

1. Coma?

I really shouldn't have had breakfast.

I have Beano's keys, so I let myself into his building and tiptoed up the stairs to his front door. I was going to go straight in, but somehow the idea of sneaking into his bedroom and waking him up seemed too sexual. Can a man wake his best friend up without it having some kind of homo-erotic threat element? I don't know.

I rang his doorbell for about two minutes solid, then stopped to listen.

Beano's antennae were retracted deep this morning. There was no tumble from the bed, no slashing back of the curtains, no obscenities through the door.

I rang again – sixty seconds, timed by my new watch, accurate to within a millionth of a second per light year or whatever. It cost about the same as a small four-wheel-drive car, but you've got to treat yourself occasionally.

Nothing, except a few predictable complaints about noise pollution from the ground-floor neighbour. Well, it was before seven on a Monday morning. And Beano's bell is very loud. More of a heavy-metal bell solo than a polite ding-dong. And if he didn't react to a whole minute of that racket, there was nothing for it but to go in.

The intruder alarm was off, which was no surprise: carefree Beano often forgets to switch it on. Especially when he's unconscious.

The apartment smelt like an alligator's larder, but then Beano is something of an alligator, always dragging things down, leaving them to fester then coming back for another chew. It means his refrigerator is always disgusting and his ideas wonderfully twisted, like a well-aimed punch in the kidneys. When I first met him, he'd just set up a website called "Horrorburgers". This was a load of gross facts about what goes into fast food. It was back in the days when people thought dotcomers were digging a goldmine rather than a bottomless pit, and he made a fortune from the out-of-court agreement to shut the site down. Well, it seemed like a fortune

then. Nothing compared to what we're all going to get now.

I trampled on a laptop, I kicked DVDs off a pile of plates, I scattered a few quarter-full coffee cups but made it to the window without collapsing in the stinking chaos on the bedroom floor. No Beano. I opened the window and took a few bodyfuls of air before trying for the bathroom. After one of his weekend benders he often spends a day or two in a coma on his bathroom floor. It's cool, white, and easy for someone else to mop.

At last, there he was. Surrounded by dried pools of unmarketable colours – dishwasher-outflow grey, run-over-squirrel's-innards purple, past-sell-by-date-mozzarella green. His blond head under the sink, a crust of gunk on his chin, there was Beano, in crumpled sweatshirt and stained white shorts.

“Beano, it's Bernie, come to scoop you up!”

Nothing.

“Beano, you rich bastard, on your feet!”

I nudged him. His lips dribbled apart. I just got the bathroom window open in time.

I once saw a French movie called *Madame Bovary*. She really was quite a Madame. A doctor's wife in the 1800s who drinks a corrosive poison that takes ages to burn her entrails out and kill her. There was more to it – a botched operation, sex in a horse-drawn carriage – but that's what stuck in my mind. Black vomit. This, apparently, is what the French were into before they invented Chanel handbags.

Anyway, I used Madame's death-bed scene on my “See Models Die” website. The site is (honestly) not as gross as its name suggests. You click – gently – on the model's face and suddenly you're standing at the foot of a brass bed. You see a naked-shouldered girl, asleep – dark swept-back hair, dark lips, long body under the white silken sheet. Then you swoop down and hover along the beautiful bumps of her, and just as you reach her face, she grunts awake and her lips start oozing black

gunk and she dies. Caption: “Sulphuric acid – for Christ’s sake don’t drink it.”

OK, it is a bit sick, but I was a student at the time. And the site was for medical students, who tended to have a pretty high morbidity threshold. After all, what other degree course involves hacking dead human bodies about? None. Except maybe contemporary art.

It was one of the first websites I put together, and even though it hasn’t been updated for years I still get e-mails asking for details (phone number, availability for stalkers, etc) about the “dying” model. Her name is Claudine – she’s French – ten feet tall, perfect skin, like a Lara Croft that didn’t need to be surgically or digitally enhanced. Yes, Claudine’s 100% organic.

And soon I guess she won’t belong to me any more, because somebody wants to buy all our company shares. Don’t ask me *why* they want to buy us out. Perhaps they’re just too lazy to set up a business themselves.

And talking of laziness, what about Beano? He should be up by now, and yelling at me for kicking him when he’s down. Beano, my inspiration. The Claudine scene was inspired by a movie, yes, but mainly by Beano’s Monday-morning dribbles.

His bathroom was no worse than usual. Except that this time Beano turned out to be dead. As in not breathing. With two wicked blue bruises on his bloated gullet. I touched his temple – he was still warm, hot even, clammy from the fight, yet somehow cold. His eyeballs were puffed out like great poisonous mushrooms. The killer was probably in the kitchen getting a cool drink after the exertion.

I parked my breakfast on the floor and ran. I got down the stairs as silently as an exploding bottle bank. Beano’s ground-floor neighbour jumped out of her apartment wielding a fat-encrusted frying pan at me. I tried to explain, but it only convinced her to take a terrified swing at my head. I ducked, belly-flopped across the hall, and finally managed to crawl to my car while the deranged neighbour woke the whole street, shrieking for someone, anyone, to save her from this dawn killer with a penchant for noise pollution.

WHO KILLED BEANO?

In the old-fashioned world I might have been failing to get away unnoticed.

*
* *

For sale: VACCINES. Flu, smallpox, anthrax, all varieties of plague. Others on request. Fast delivery for batches from ten to ten million. Vaccines guaranteed to be latest strains.

For sale: one KIDNEY, blood type O+, hardly used, one careful owner. US\$20,000 ono.
Buyer collects.

*
* *

2. Questions, Questions

Pigeon instinct took me straight to Coma, the office. In normal times, a labyrinth of bright corridors, revealing at every corner its clusters of screens and its wide-angle views across the bay.

I stumbled through the doors and collapsed on the first chair I saw.

If you didn't know us, you'd probably never guess what went on here. Headhunting? PR? International arms sales?

No, we're tapping into the motherlode of modern life (I hope): health.

We're a double-edged sword of a company. First, there's the doctors' internet service provider. The docs get free e-mail, they can set up their own websites, give on-line advice about embarrassing diseases, receive truckloads of freebies from the drug companies, advertise their skills at tummy-tucking and liposucking, all sorts of stuff.

That's been ticking over nicely for a while now, so we've gone international. Our advertising blurb says we've invented a new economic sector. We are, amongst other things, doctors' agents. An Argentinian footballer arriving in England needs help negotiating his multi-million-pound transfer fee. So does a Bulgarian doctor. If a hospital has a ten-year waiting list for cataract operations, we'll find them a specialist within 24 hours. He or she might not speak English, but the patients will all be unconscious, so a capacity for chit-chat is not a priority, right?

And it works both ways of course. There's a huge market for foreign hospitals selling their services to Brits who are browned off with being on waiting lists. You type in your illness on our search engine, we'll find you the cheapest, fastest treatment deal. I guess we're a sort of e-sickBay.

We're making a mint and doing the nation a service. We ought to get a knighthood. Arise, Sir Coma.

We've come so far.

We started out as a medical students' website. It was a place where they could network, find jobs and accommodation,

discuss the latest therapies, and have a laugh. And what made them laugh, they told us, was anything sick. Hence my “See Models Die” site. The other scenes on that featured all sorts of disfiguring accidents and flesh-eating diseases. It’s still there somewhere on our current, much slicker site. I can hardly *believe* the requests for new death scenes that still come in from the medics. You don’t get sicker than someone who works on the front line in health.

When I first met my dying model, Claudine, we were all students. We’d just started the company. We being me, Beano, Phil, Mona, Louie and Des. Mona was sending out waves of spam about our free mail and website hosting. Phil was stomping around telling pharmaceutical companies to advertise. Beano and me were setting up these websites that would get us talked about.

We’d gone on line a few months before, but it’d just been a hobby till Louie suddenly came up with the cash to turn it into a real business. It was venture capital from this big drug company, Nostrum. Everyone was throwing money at the internet. We’d have to repay it eventually, Louie said, but for now we’d got enough cash to drop out of college and create something very special if we worked at it. And so we did.

We more or less dumped the students (no disposable income, Louie said), we started targeting doctors, and it all took off.

Back then, the six of us were like a band, crashing on each other’s sofas, together in various combinations for 24 hours a day. When one computer went down, you’d squat someone else’s – that’s why we all had each other’s house keys. These days, though, we’re less inseparable. The only key I use regularly is Beano’s. He’s the only one who uses mine. *Used*, that should be. Hell.

I rub my neck at the memory of him. My fingers rasp on 36 hours’ worth of stubble. Last time I shaved, Beano was alive. Last time I pissed, he was alive. Last time he pissed was the last time he pissed.

The lights seemed to be flickering like strobes. The clinical, almost metallic-white walls were setting my teeth on edge.

There was a brain-quake happening in my head, a typhoon loose in my entrails, but I couldn't get access to my drawer-full of life-saving pills. My cubicle is in the same office as Beano's, and a plain-clothes cop was giving his desk a frisk. I wasn't allowed in. I had to sweat it out in reception.

Another policeman, the head one, was talking to Louie, who's now our Financial Controller. Waste of time. I mean, who found the body?

We really shouldn't have let Louie put "control" in his job title. To a little Napoleon clone, it's just an invitation to start acting like an emperor. OK, he's the one who is organizing the business of getting rich, but he spends most of his time stomping all over my ideas with his miniature feet. He would no doubt be feeling obliged to tell the police about all the times Beano and I punched it out over who'd thought of an idea first. As a large proportion of our ideas were (I admit it) stupid, our fights could probably be classified as mindless violence. The cop would be writing it down and thinking he'd have my confession in time for an early lunch.

People were starting to arrive. As well as some travelling salesgirls, we've got a dozen in-house staff, plus a nomadic set of sub-contractors for all the fiddly stuff like on-line technical support. Each new arrival in reception received the news about Beano with a gasp, and began flicking their eyes about at each other, and at me, as if they wanted to know which one of us had done it and who'd be next. Then they all came and stood over me, gawping down at this being who had just left the presence of a corpse they used to know.

I wouldn't have minded too much, but two of them were the smelly nerdlings, Mike and Joe. People sometimes accuse me of being a bit of a nerd, but these two are like Nerdo Sapiens. Nerderthal man, teenage caveners, the type who don't wash because no one's figured out how to connect up a shower nozzle to a Play Station. Still, I guess at least that means they won't be able to mate and perpetuate their species. I don't know what their job title is exactly, but I hope it's nothing to do with public relations. Their collective armpit odours were

making me want to recycle some more of my muesli.

Mona joined the crowd. She was crying. She's half-Egyptian, naturally tanned, but somehow she was pale. To break the spell of the others' gaze, I stood up and gave her a hug.

"Bernie, I'm so ..."

"Yeah, me too."

"He was ..."

"I know, Mona, I know."

She went to the ladies' to wash her face. Finally the others went away. Off for a gossip about whether I'd done it, no doubt.

I whipped out my phone. I'd only just got round to recharging it, so I hadn't looked at my messages since Saturday morning. Way too long to be out of touch.

Des, our in-house technical guru, who no longer works in-house, had sent me a text of condolence. God knows what he's been hacking into to get the news that quick. Perhaps he's permanently logged on to our DNA and knows automatically when one of us goes down.

There were other messages, but nothing from Beano, which is unusual. He must have been out of action for the whole weekend. Or otherwise engaged. Maybe he'd taken a stronger-than-usual woman back to the flat. His head has been punched and scratched many a time by women who didn't appreciate his company as much as he appreciated theirs. Perhaps his death just proved what the doctors have been telling us for years now – you really have to be careful who you invite to your bed.

Rita walked by, crying inconsolably. Rita is PA to Louie, Beano, Phil and me. Lovely Rita. I hugged her, too. Her ribbed bra heaved between my ribs. Her tears soaked through my shirt and it would all have been very sexy if the wetness on my shoulder hadn't reminded me of Beano's clammy forehead. She also headed for the ladies' to dab her eyes. There was going to be a toilet-roll shortage before the end of the morning.

I couldn't believe it. How could Beano get killed? Today of all days? If one day can be worse than another to die, this one was pretty bad. He was due with me at a meeting at eleven,

after which extra-thick cheque books were going to be ordered just to cope with our increased demand. This was nothing to do with the buyout. This was a job. A commission, courtesy of a certain Mr Greensands. The screen on my desk would be blinking his name at that very minute, in big red capitals.

No one had ever merited such a flashy entry in my diary before, but then this was the first time I'd ever had a meeting with someone so close to the heart of the country's power. I usually associate the title "Junior" with inadequate American sons trying to live up to Dad's name. But Greensands is a Junior Minister. And from what I've read about him, there's nothing inadequate about the man, or the budgets at his disposal. As Juniors go, he's pure Senior.

"Anyone else got the shits this morning? Fuck Nell."

This is Phil, yelling the length of reception. He's exactly the guy in the ads who drives into the Andes village to inspect the new coffee blend and sleep with Juanita the half-dressed waitress. Fair and hunky, in everfresh khaki bermuda shorts. Phil Harrap from the Cockney jungle.

"Oy, Bernie, got any of ya gut drugs on ya?"

He obviously hadn't heard about Beano. I didn't have the energy to tell him.

"Not on me, sorry Phil. And my desk is –"

"Well anything in a tube then – like vitamins, aspirins, glucose ..."

"Nothing that'd cure the shits, no."

"I don't wanna take the stuff, I just wanna ram the fuckin tube up me arse to block it."

Typical Phil. He tramped off down the corridor in his great rock-crusher boots. Strange that no-one's told him about something as vital as Beano's murder. He knows *everyone*. His address book is a satellite. When we all met at college, Phil was playing bass in what he called a thrash-metal reggae-disco band. He had blond dreadlocks and was claiming to be the only son of a bank robber. I think he just mispronounced it. If you're permanently stoned, you could say "robber" when you mean "owner". The offspring of minor criminals don't usually have access to the kind of money people Phil deals with. I'm

sure his Dad paid for a six-month total immersion course in Estuary English for him. No, not Estuary English, sewer English. Everyone loves him for it and says he's an unspoilt, gifted young man, the bastard.

"Mr Bridges?" At last. "Sorry to have kept you waiting," the policeman said.

"That's OK." I followed him into Louie's office. Louie had disappeared. On the sofa in one corner there was a tall cop in a suit, who was introduced as Sergeant Milner. I nodded to him and settled into Louie's star-guest chair. Inspector Armlock, as the head man called himself, was in Louie's own swiveller at Louie's tidy desk. Louie's office is bigger than mine, of course, looks out towards the mercury sea. The window blind was down, and it rattled from time to time in the gust from the overhead colonial-style fan. I haven't got a fan – I'm afraid it'll fall on my head – but Louie (ironically enough for someone with the same name as a guillotined king) is oblivious to the blades hanging over him.

"OK, Mr Bridges. Thanks for taking the time to speak to us. Now, could you –"

"One thing before we start, Inspector? Will you be wanting me to, um, return to the scene of the crime?" (That didn't sound too well phrased, but never mind.) "Because if so, can it wait a bit? I've got a really important meeting at eleven."

The Inspector ran his large flat hand across his sparse black hair. "We can discuss that later. Now –"

"Have you been to Beano's place? Have you seen him?"

"No, my colleagues from Scene of Crime are –"

"But – sorry, last question – is Beano's murder the first of its kind hereabouts?" I crossed my fingers under the desk rim.

"No it isn't, but I'm afraid I can't tell you more."

"You can't tell me more? But that means you do know more, you do have suspects?"

The Inspector fussed about with his pen and pad, his hair and his words, obviously trying to think of a way to say "shut the fuck up and let me get on with my job." So I told him

what happened, sparing none of the fear and the stink. He scribbled a few notes and didn't squirm once, even during the bits of my account that made me stop and swallow to steady my voice. It must be tough on the street.

"That's all very graphic," he said. "Beano was Mr Wright's nickname, I take it?"

"Yes, because he was so blond."

"Sorry?"

"His name was Alan and he was very blond."

"No, sorry, still not with you."

"Al Beano."

"Ah. Right. Very clever. Go in for a lot of binges like that, did he?"

"We've both been known to over-indulge and suffer the consequences, if that's what you mean. We tend to have our best ideas drunk."

"Yes," he said, the voice of someone who has all his ideas sober. "We're having the substances on the bathroom floor analysed. But I don't think they can all be his, can they?"

"Yes, they are, except one bit. Mine was the thick brownish pool by his feet. Breakfast cereal. It should tally with the stuff in the entrance hall."

"And with the stain on your shirt?" He was sharp, this one.

"Oh no, that's Rita's makeup." I explained about the tears and the hug. The Inspector looked at me coolly, soberly, as I spoke. I finished. He said nothing. The fan blades swished above our heads. Seemed like a good time to end the meeting. "If I think of anything else, I'll call you," I suggested. "What's your mobile number?"

I almost heard the click as his stare switched down a notch from Cool to Chilly.

"You'll *call me*?" It seemed that we weren't on phone-number exchanging terms yet. "I do have a couple more questions, if you don't mind," the Inspector said, the sarcasm oozing across the desk at me. "Like motive. What about you? Why would you have wanted to kill him?"

Instead of bending forward and turning the angle-poise lamp on me, he leant back and stared from under his

eyebrows, as if he was wearing bookish reading glasses.

“Bollocks!”

“What was that, Mr Bridges?”

“Sorry, that didn’t come out right. But you know what I mean.”

“No.”

“Did you ask Louie the same question? Will you ask Phil?”

“You just happened to arrive in the victim’s flat around the time of death.”

“Yes.”

“At the crack of dawn.”

“Look, Beano was my best bloody friend! We worked brilliantly together. We’re just about to – we *were* just about to” (I was glad I’d made the slip so naturally, most suspects must stumble over it) “cash in on all our hard work together.”

“Hard work? Which is what in your case?”

I explained how I create websites, for us, or for outside clients. At his request I described one of them, the “Models” one starring Claudine. It was the first one that came to mind, for obvious reasons.

“That’s repulsive,” he said.

“Yes it is, isn’t it?” I said.

Then I saw that he hadn’t meant it flatteringly. He probably had kids at home, and was scared they might go knocking back sulphuric acid like lemonade.

“Though it’s a health site,” I added quickly. “We’re a medical company. It says ‘don’t drink acid’, you know.”

The Inspector shook his head. “What else have you two worked on together recently?”

“We did a site for a company called Woodlanders Rest? That was very tasteful, very respectful.” This was for a chain of ecological crematoriums, where the clients’ ashes are scattered over an area of picturesque woodland. A brilliant scheme – when was the last time anyone paid money to have themselves used as fertilizer for the timber industry? The site was all twittering sparrows, rustling leaves, not a vulture or maggot in sight. I described it.

The Inspector nodded. “Does everything you do have

something to do with death?”

“Much less than everything you do, I expect. I do health websites. And health, good or bad, always leads to death, doesn’t it?”

The Inspector stared at me while he considered this. Louie’s desktop hologram sun-dial said ten o’clock already. My new watch said five past. Damn.

“On this, er, ‘See Models Die’ site. Does anyone get strangled?”

“No. Yes. In the –” Oh, Christ, no. I closed my eyes. “I was a student at the time, you know.” It was my only defence.

*
* *

Hello sick British!

You must to wait long time for operation?

Come with us! Here, no waiting list!

You want hip exchange, artery unplugging, fake teeth?

We can do all operations, at cheapest price, with private bathroom.

Click for color catalogue.

SPECIAL OFFER! Until 31th December, two new hips for price of one!

For sale: **SURGICAL MASKS**, from only \$1 per 100. Buy now while stocks last.

*
* *

3. Go West

“In the ...?” The Inspector tightened his grip on his pen. He thought he was on to a lead.

“In the crucifixion scene.”

“Crucifixion scene?” This confirmed it – I was the perfect suspect, the virtual executioner with a sense of humour warped enough to power the Starship Enterprise.

“Yes,” I confessed. “A girl gets tied to the cross – with ropes around her wrists and a big loop holding her feet together. But she’s so thin that her wrists slip out of the ropes and she slides down and hangs herself on the loop that was round her feet. It was a student joke about anorexic models. Nothing more.”

“A joke?” The Inspector had obviously never met a medical student.

There was an unpleasant silence in the room. I could feel the fan getting lower, coming down to decapitate me.

“Listen, Inspector. I know I’m making a cock-up of this. I should get a lawyer in here, shouldn’t I?”

“For an informal chat like this?”

“Informal chat? When I have an informal chat it’s usually: ‘have a good weekend?’ or ‘download any good movies?’ Not ‘throttled any friends lately?’”

The Inspector simply raised an eyebrow. It was like Tom Hanks in *Bonfire of the Vanities*. He’s in the clear till he starts acting all guilty with the cops. Though, shit, he *was* guilty.

“I’m innocent!” I shouted.

“Pardon?”

Luckily my vocal cords had panicked and made me sound more like an infuriated parrot.

“Nothing.”

“Hmm,” said the Inspector. “Did you see any pieces of rope in the apartment?”

“Rope? No. Why?”

“Did you ever consider the danger of inspiring a copycat crime?”

“Copycat? You think ...?”

“What if someone has decided to set up a – what do you call them? – ‘See Webmasters Die’ site?”

“God. Have they?”

“No. Not as far as I know. Not yet.”

“Anyway, we’re not webmasters, we’re designers.”

“Oh, well, you’re in the clear then, aren’t you?” He puffed scornfully. It was clearly the wrong time to be pedantic about my job description.

“But you just said this isn’t the first murder of its kind. So you do know something?”

“No. Just looking at theories.”

This took a minute to sink in. Beano killed as a sort of homage to our work? *My* work? They got the wrong guy. I could be next. If I’d turned up at Beano’s place ten minutes earlier, I *would* have been next. Or first. Holy shit.

“Perhaps we can return to the subject I wanted to discuss before you sidetracked us off on to crucifixion and strangling ...” He paused, but I resisted the temptation to react. “You have a motive for the crime. As do all the other founders of the company. Money.”

“Oh. Yeah. Yes. Of course. Louie must have told you about the company being bought out? I mean, us six, the founders, we’re going to make millions. I don’t know how it’ll work now, whether Beano’s share gets divided out or what. But he had 16.66% of the company.”

“16.66%. That’s an awkward figure, 20% is much rounder.”

“Now you’re talking like Louie. You should ask him about the arithmetic.”

“I did. He said that Mr Wright had slightly fewer shares than the rest of you. Any idea why that might be?”

“No.” That was weird. I could only think he might have swapped some of them for booze. Or given them to a woman in exchange for her favours.

“And you don’t think any of your colleagues would have killed for a larger share?”

“I bloody hope not. No, we’re all old friends.”

“Good, because if one of you did kill him for his shares, you

were wasting your time. They're all in individual accounts. Mr Wright's shares will go to his next of kin."

"So it couldn't have been one of us, then."

"Unless one of you didn't understand how the system worked, and killed him because you thought you'd benefit ..."

He let his accusation hang in the air like a particularly noxious fart.

"No," I said. "It has to be an outsider." I thought this one over, and received a cruel flash of inspiration. It felt like a posthumous text message from Beano zapping onto my phone. Accuse your accuser, he was telling me. Thanks, old friend. Now it was my turn to lean forward and turn my angle-poise eyes on my questioner. "Do you think that the bruising could have been caused by a frying pan? His neighbour is this hysterical psycho. She –"

But then I noticed that my suggestion had had a strange effect on the Inspector. A kind of nervous ripple ran back along his balding scalp, and he took a long indrawn breath. I thought he was working up to some great post-breakfast burp, but no, it was worse.

"You know, Mr Bridges, to my unsophisticated eyes, you seem to be treating all this as an enormous game."

"Game? No."

"This is a murder inquiry and you're not taking it at all seriously."

"Not taking it seriously? What do you –"

"You're flippant."

"No. No! It's not flippancy. I'm just making suggestions."

"Flippant suggestions."

"No. It's a – an occupational hazard. I'm an ideas man. All day, every day, I have to have ideas. Some are good, some are garbage. It's part of my job. You don't criticize a fishmonger because he smells of kippers, do you?"

"Kippers," he said, and nodded. I thought maybe I should have chosen something more discreet, like "sole" or "salmon". The Inspector said the next words as if talking to a paedophile who's just invited his seven-year-old daughter for a walk in the woods. "I don't like your sort. You're the kind of rich-kid

joker who'd run someone over and then say 'well he didn't have a job, so what's the loss?' No-one matters a damn except you, do they?"

This guy didn't have a chip on his shoulder, he had a whole chain of chip shops.

"Look – I may have a new sports car and a new watch, both on credit I might add, but that doesn't make me a psychopathic snob," I told him. "For Christ's sake! I see my best friend lying there strangled and instead of trying to catch the killer you sit about telling me you don't *like* me. What else don't you like? Decaffeinated coffee? Green socks? The Bahamas?"

"See what I mean?" he sighed. "Flippant." He shook his head towards his buddy, who just stared through me, playing the stooge.

The Inspector turned back towards me as if I was something he had to wipe off the bathroom floor. It must be a trick they teach them in police school, because every little crime and misdemeanour I've ever committed came flashing to the front of my mind in a burst of telepathic confession. Yes, I stole Marjory Johnson's yoyo, because she said I had hippopotamus teeth. Yes, I set fire to grandad's newspaper, but only to see how long it would take him to wake up. And I did throw the bucket of water over him to put him out, didn't I?

The Inspector interrupted me before I could get on to my more recent mischief. "Now then, you two were good friends, weren't you?"

"Yes, I told you that."

"Very good friends. "

"Yes. "

"And you arrived in the apartment at 7am. You didn't, ah, spend the night there?"

"What? Oh, right – you don't like me therefore I must be gay. Logical. God, two guys can be good friends without ... you know."

"No, what?"

"For God's sake. I can't prove I'm not gay, can I?"

"Was your friend gay?"

"Beano? Christ, no."

"Current girlfriend?"

I realized I didn't know. Weird. Why didn't I know?

"Sorry, Inspector. I don't know." Armlock just "hmm"ed again. He was obviously planning his speech for the midday TV news, when he'd reveal to an outraged nation the details of this disgusting gay SM-and-murder orgy ring. "But I'm not gay, we weren't lovers, and I didn't kill him," I added.

"Did I say you did?"

"You implied it."

"Did I?" He looked with fake astonishment across at his colleague, who, as usual, didn't move a muscle, facial or otherwise. I wondered if he wasn't inflatable. "Perhaps I do sound as if I'm accusing people all the time," the Inspector said. "I suppose it's an occupational hazard." He raised his eyebrows to bludgeon home his irony. "Now, you said you had an important meeting this morning?"

"Yes. It's –"

"Well, we've got to talk to your other colleagues, so we'll let you get on with your work."

"Uh?"

"Your desk should be free now."

"That's it?" I almost laughed with relief. He'd just been clicking my buttons. Goading me to see if I cracked. And I hadn't.

"Unless there's anything else you want to tell us?"

I shook my head. After all, Grandad had only suffered singed trousers.

"Well if you think of anything else ... call me." He handed over a card. With a mobile number. So we were friends after all. "Please don't leave town for the next 48 hours. We'll be in touch if we need you," he said.

Be in touch? Great. That's what people say when they have no intention of contacting someone ever again.

I was out of there before he changed his mind.

Little Louie was hovering in the corridor. "Ah, Bernie, a word," he said, looking round to see if we could be heard. "No need to tell Greensands about, you know, is there?"

"You what?"

“Don’t mention Beano when you meet Greensands. Having one of your partners die is not exactly good publicity for a health company, right?”

Beano hadn’t even started to decompose, but he was already creating too much of a stink for Louie.

“Listen, Louie, I’ve just been accused of murder by kinky Kojak there. It’s not a subject I’m going to bring up over coffee, is it?”

“Good, yes, OK,” he said, looking pleased. Too pleased.

“But,” I added, “Greensands is a government Minister. He’s got a direct line to the secret service. It’s not going to take him long to find out about Beano, is it? What’s he going to say then? He’s going to say ‘hmm, they never told me about their colleague’s death. I wonder what other minor details they’re keeping from me?’ We’ll have to tell him.”

I was pleased to see Louie flinch.

“No, no. Once the deal’s agreed, we’ll get in touch and say that the police asked us not to talk about Beano yet. Or that we naturally assumed he’d already know or something. Believe me, Bernie, sudden violent death does not make for profitable meetings. We’re not talking about one of your nerdy nethead friends who wants to spice up his website. This is politics, Bernie. Diplomacy. Decorum. Money. Great watch, by the way. Is it new?”

First I’m a gay psychokiller then I’m a nerdy nethead. Good to know what people really think of you. I was surprised to find a tear escaping from my eye.

“Just fuck off, Louie.” I ran to the miniature pharmacy in my little cubicle. There was plenty in there to stop the flow of my rebellious bodily fluids. Much of it bought while travelling, semi-legal in this country but very effective. Luckily, most customs men can’t read Hindi or Japanese.

As I fiddled with the key to unlock the magic drawer, I remembered this idea I had once: constantly flying west. Escaping from time.

It’s the middle of the night here, OK? But in, say, California, it’s still yesterday. The world is turning eastwards, propelling me towards dawn and office opening hours, while my brain

has run aground, totally overloaded, on the unfinished business of the day before. So I thought someone could start an airline that simply flies people westwards around the world, staying ahead of time, grabbing some extra hours back from yesterday, never having to face up to the shit of tomorrow. I'll have to ask Des how it'd work.

From what people are saying about this new Asian flu bug, westwards should be the fashionable place to go right now.