked like above and beyond white, chunky and short.

They knew he planned to make a big deposit at 6pm, with the month's takings. The ex-burglar's nephew had written this down as he worked at the place and he was trying to make a good impression; this was where the idea had originated before blossoming into the final plan. The plan was to pick the target up, taking the cash deposit which meant they would have a little cash up-front. They weren't to know any better.

Later that day, as Marty, the cleaner, left the shop with his bag of cleaning products at 6pm, he was very surprised to be roughly hooded with a pillow case and bundled roughly into the back of a van. They hit him several times to quieten him down, and they drove to the safe house, which was in a relatively deserted area of town.

For good reason Marty didn't say a thing until they had tied him up, blindfolded him and began making demands. Initially the kidnapers thought Marty was just playing it extraordinarily cool, but they pressed the cleaver against his hand and became more menacing and at some point Marty began crying, a lot.

The kidnapers exchanged glances with each other - it couldn't have been simpler to them: you pay the money, and then we let you go. The ex-burglar was a little nervous as the guy seemed a little under-educated for a millionaire but he told himself not to be so judgmental.

It wasn't until a little later that night, with Marty losing a little blood from an initial cut on his finger, that the ex-armed robber finally figured it out. "Your fucking nephew has stitched us up - he's given us the wrong fucking time". The ex-burglar shook his head crossly and asked to see the slip of paper. "This says, 16:00, not 6:00 - that's 4pm, not 6... you fucking prick. This is the fucking cleaner".

Marty said quietly, "I've been trying to tell you that all evening".

"Now what do we do?"