

The Meeting

There were half a dozen of his colleagues in the richly-carpeted room when John arrived for the weekly meeting of the sales team - the weekly boost for the flagging morale, as he thought of it. The chilly welcome of the receptionist had already lowered his spirits. In this place there was only one measure of your worth: your sales figures. John's had not been good lately.

Victor, the team manager, bustled over to greet him. John braced himself for the encounter. The Company was in the business of investment and insurance and Victor had fashioned himself to embody the glittering possibilities it offered. Everything about his rotund person spoke of money - the Armani suit, the ultra-slim gold watch, the red 'Inspector Morse' Jaguar parked outside in Curzon Street with its personal number plate, carelessly collecting parking tickets. The message to the sales force was: *'This could all be yours.'* Lust for money was, of course, the universal motivation.

"Morning John," Victor's voice boomed, "good to see you. I'm hearing lots of good news this morning. So - tell me yours."

"Well....."

"You don't need to say it, John, it's written on your face." The manager's bonhomie evaporated. "You're what now - twenty-five?"

"Twenty-six."

"Right. You're a well-educated, good-looking guy; I really am looking for better things from you. Tell me - that single-premium bond you told me about last week - did you close it?"

"Not yet. I've got to go back with one or two more answers, but I think he'll sign."

"Listen John, you sign them up or you move on to the next punter. He's giving you the run-around, don't you see? You know the drill: 'Mr Prospect, tell me - what is it that you want to think about?' Push for the sale; it's good for him. Don't be soft."

His softness was John's principal sales tool. His clients appreciated the care he took to make them aware of what he was selling them. If they asked to 'think it over' that seemed only reasonable. A year ago he had been teaching English part-time to adult students while he worked on an historical novel. Then he joined up with Jess, a rising star in her City merchant bank. It was an unlikely meeting, brought about by the morning rush-hour, when they found themselves crushed face-to-face on a congested District Line train. She was tall, blonde and athletic, not the type he usually went for, but in a matter of weeks he found himself signing up to joint ownership of a flat in Wimbledon and a mortgage. His share of the payments demanded a rise in income and Jess urged him towards financial sales. "There are big commissions to be earned and you'll be your own boss," she assured him. "You'll have plenty of time to do your writing."

Someone else arrived and Victor went off to give a big welcome to a more successful man. John drifted to the edge of the group. He was an observer of people, with the writer's habit of carrying a notebook in which to record a description or a snatch of overheard conversation. But after a year in this job his novel had hardly progressed at all. What he found himself looking for now, in the men and women around him, was not some useful detail of appearance but their financial worth, their potential as clients.

Others had arrived and John studied his colleagues, noting how degrees of success were reflected in their body language. There were the brash, self-motivating

types who naturally took to this kind of work. They had a bit of swagger about them; they were not apologetic about the space they occupied. John had known periods of optimism after a good week or a substantial sale, but these days he identified more with the other group, the ones who lived in hope of a big sale that was always just around the corner. Trapped by that hope they pursued a lonely working life, always on the outside, trying to penetrate the private world of strangers, trying to display confidence that was not really there.

Jess always questioned him about his day, but more and more he was having to tell her of hopes and possibilities. “For God's sake, John,” she would say, “make the presentation like they taught you and the product sells itself. Alan can do it, why can't you?” Alan had joined on the same day as John and they had trained together. After a hesitant start he was cutting a swathe through Hertfordshire, delivering the presentation word for word and signing up a host of clients. John resisted the thought that a lack of scruples might play a part in Alan's success. No, he told himself, Jess was right: it was all about determination. He must get a grip. Next week he would reach his sales target and earn respect from Victor.

The sales reps were all present now and the manager called them to their seats. John headed for the back row. The meeting opened as usual with tales of success and huge commissions earned. Alan, elegant in a beautifully-cut new suit, was singled out for applause. The topic of the week was 'closing strategies' - how to give that extra push to the hesitant client.

'OK then,' Victor began, 'he's told you about his situation; you've established his 'need' and you've noted his details on the form. It's on the table between you; all it needs is his signature. It's time to ask for the sale.' Victor had the attention of his team – no salesman can ignore a formula that might convert a hopeful pitch into a sale.

'So – now you ask him: “Would you like to use my pen or would you prefer to use your own?” Your client replies to the choice of pen and finds that he's made the bigger choice to commit himself to the sale.'

His colleagues were eagerly taking notes, but today John's pen refused to record these cunning traps. His mind wandered and he started to doodle on his pad. A figure began to take shape - a round-shouldered, defeated-looking salesman, briefcase in hand, retreating to a café to repair his morale after yet another rebuff. He awoke from his reverie as Victor was wrapping up the meeting, whipping up enthusiasm, unleashing his team on the public like a pack of eager hounds.

Before John left the office his supervisor gave him a 'lead' to follow up later that morning. The sales force usually had to look for its own contacts, but some clients approached the firm asking for information. These were considered almost certain sales, in the right hands. John was rarely entrusted with one.

“I think you'll know how to talk to this guy, John. Don't let me down, now. And don't go in there thinking of small money – this is Mayfair.”

The lead was at an address in Albemarle Street, the appointment at noon. It could be the big sale that would turn his fortunes around.

He located the building and then walked along Bond Street to pass the ten minutes that remained. He followed a sleek, middle-aged couple, fashionably dressed and infinitely self-assured. They strolled without haste, trailing an invisible cloud of perfume behind them. Those two are in their natural habitat, John reflected.

It was time to turn back and he stopped in front of a couturier's window. The glass reflected a young man in dark grey suit and sombre tie. For a moment John didn't recognise himself.

He walked southwards and turned into Albemarle Street. Again he paused, this time at an art gallery. A painting in the window had caught his eye, a landscape by David Bomberg. He put down his briefcase and stood there with a sense of letting go, allowing the painting to speak to him. Here was something honest, free of any artifice or trickery. John had to tear himself away. When he reached the building at which he was expected he walked past it without a look.

He continued towards Piccadilly, filled with a sense of elation at what he had done. Failure to follow up a lead would never be forgiven. When he looked around him he saw a bright, clean world; everything in sharpened relief, like a stage set.

His feet carried him effortlessly to Piccadilly and on to St James' Park, where he walked up to a bench beside the lake. He needed to pause and catch up with himself, to absorb the import of what he had done. Today, for the first time in a long while, there would be material for his neglected writer's notebook.

He hesitated before sitting on the bench when he saw tears on the face of its other occupant, a young woman with fine olive skin and lustrous dark hair. What had happened to her? What had someone done to provoke such a public display of distress? He sat at the other end of the bench and watched the water birds foraging at the edge of the lake.

There was a waste-basket beside him and on an impulse he opened his briefcase and disposed of all his company's glossy literature. The young woman looked round, without expression. Birds of all shapes and colours were scrambling for pieces of bread that a boy was throwing. John noticed that a little black moor-hen was always pushed aside in the rush. He unwrapped a sandwich, pulled off the crust and made sure that the moor-hen took it. His neighbour turned to him, the beginning of a smile on her face. I think she knows how that little bird feels, he said to himself. He took out his notebook and opened it to a fresh page.