

Opening extract from  
**In Sparta**

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# 1

One bright day a bomb went off. A small strip of incendiary gel made dust a coffee concession at one of the mainline stations. Took out three staff, their manager; six people in line for take-out latte, skinny, perhaps soya; four more downwind of the blast, skinny, perhaps not; a policeman, just back off sick leave; and two teenage girls bunking school. A small fire started, damage localised by an efficient sprinkler system. Forty-five people were injured – broken limbs, blinded by flying debris – and – in a grisly footnote to the newsflash – several were burned by molten chocolate hurled through the air by the blast.

The attack caused shares to fall, falling further in the absence of decisive action. No warning was given, the authorities looked dangerously unready. The value wiped off markets, plus insurance costs and revenue losses, made a hacks' Black Monday, a dirty scrap of the market chaos of just a few years before. The crash that couldn't happen again. Disruption was widespread. Trains were stopped, the tube suspended; diversion of traffic away from the scene brought gridlock and a couple of extra

deaths. Tourists cut short their stay, only to lounge in frustration as airport security spavined departures. Over the six months following, insurance premiums rose sharply, and several thousand job losses were ultimately attributable to events begun that day.

I was in the disruption. The bomb ignited at eight twenty-two and thirty-one seconds; an opportune time to cause grief. Not that I needed more. I was starting a new job. It was Monday; I was scared. I used to change jobs a lot; never lost that sickness of being new. I was expected at quarter to nine for introductions. I hate introductions. Hate work. Sometimes, my only ambition was to pick loose skin off my fingers till it was painful and dry.

People got the news off data toys. I guessed what happened. The city hadn't had bombs in years, but we remembered: the word filtered quiet, no panic. Exploding a station is predictable but shocks like few other things. People think: could have been me. Anyone can be at a station, anytime. A flawless target, a space that can't be locked tight. The streets were holiday busy, people lost without trains. No one was on time. But I was late.

The world explodes and burns away; we cling to what we know. Sliding doors, reception, the water machine; the shiny, hired plants. The blonde with the twist who says take a seat. The locals, slyly checking: visitor or new? I smelt new, in my cheap suit. Smelt scared. I always started scared and jumped before the crash. I've had so many Mondays, sat at coffee tables, gaping at the vision statement, the annual report. Another lab monkey, taken through the doors.

There was no mention that people had died, were

crippled, blinded; small worlds blown apart. The man shaking my hand was very brisk, very keen to get on. I thought, like always: you don't know who I am. You've read my application, believed it might be true. Called me for interview, thought I answered your questions well enough; satisfied with my psychometrics. Now you want me in your team, and don't know who I am. The man shaking my hand, my manager, thought perhaps it was the first day of a long, solid career. Thought he was welcoming me to something that was mine to keep. So we could look back one day, basking in all we'd done.

We walked down the corridor, him talking, me making throaty noises, to show I was paying attention. He was setting the scene, structuring my induction. Some reading-in, a tour, meetings with key players; context for successful assimilation. I was always horrified to learn what my role would be. Between the advert and the interview, and the job offer and starting, a process of elision would translate what was interesting on the webpage to a drudge of fear and resentment. Tasks that hadn't been mentioned; targets not spelled out; the requirements no one hinted at when I asked about flexible working. The generous package, with strings attached. When Monday comes and you're led to your desk, the section manager, so affable at interview, scarcely acknowledges this new element in his machine. You won't feel human again six months, and by then you'll be looking round.

I wasn't set up on the system. My manager tried to log me in, rang Information Services. Said he'd done the request last week, it was inconvenient, not the first time. He understood, yes, priorities. But he'd done the request.

Last week. I was miserable and alone. At a new desk, in open plan a long way from a window, not knowing anyone, not knowing what to do. I sat as he wrangled with them, feeling, like usual, the best of life was gone. I always changed jobs but never made friends, never kept in touch with names on the leaving card. Exchanged email addresses. No one sent. I thought in time I'd grow harder, but lived in constant fear. I'd built a certain level of skill to take from job to job; plausible interview chat; set-piece bull. Kept checking sites, filling applications. Sweated from office to office, one step off the edge. I had no stories because all my adventures were petty. Had no belief but the analysis of process. In my life then, there was nothing out of the blue.

He couldn't get me in: IS would look into it. He had papers, files, a batch of reports. Reading-in. Did I want to start reading-in, or meet people? Choice, but not choice I wanted. Choice was to clear out, go home. Did that once: walked, first day. I'd got there and it was nothing like I expected, and the people were cold and didn't have time; I wasn't so used to it then. They wanted me on the road next day: shocking, bad-mannered, expecting someone on the road next day. And they wanted me to carry a laptop and I hate laptops. So, lunchtime, I walked. Spent the afternoon doing agencies, got temp work. Used to like temping. But needed treadmill money.

I said let's meet people and made the usual joyless remark about not remembering names. He didn't laugh. There was an air of sufferance to him, like he'd rather get on and let me flounder. He introduced me to the work group, the people I'd rely on for days and weeks to come.

I didn't remember their names. Don't now. They said some stuff about themselves that passed me by. Most of the men were older than me; some of the women were pretty. I fixed a watery smile and recited where I'd come from, what I'd done before, why I'd moved. I didn't want to talk, they didn't want to listen. But there's rules in office life. The details have different accents, but the language is the same. Systems, workflows, office jokes. Bastards and nutters. Young lads starting in the world; old fellas wishing their pension. The women who come and go, having babies, spawning whip-rounds. The ones who stick the job like glue and never get anywhere. The machines, the kitchen vermin; virtual conference suites. Briefings and nowhere to hide. The tension, the understatement. Quiet madness all around. Office life like junk in your blood: hooked, so hard to get clean. I've changed jobs so many times I could do any job now. Walk in any office, do the reading and begin. Not something I'm proud of. Just something.

We didn't go far, he had too much to do. Didn't say, but I read it, in every busy shirt crease. When we reached Support at the end of the wing – a proper office, with walls, not partitions – he didn't acknowledge these were people who mattered: post, despatch, bookings. They were all young, three girls, a bloke, straight from school. No handshakes, just a survey from the doorstep like the broker's men come round. No names, except the head of office services. As we left, a young woman arrived, her short dark hair fixed with a slide, in no rush to get started. She slipped by into the room. We weren't introduced.

IS still hadn't got me in so I was beached with reading.

It was familiar, though I'd never seen it before. I'd been there, too many fresh Monday mornings, back to square one and start again, anxiety, hate.