

Just popped in for a second

The light seared synthetically, that bluey paralysis of an anesthetic waiting to drop, the flush of air as the dentist drill warms up before plunging in and touching a nerve.

It wasn't what he'd expected. The endless tunnel fitted expectations, the haze of brightness a tantalizing promise of fulfillment, but the rather dreary waiting room at the end was demoralizing: it was like his first cigarette, fuming with anxiety he'd puffed away and then choked back annoyance.

"Mr. Poppins," the voice gleamed. "A rather curious name. Do have a seat."

Mr. Poppins sat. Lights blared through his eyes. A swish of machinery seemed to be recording his every gasp. They gleamed in whiteness, hand held gadgets recording every sound. It didn't smell like a dentist's. Odorless, nothing at all to twitch your nose. That was scary, unsettling; Mr. Poppins could feel his nose twitch in the airless vent forming at the end of his journey.

"Mr. Poppins. Yes. Curious name."

He wanted to argue that it hadn't been his choice but they refused eye contact, or any other encouragement of recognition. They stared at screens and punched objects, apps, keys, banks of information stored and manipulated carefully beyond his vision.

"Just some routine checks before we let you back in."

Lights flashed, machines hummed. Mr. Poppins felt himself turn as pale as the surrounding walls, as sleek in sweat as the LCD projectors they were gazing into, lost in space, gouging out his recent past. He had no sense of returning, just the hope of arriving on time.

"Only one wife?"

Mr. Poppins nodded. He was quite proud of that.

"Really? Only one?"

Ok, there had been a couple of brief affairs but he remained proud of his fidelity. He'd nursed her through to the end. Hoped to be reunited soon.

"Bit careless of you, wasn't it?"

Mr. Poppins twisted his head. The strobes followed his gaze. Surely to God that was the point. He squinted in incomprehension.

"Two little fluffs on the side and that is it? you had lots of opportunities. Surely you could have done better?"

They still refused to look him in the face. Mr. Poppins couldn't see theirs. Do better? He'd stayed married for close on fifty years and brought up three children. What more could they want.

"You had quite a good job in the bank, didn't you?"

Mr. Poppins nodded, perturbed. Surely this should just be a bureaucratic procedure: could he not just get on with it: he'd spend his life waiting for this moment, earning it.

"But all those opportunities and you just didn't make it, did you?"

"Make what?" Blinded, mouth rapidly drying, he almost wished for the dentist to drill him awake and back to reality. What were they on about?

"A fortune."

Mr. Poppins shuffled in his chair. The lights followed his face until he went red under the glare. "Make what?" he repeated, feeling limper and lamer. They were sucking his jest for life away, ready to expel it into a vacuum which he was starting to long for.

"A fortune."

"What do you mean?" Mr. Poppins was aware he was starting to plead, not guilty, just anything, a glimpse into what was going on. He'd had a good life. He deserved more than this. He swore silently, knowing they could hear him.

“You could have made a fortune for God’s sake. A fortune. Inside information, inside dealing ... and you ended up in a housing estate? Not really taking advantage of the opportunities you were provided with, were you?”

Mr. Poppins was beginning to roll off his chair; he could smell his own perspiration eat through the sterile room until it took on an air of dominance, dripping into his eyes until they began to cloud over and the corners of the room lose their right angles.

Their fingers jabbed, probed. Just a little prick. One prodded the information on screen while the other one spat out the comments, questions, sly remarks, building, step by step, a twisted vision of Mr. Poppins' own self. Together they formed a wall which was twisting truths from what now appeared to have been all lies.

“There must be some mistake,” Mr. Poppins finally attempted, puffing for air.

“We don’t tend to make mistakes,” said the man on his left, the quiet one who did all the machinery. “We have been doing this for quite some time.” There was a hint of a smile, the grin of satisfaction as one more customer has been caught out.

“All that potential and just two brief affairs?” asked his partner, the one who wouldn’t permit a smile, even in jest; the one who never stopped talking, inferring, questioning Mr. Poppins very existence.

Mr. Poppins blinked. “I just thought I was doing right.”

“Doing right, were we?” The talker started another rant, folding statistics into sheaves of data that built up a picture Mr. Poppins had never seen so clearly before.

“Your kids are so busy out there working they probably haven’t even missed you yet. And they have no choice. You left them nothing.”

The talker sighed and tapped his computer again. “Good grief they could be loaded and doting on you, living off the proceedings without ever having to do another days work again.”

“I thought it was what you wanted.”

“What we wanted? You must be joking. You obviously listened to all the wrong advice. What set of guidelines were you following? Pick up the wrong brochure on the way down, did we?”

They both turned away from Mr. Poppins with a tone of disgust. From over their shoulders they continued to sigh remorsefully, a growing hint of disgust as they completed the forms, shadows floating through the blandness of a white sky puffing smokelessly in the thin, skeptic air of an office without windows, or a sense of humour.

“We send you off on holiday to have fun, relax, get on with it so you can come back refreshed, full of memories, energy for the real job. Good grief you really missed some opportunities. It will be some time before your next holiday Mr. Poppins, if we can continue to call you that. Some time indeed, and meanwhile you are demoted. Start again and next time around try and make more of your earthbound leave.”

As he spoke, with the rush of revenge perhaps, the quiet one’s elbow jabbed off the screen in his emotion, slipping it slightly to one side. For a moment Mr. Poppins could see the coffin slide into the earth, recognize the faces, mainly downtrodden, sad even, although there were one or two who looked surprisingly pleased, mice before the cheese in a mousetrap.

Poor sods, thought Mr. Poppins. Just when they thought it was all over. They had no idea how long eternity would be.

Mr. Poppins slopped back into his seat and waited for them to finish the processing. It was all beginning to come back. He’d make a better effort next time. They were right: holidays should be all about having fun. He’d messed up. He’d read the wrong commandments: he’d always thought ten was rather a lot.