



THE MANAGER WHO FELL TO EARTH Richard Guest

I knew at once; there was something wrong with Mr Newton.

I was driving down to the Saint Joan Hotel, Eastbourne to attend a Museum-organised residential course called Foundation Skills for Managers Level One, when I decided to get some petrol. As I pulled on to the Esso forecourt, I caught sight of a familiar black Mercedes stranded half way up the steep grass bank that bordered the station.

I climbed the bank. Mr Newton was standing next to the steaming remains of his car. 'I haven't driven for a while,' he said. He was unusually well dressed in a neat dark suit and smart grey fedora. He took off his hat and scratched his head. His usually white hair had been dyed a vivid and unnatural orange.

'I'll give you a lift,' I said.

Whenever I had seen Mr Newton in the Museum's corridors he had been wearing corduroy slacks and a sports jacket. I asked him if I was too casually dressed for the course. He assured me I was not, and lighted a cigarette.

He said, 'My wife, Joyce, suffered a stroke three months ago.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, Mr Newton.'

'I want to nurse her, but the Museum refuses to let me retire early.' He wound down the window and threw away the cigarette.

As the coast road crawled past, Mr Newton told me how he had been leaving bottles of chemicals open, absent-mindedly smoking in the lab, and having minor accidents in the Museum carpark. 'I've been watching my life unravel, Lee, that is until I discovered this book.' He did not name it, but I guessed it was *The Bible*. 'And now I've found a fresh purpose; I'm putting my life in order. That's the first crash I've had in weeks,' he said.

I found a parking space at the back of the St. Joan. Grey rain washed the hotel's dilapidated outer shell.

I handed Mr Newton his suitcase. 'Thank you,' he said. He walked carefully along the slippery path to the hotel entrance and disappeared inside.

In the hotel bar, amongst the prime movers from every department of the Museum, I felt suddenly inferior. I had only been promoted to Assistant Shop Manager because my predecessor had died and

management needed someone to fill her shoes at short notice. I quietly joined the queue for complimentary coffee and pastries.

I was reaching for a miniature pain-au-chocolat, when someone tapped me on the shoulder. A man wearing Armani glasses and a tweed jacket said: 'Hello, I'm Derek Tenet, course leader. And you must be?' His eyes scouted my chest. I had forgotten to pin my name badge on. 'Lee Bender, isn't it? How are you settling in to your new position?' he asked. Without waiting for an answer, Derek carefully steered me from the breakfast buffet. In a half-whisper he said, 'I want a word.'

But the laughter from the bar stopped him. Mr Newton had removed his hat, and was making a great play of mussing his orange hair. The crowd quickly tired of this display and resumed its noisy networking. Mr Newton put his hat back on. Without looking at me Derek said, 'Lunch.'

I got to the training room, which we were to spend the best part of the next three days in, early enough to sit with my friend, Sue. Mr Newton had chosen a seat in the front row amongst the more senior managers. The strip lights buzzed and flickered.

Derek's needy eyes scanned the room. 'Everybody comfortable? Good. Welcome to Foundation Skills for Managers. For those of you who haven't yet had the pleasure, my name is Derek Tenet. This is my assistant, Jenny Crudd. Over the next three days, we are going to teach you how to be a better manager.'

Our first exercise was to draw depictions of the department we worked for, our management style, and any hobbies we had on a large sheet of paper. When we stopped drawing, Jenny singled out a manager at the back of the room to explain his pictures and the game began.

A couple of managers gave slick PR presentations. Some admitted having faults that they hoped the course would cure. Myself, I had a few jokes planned, but I never got to tell them, because Mr Newton's performance brought the session to an abrupt halt:

'My name is Jeremy Newton. I am Head of Conservation Science. As you can see, I am a firm but fair manager.' He pointed to a stick man brandishing a club, while other stick figures cowered at its feet. That got a few polite laughs. Then, indicating an indistinct black shape with his marker pen he said, 'In my spare time I am building a spaceship. I aim to leave this unkind and ludicrous planet and rejoin my people.'

The assembled managers reacted with a mass inhalation, followed by an explosion of cruel laughter. The Curator of Comic Book Ephemera was rhythmically beating the back of the plastic chair in front of him, trying to catch his breath. The Visitor Services Manager was crying. Next to me, Sue was barking. Mr Newton looked on, small and bewildered.

As the noise subsided, Derek asked the old man to see him outside, but Mr Newton refused to move. 'No thank you, Derek,' he

said politely. And as the course leader approached, Mr Newton said, 'Don't you fucking touch me.'

Jenny Crudd, smiling her blandest and most enigmatic smile, stepped forward to shield the crowd from the exchange with her body, made swimming motions with her arms to dispel the last of the noise and told us that it was time to break for coffee.

Mr Newton was still in his chair when we filed back into the room to watch *Managing By Wandering Around*. After ninety minutes, the video ended.

In the dining room, Derek stopped me leaving. 'Lunch, remember,' he said. We sat down. He poured two cups of coffee and waited for the last manager to leave the room. Then he said, 'So, Lee, do you think you have learnt anything from the course so far?'

'I think so,' I said.

He did not ask what, and stirred several spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee. 'You have the makings of a fine manager, stepping into Meike's shoes like that – very admirable.' I looked at my reflection in his glasses. He attempted a smile then lurched across the table and gave me a playful punch. 'You're a 'can do' kind of guy. The administration appreciates your spirit.' Derek stirred his coffee. 'Have you met our new Director? Extraordinary woman. Thanks to her the Widows and Orphans Museum's back on its financial feet, and fighting fit. Government cuts can't touch it. Extraordinary.' He rolled his moist eyes at the ceiling, and

permitted himself a smile. 'Of course her ideas are not popular with everyone.'

The door opened and a stocky man stepped into the room. He raised his greying eyebrows, and tried to smile around the cigar that was clenched between his jaws

Derek said, 'Allow me to introduce Andre Hennis, the Museum's Head of Safety and Security.'

'Awright,' said Andre. He removed the cigar and frowned at the lighted end.

'I was just going to put our proposal to Lee,' said Derek.

'Uh-huh.' Andre took the waist of his trousers in both hands and with a couple of brutal twists tugged them up towards his belly. 'Well, I've got the goods if he's got the inclination,' he said and offered me an unpleasant smile.

A shadow of distaste passed over Derek's countenance. 'Quite,' he said coldly.

Andre took a seat at the opposite end of the long dining table.

'As I was saying, the Director is not universally popular,' Derek began, 'to some – Mr Newton, for example – she is a frightening force for change.' Derek studied my face for a reaction. 'He was always opposed to her appointment. That's what he told The Guardian; he argued that she would ruin the Museum, and that there would be job losses if she got the job. That article led to a lot of bad feeling amongst the staff.' Derek took a sip of coffee. 'Things calmed down eventually, but Jeremy never stopped being deliberately disruptive,' he said.

‘I think Mr Newton is sick,’ I said, ‘he crashed his car on the way here.’

‘No. He’s not sick.’

‘He’s an arse-hole,’ Andre rolled the words around on his tongue.

I got up to leave.

‘Where are you going?’ said Andre. He stubbed his cigar out in the nearest teacup and put a hand out to stop me.

‘I’ll get to the point,’ said Derek, ‘A bright boy like you doesn’t want to waste away in a shop. Which department would you like to work in Lee? Whichever it is, I can fix it. All you have to do in return is have a little chat with Mr Newton.’

‘On tape of course,’ said Andre.

‘Prove for me there is nothing wrong with him. I’ll take it from there,’ said Derek.

‘And if I refuse?’ I said.

‘Guess,’ said Andre and dropped a heavy cardboard package on the table.

I bought a paper and walked down the boulevard of rusting cars to the deserted pier. The tape recorder hung heavy in my jacket pocket. I smoked a cigarette, staring at the sea. The wind picked up an old chip paper, and wrapped MORE JOB LOSSES round the base of a metal column. I felt the tiny microphone under my shirt, and felt ashamed.

I got back to the hotel with no clear plan of action, but in time to catch the managers exiting the Workplace Safety session.

As they trooped out of the training room, Mr Newton caught sight of me, clutched briefly at Sue's shoulder and collapsed. Sue let out a shriek. A few managers stood around. Derek appeared in the doorway to the training room. After a couple of minutes Mr Newton seemed to recover. Sue helped him to a seat in the bar.

Buttoning up my jacket to conceal the bulge of the microphone, and trembling from the rush of adrenaline, I made my way over to Mr Newton. 'Can I get you a glass of water?' I said. I straightened his jacket lapels, and nervously moved his hat from one side of the table to the other.

'Lee, what the fuck are you doing?' said Sue. 'Leave the poor man alone. He'll be fine once he's had a sit down. Won't you Mr Newton?'

'Yes. Thank you Sue,' he said gently.

'Wouldn't you feel more comfortable in your room?' I said. I could feel Derek watching me from the doorway to the training room. I pressed the record button on the machine in my pocket.

Turning his pale eyes on me Mr Newton said, 'Alright, let's go to my room.'

Apart from the framed photograph of Joyce Newton on the dresser, the room was an exact replica of my own. We sat opposite each other on the twin beds.

‘Would you get me a glass of water?’ he said, avoiding my gaze.

When I came back, we sat looking at each other for a few minutes and then he started talking quietly to me about his life. Feeling the tug of the recorder in my pocket, I made no attempt to interrupt him. Ten minutes in, the Head of Conservation Science described life on another planet, where water was in short supply, and he and Joyce lived in a transparent tent. Mr Newton hinted at strange sexual practices in which there was no bodily contact. He rhapsodised about the construction of the machine in his garden, and was mid-sentence when the tape ran out. My jacket issued an audible clunk. Mr Newton looked at me, and with a paternal wink said, ‘What shall we put on side two?’ He took a sip of water.

‘How did you know I was recording you?’ I said.

‘I listened outside the dining room door after lunch,’ he said. ‘So much for the Safety and Security Manager.’

I took the machine from my jacket pocket, and pulled the microphone lead out of my shirt. I lifted up the paperback that was sitting on the night table so that I could put the machine down. The book was *The Man Who Fell To Earth* by Walter Tevis. On the cover, David Bowie sported a grey fedora; his hair was dyed the same unnatural orange as Mr Newton’s.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Newton.’

‘You have to help me Lee; Human Resources told me that if my performance did not improve after this course, I would be

handed my final written warning.' Mr Newton's hands were trembling like trapped birds. 'I am desperate,' he said.

'But this is hopeless, Mr Newton. Derek knows you're not really ill,' I said.

'You must give him the recording.'

'It's not going to convince him.'

Derek was not convinced by the tape. We sat in his wind battered 2CV listening to it on the car stereo.

'This is all you managed to get out of him?' he said.

'That's everything,' I said. 'Pretty cracked, eh?'

Derek turned the volume down. 'Get out of my car,' he said. I got out of the car, and carefully shut the door.

That evening, Andre Hennis visited me in my room. I refused to sign a complaint about Mr Newton's 'unprofessional' behaviour, which a third of the managers on the course had lent their names to. Andre handed me a written warning for my absenteeism earlier in the day.

I skipped dinner, and took up residence in Bar St Joan watching the managers meander in, clutching their evening assignments. By 9pm every seat at every table was filled, but my table was empty.

Once I was drunk enough, I walked out into the car park to damage Derek Tenet's car. With my keys I put a stripe along three

of the doors, and was about to do the fourth when Mr Newton appeared out of the mist.

‘Lee, Derek has made an appointment for me with the Museum Doctor for tomorrow morning,’ he said.

I tried to speak, but only animal noises would come out.

At 3am that night I found Mr Newton face down in his own blood outside the communal bathroom.

It was warm in the back of the ambulance. One of the medics told me that Mr Newton had pulled out his left eye. In return I told the medic about Jeremy’s spaceship. He scribbled something on a pad. The medics looked at me blankly, and swayed on their bench. I needed air.

The night shrieked past the wagon’s tiny plastic windows.

Without a word, I got up from the bench, opened the back door and jumped out of the ambulance.

I hit the ground running.

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