

Theresa

Kent Cant eased out the clutch on his ageing Fiat Panda and released its handbrake. Ahead the line of cars crawled up the gentle slope behind a battered white panel van. Theresa tickled his left ear. The traffic lights rotated to red and Kent slipped into neutral. He pulled hard on the handbrake until it clicked, and raised his foot from the brake slowly, checking it was holding. He would definitely be late again and this time he would receive a written warning, losing his chance of a much needed performance related pay award.

His partner Tommy had been right to nag. The train was quicker and parking was a big issue around the Skypark office complex. When Tommy had started on at him again over breakfast, Kent had fought back, but gently, explaining that taking Theresa to the 'Bring a Pet to Work Day' by train would have upset her. He had just managed to hold back about it also being 'Dressing-Up Day' as it was the last Friday of the month. Kent had set his mind on winning both events and as soon as Tommy had left, he had dyed his hair purple to complement his all-new cockatoo outfit - a red polo shirt over Canary yellow shorts and green sparkly tights into fluorescent yellow open-toe-ed sandals.

The cars ahead were familiar to Kent; he saw them most mornings, especially if he was running late. He checked his rear mirror for the footballer's car. The shiny red Porsche Cayenne with its personal plate HIT 3 raced up behind. Kent tensed, again expecting a thump. The car stopped just in time. The cheery woman on the radio apologised that the long hot, dry spell would end before lunchtime with a heavy rain storm bubbling.

'Don't worry Theresa, darling, I'll put you in the safe before the thunder starts, you'll not hear a thing. OK, darling?'

The overhead traffic light flipped from red through amber to green and the daily conga started to creep forward until the van, now spewing black fumes, winked for an illegal right turn and kangarooed to a stop, waiting for a break in the stream of oncoming traffic. The driver of the black BMW two cars behind the white van leaned on his horn in protest. The blonde dolly in the Range Rover, (who was a 'somebody' at the BBC, Kent thought), joined in. Now the entire line of cars ahead and behind Kent was hooting in protest, all edging forward onto the bumper of the car in front. Theresa, the hand-sized tarantula, scuttled across the passenger seat into her little Wendy house.

The van revved hard and tried to get through a gap in the flow but shuddered only a few meters before it stalled. It revved harder and the smoke got darker then stopped as the engine conked out. The van's hazard lights came on. Now the oncoming traffic was blocked as well. Kent closed his eyes, took his foot off the accelerator and slipped the gearstick into neutral. As he reached for the parking brake the Porsche thumped into him causing the Wendy house to shoot forward into the foot-well. Kent groaned but refused to let the words escape.

Theresa

Shaven headed Darren Dennison (aka Denny) was nearly two meters tall with a wide-bodied frame to match. A tattooed fist hammered on the roof of the Panda and Kent's door was hauled open. The air filled with the man's fruity, spicy aftershave. The blonde dolly appeared on the periphery with her iPhone to record the encounter. At this stage Kent did not realise that the incident would appear on Reporting Scotland and then become a viral world-wide hit on You Tube.

'What are you playing at, you wee mongrel, eh? You've smacked back into me.'

'Sorry? Me? No. No, I don't think so. I was stationary. You rammed into me.'

'No, **you** rolled back,' Denny's rake thin model wife screeched in support of her provider. 'We all saw you, didn't we girls.'

'Yes he did Mummy', chorused two girls in smart school uniforms.

'No. No, I did not,' said Kent.

'Right budgie boy that does it! OUT! Call my wife and kids liars? OUT!'

'Oh God! Watch Denny, he's got one of those poisonous spiders on his shoulder. Leave him.'

Denny leapt back and Theresa, attracted by the man's smell, dropped to the ground and scuttled towards its source. Unaware of this Kent closed and locked the door.

'God, it's after us now. Quick, back in the car girls. Quick,' shouted Denny's wife.

From his rear view mirror, Kent saw Denny climb up onto his shiny car, first to the bonnet and then to the roof. Only then did Kent realise that he was alone in the car.

'Oh Theresa, darling. Not again!'

Denny's wife telephoned the police, who called in the SSPCA.

ooOoo

Three hours later Kent executed a ten-point parking manoeuvre and squeezed the Panda into a space between two other cars near the top of a steep hill.

'Well, Theresa darling - *that* was a close call. Lucky that policewoman Angela knew about arachnids and that you're harmless, so long as you are not spooked. I must get that handbrake fixed. Still, maybe we can wangle a 'knock for knock', eh, darling? Did you see that he's with us at ExecuCar Insure? I'll set the system to send his enquiry to me. Our insurance is in Tommy's name at Direct Line. He'll never know, will he, darling? Revenge is sweetest delivered anonymously, isn't it Theresa?'

This was Kent's parking place of last resort, as it was for many at Skypark, leaving him a twenty minute hike. The handbrake seemed to be holding, but he used his

Theresa

wooden wedge under the front wheel as a backup. Half way down the hill Kent remembered the weather girl's warning and trudged back for his broolly. It was not in the car. Tommy must have taken it.

The first large drops of rain spattered dust from the pavement. Seconds later it was hosing down on him and the purple dye began to run down his forehead. Kent bit his tongue against the words, took his Bag for Life from the boot, fashioned it into an emergency hat and hitched his man bag over his shoulder. He set off again with Theresa safely locked in her Wendy house, which was tucked under his arm. The crack of thunder exploded directly overhead. The air vibrated and every car alarm in the vicinity started to hoot and howl. Kent began to run. By the time he reached the bottom of the hill the gutters were overflowing. As he tried to negotiate the corner his foot skidded and he fell headfirst into the lighting standard. His last memory was of the Wendy house landing on the busy road as the bus raced towards it. He did not see the wooden wedge float by in the gutter.

Kent returned to consciousness. The storm had passed but he was drenched and his face was a light purple from the hair dye. He looked up into the eyes of the elderly West Indian lady who was on her way to the local Health Centre where she worked as a podiatrist. He knew this lady quite well.

'My God, you sure dun you-self this time, boy. What you do? You drunk, again? You party time, again? You do drugs, eh? Give em up, boy. No do you good.'

'No, no Gelisa, not this time. I fell, honest. Oh God, Theresa, where are you, darling? Theresa, Theresa. Have you seen her? Please?'

'What she look like? Why she leave you? You do bad this Theresa, eh? You stop that, you hear to Gelisa, eh? Be good Theresa, hear me, boy?'

'No. No, Gelisa, it's not like that. She's a tarantula, my Theresa's a tarantula. She's black and red and about this size.'

'Boy, you got it bad, you need go doctor. Common - up wid you. You gottago home *now* boy, and stop dem drugs, OK?'

The woman strode off. Kent had scrapes on his legs and arms; his ankle was throbbing and he had an egg-sized bump on his forehead. His man bag was missing. He counted to ten. The tears came only when he saw the splinters of the Wendy house scattered across the road, but even then he refused to say the words. He picked up his Bag for Life and trudged towards his office. Crowds of people he half-recognised streamed past him heading away from Skypark, giving him a wide berth.

As he neared his own entrance he saw a group of his colleagues huddled outside.

'Kent, whit the Hell happen to you? Did the lightning strike you an' all?'

'No. No, Trudy, I had a bit of a contretemps with a lamp post.'

'Whit?'

'I slipped and bumped my head on a lamp post, OK?'

Theresa

'You're in wan helluva mess. Kent. Uch, but look on the bright side, eh? The lightning has zapped the satellite dishes an' got intae our main server. They're transferring our calls tae Manchester. We're jist waiting on Big Freddy from Human Resources tae give us the word and then we're affsky. A crowd of us ur going for a Chine-easy. Ur you coming wi' us?'

'Looking like this, like something the cat dragged in? No. No, Trudy I don't think so. Anyway, I'm in mourning.'

'Whit? No! Yer auld Auntie Betty huznae gone and clocked oot at last, has she? You should be celebrating, Kent, no' mournin'. You'll get her big house noo, at last.'

'No, No, Auntie Betty's fine. Did I not tell you? She's getting married next month to a guy she met in Majorca, on a Saga holiday. Sergio something. He's only forty-three, so she says. She told him she's only fifty-six. It's bloody ridiculous, Trudy, so it is. I mean she's well past all that. No. No, it's my Theresa I'm in mourning for. She was knocked down just half an hour ago, under a bus.'

'Theresa? Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho! Now I see whit's bin making ye late every morning! You're a dark horse, so ye ur, Kent Cant. Does your Tommy know about this Theresa then, eh?'

'No. No, Trudy, it's not what you think. Tommy knows all about her. Theresa lives with us. We share her.'

'Youse whit?'

'No. No, oh Trudy, oh God, I can't take it. I should have said she *lived* with us. She was our pet tarantula. Oh God. Oh God, squashed under a bus so she was, poor wee darling. I was bringing her in for the Pets at Work Day, you know.'

'But Kent, that's not until tomorrow, Friday. This is Thursday.'

'No. No, Trudy, this is Friday. And it's Dressing-Up Day as well. Is it not?'

'Noo, I get it. Is that why yer dressed like a clown? No, Kent! Whit the Hell *ur* you on these days, eh? It's definitely Thursday. And Dressing-Up Day is next month. Yer diary's a' tae pot. Are you back on the weed again, eh? Gie it up afore it fries your brain. Remember whit happened that time with you and Wee Shuggie at Clatty Pats? Eh? But look, Kent! It's Big Freddy! That's the word coming from on High. Chine-easy here we come. *We're aff tae see the Wizard!* Ur you coming or no?'

'No. No, thanks Trudy, I couldn't face a soiree knowing that Theresa is no more.'

'Aye, suit yerself, Kent. See you! *I'm getting' married in the mornin'! Ding Dong...*'

ooOoo

As Kent turned the corner leading back to the steep hill he saw at once there was a problem. What remained of a Porsche Cayenne was ablaze, with a Fiat Panda embedded in what had been its front widescreen. The Fire Brigade had sent two tenders and there were three police cars. Kent began to shake and sweat and his heart thumped in his chest. He closed his eyes and began his deep breathing and visualisation exercises to try controlling his blood pressure and calm his mind. The sessions at the hypnotist had been expensive and had lasted for months. Again the old negative words raced to the tip of his tongue but he refused to let them escape.

Theresa

'Ah, we find Mr Thomas Gurney at the scene again,' piped WPC Angela Moodie. 'How odd that your vehicle should be involved, sir. Very fortunately for you Mr Dennison's vehicle was unoccupied. Have you been in a fight with someone? Was this an act of revenge, Mr Gurney? This could be a very serious criminal offence, not just another accident.'

'No. No, Officer. No. No, it's not what you think. No, no, not at all. Oh Angela, look, I have to confess that I may have misled you earlier. You see actually my name is Kenneth Cant. Most people know me as Kent Cant. And I want to report the theft of my man bag. And to tell you that Theresa's dead, her Wendy house went under a bus. Oh God, how will Tommy take this?'

Big spots of rain started to fall, hissing into steam as they landed on the smouldering wreckage of the two mangled cars.

'I see, sir, eh, Mr Cant. You say you were attacked by an unknown assailant who stole your man bag, beat you up and who threw your tarantula under a bus. Then a man with whom you had, let us simply call it an 'encounter' earlier today, has his vehicle set ablaze when your vehicle hits it head on at high speed. How odd. How very, very odd, Mr Cant. Please take a seat in my vehicle, sir, and let me get everything down properly. Watch! Duck! That was your own fault, sir. Did you not see the notice?'

ooOoo

It was almost seven o'clock when Kent pressed his doorbell.

'In the name of the wee man! What happened to ...,' started Tommy.

'Tommy, don't ask. Please. Not until I have a long hot shower and a very large Vodka coke, OK?'

ooOoo

It was nearly midnight when the doorbell chimed. They were on their way to bed, already in their pyjamas. They froze.

'I'll get it,' volunteered Tommy.

'No. No, Tommy, let me do it. It was me who caused it. But get ready to call the Police, just in case it's who we think.'

Kent peeked through the spyhole, expecting to see Denny Dennison or one of his friends. Who he saw was Angela Moodie, in civvies.

'Just a minute, Angela, I need to undo the safety chain,' he said, rattling it to play for time. '*Tommy, it's the policewoman, Angela,*' he whispered, '*get the bloody windows open, for God's sake. We don't want her sniffing that stuff and coming back with a warrant to search us.* Nearly there, Angela, it was stuck but I've got it free now.'

Theresa

Kent swung the door open and stepped out onto the doormat, hoping the smell would not follow.

'Oh Angela, it's you. What is it now?'

'Look, Kent. Look who's in here, in your shopping bag, which you left in my car.'

'Oh Tommy! Come here! Look, our Theresa's safe. She's made it home again!'