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Brian caught sight of David standing alone on 41<sup>st</sup> street opposite. The tightly circulating pedestrians were all in intense conversations with each other so David stood out. Brian hadn't seen him for a week and recognised an opportunity. He hoped David was still a maverick—an off-hook, as the street says—and thus a listener ready to be primed. Brian was young and ambitious enough to risk a ticket for jumping the line. He dashed across the street and worked his way towards his opportunity.

Ahead of him, David suddenly started walking, trying to lose himself in the throng, but Brian was ready for the manoeuvre. The promo had taught him to watch for this and to be ready for the subject to dash into a shop or metro station.

David was stopped on the kerb by a rush of traffic and Brian caught him up and held his arm.

“David!” he said. “It’s been a while. Let me buy you a Sparky’s coffee.”

David’s eyes had a hunted look. “Oh Brian, I was just thinking about you,” he said, without enthusiasm.

“Well then, let’s get up to speed with each other. There’s a great new offer on Sparky’s Mocha. It’s just up ahead.”

“Well, I ...er...Look here...” David was stammering. “I’d like to, but ...I... I rather want a Coca Cola. Let’s enjoy the hour with a Coke. You know it’s more refreshing than coffee and has the same amount of caffeine...and...and...in fact the new Coke Imperial is ...on offer just now. Look, Paris Springs Café is right

here.”

Brian was briefly disappointed to find David finally hooked-up. But he was big enough to be glad that David was not going to end up in the shuffling band of off-hooks, continually moved on. He focussed on David’s jaw line beneath the ear. There it was, the telltale bruise of the implant. Ah well, he’d have to play it differently. “David, that’s neighbourly, but I offered first. It’s my shout.” Brian didn’t want David to get away. He would try a loss attractor and hope that David would buy a round. “I’m the host and ready to tune in to you.” He held David’s arm and David, clearly unused to the hook-up jousting, went with him reluctantly.

They settled into an economy-seating booth – Brian wasn’t yet sure about David’s positioning - and stared at their foaming cups. The cafe was very noisy.

Brian reached into his pocket. “I use Aspartame Dominica for my comforter.” He punched the little sugarcane shaped dispenser twice and held it out to David. “Try some?”

David shook his head. “I’ll have regular sugar.”

“Too much of that and you’ll need Slims-ur-line insulin regulator.”

“Better than...er...Colon Clarity De-cancer Capsules,” David muttered. “They’ll...” Forgetting the correct slogan, he lapsed into silence.

Brian took a breath and tried not to draw any conclusions from last season’s Sweatshop Burberry raincoat that David wore buttoned.

“Well Hi, you two!” A high nasal Texan drawl greeted them. A tall tanned girl with a half blonde and half brunette head of hair pinned by an ice-cream tub shaped barrette bearing the Dayville’s logo for the Chockilla range of ice-cream splits stood over them.

“Oh hi, Bridgett,” said Brian “Care to join us. We are having a Sparky’s Mocha.”

Bridgett slid into the tight booth beside David, whom she knew vaguely as one of Brian’s acquaintances. “Well, I was just thinking I’d have an Italian Mezzo with some Dairy Royale cream foamer, new to the Sparky’s European range of coffee joys. Let me introduce you to it.”

“Next time. We have our fine ground ever smooth Mochas right now.”

Bridgett slid on a pair of dark glasses. “Oh golly gosh! My Raybans really make me feel safe - so many lazes in the street these days. So what’s new?” Without waiting for an answer, she turned to David and said, “Hi. You know, I have something especially for your beautiful shadowy complexion. This,” she held up a blue tube blinking like a neon light and pronounced in a musical voice. “Youraura. Direct from the Garnier Skintech laboratories, developed uniquely to enhance your skin glow.”

David appeared uneasy. He swallowed his coffee and slid out of the booth. “Look, thanks for the coffee. I didn’t realise the...er...Timex time; must rush. Let’s link up later. Maybe meet for a Pizza-Hut Festival Firenze deep-pan.”

Brian refused to be depressed. He had lost a sale, or reference enhancement in the words of his promo. A sale would have multiplied the value of the Sparky’s references he had made in his conversation, all duly recorded by the implant in his jaw. Not to worry. Don’t throw good words after bad, the promo had said. Move

on to the next opportunity. Brian didn't worry. He was hooked to a good set of products.

Bridgett shrugged. "Rookie!"

Brian shook his head. "He's only just hooked-in. He's a little fresh." He tried to sound fair. Don't knock the opposition—the contras, his promo kept saying; don't even think about knocking them, it'll show in your face. You'll be knocking their personalities, the state of their very souls, and that's not good for your opportunities. But Brian couldn't stop the thought coming into his mind. David was such a jerk. Imagine, Coca Cola! It can't be worth a cent.

A man sat behind him in the next economy seat booth. A slight warbling suddenly came from the man's ear set. The man cocked his head slightly and listened. Then he turned round to them and said in an inclusive voice, "Hi you good people! I want to share something with you. Did you know there's a quick-fire special at Bloomingdale's this morning? Twenty percent off allsize Calvin Klein padded underwear. Worth the metro trip, I can assure you."

Brian was grateful for the opening. "I use only Highland underwear myself. It's a Sears line, unique to the downtown store, opening hours seven-eleven."

The man was inexperienced; he had no close out. He blushed and turned his back on them.

Bridgett leaned forward and whispered to Brian. "Good one! Highland got a vid on the red-eye TV this morning. That'll teach him to maven without a quit-bit."

Bridgett's generation-4 rang sweetly in her ear set, and she turned to the wall to chat.

Brian took the chance to call Adèle, a girl he had just met. He took out her glittering info-card and wiped his thumb over the lettering. The scent of lemon and sandalwood rose over the aroma of roasting coffee beans impregnated in the tabletop.

He dialled the public number and her catcher picked up immediately. "Hi y'all, I've been waiting for *your* call. My catcher has a few things to say before we can talk about *you*. So, hang in there. Listen to the rave about the exciting new range of Lightup lip-glosses from L'Oréal. Why say goodbye to the sun when you can wear it all night long? Just press one. Beat the street with an exciting Calcisur investment opportunity exclusive to *you*. Just press two. But if you just want to talk to lil'ol' working me, a Wisdom Brothers investment empathist, just press three."

Brian, impressed by the modesty of her ad-voice, pressed three. Adèle sounded a little more husky and seductive. "So happy you want to talk. I'd love to talk to *you*, please hold a while longer and I'll turn my full attention on you. Here's Kitty Litty's latest disk, number six in the charts and climbing, *All that you are*. Listen and Enjoy."

The song came on. Brian had to admit that it was catchy. But he had heard it too often. Suddenly, Adèle's husky voice interrupted. "Hi..."

"Hi, Adèle," Brian said, but Adèle's voice continued on, "...do rate this song for me right now. Press one 'coz it's cool cool. Then add it to your collection this very minute. Press two for Amazon Dot Com hi-speed personal purchasing—one

touch music in your ear. Keep holding, we are almost linked. The suspense is thrilling.”

Finally, there was a click and Adèle’s far from sympathetic voice came on with all too real indifference. “Yes.”

“Hi Adèle, it’s me, Brian.”

“Brian?”

“Brian Allbright. We met at the Brick’s launch party.”

“Launch party?”

“They were launching their latest affiliations. You remember...”

“Yes, I remember. The Alcatraz bakery was one of them. Too silly, when you can have a Dunkin Donut torus taco for half the price of their stuff.”

“How right! SexBay was also one, as I recall. Hard to niche them.”

“What is this, a dirty ‘phone call?”

“I thought we might link up tonight. Got some free minutes?”

“Free for what?”

A little bell tinkled in the background and a new rich masculine voice full of optimism interrupted, “Calcisur latest put, ninety two and half. Up on the day, you people. Why sit on the sidelines when you can one-touch trade with a Wisdom Brothers InTrackTrade account. We’re bull right now, why lose when you can gain.”

Adèle gave the closer. “That Calcisur’s been a great earner for me, personally. I’ll like to give you the same opportunity. I’ll beam you the stats.” Her voice dropped a register. “You can call me anytime with your order.”

Brian heard the tense little warble of information on the move in his ear, and across the screen of his gen-4 marched the market data for Calcisur. “Sorry,” he said automatically. “I Yahoo.”

“So,” said Adèle. “Free for what?” She was moving on. Never fight a contra, said the promos, you’ll lose your openings.

Brian had been madly estimating Adèle’s positioning. What hook did he have that would fit her style niche? “I was thinking of the Paddy-Wak cavern for an Orange Grove Chardonnay.”

“Well...er...”

“Brian.”

“Right. Maybe we could link. You got date insurance? Because I can get you a special...”

“I’ve got an Assurance General Bright Lights comprehensive that’s good up to midnight. You?”

“The usual Wisdom Brothers third-party scheme. Yours cover Beat places?”

“Uh huh. But depends on the volume.”

“Cover the higher kilowatt range?”

“Sure.”

“Let’s make it the Beat Goes On at ten. Oh and Brian, I’m a Bud Brewski person.”

“Me too...” Brian panicked for a moment. He had forgotten the jill-jingle for the beer that would tie them closer together. He could only think of the jock jolly,

beamed on the hour to the male mavens hooked in to the brewery's network, *Buddy-up with the best*. He blurted out a generalised reinforcer, "...Things go better with a Bud." The girl didn't seem to notice. "I'll set it then." Brian fingered the date into his keypad.

"Hey," Adèle asked. "How will I know you?"

"I've the Guiliani-Tall profile, with a few specials: genuine Antique Raybans, Armani special edition loafers, Surfcut hair styling. I'll know you."

"Brian, I like your positioning. Do you have a ride?"

"I time-share on a Harley Fat 3000."

"Whoa! What's your action?"

"Tell you when I see you."

"Right. Later alligator." Adèle hit her closing button, and Brian's gen-4 waited to disconnect while her closer intoned the disclaimer. "Remember that Wisdom Brothers did not initiate this call and is not responsible for the casual content of the conversation. When taking investment advice you should realise that shares do go up as well as down. Have a great day."

Brian punched the air excitedly.

Bridgett, who had finished her call, was observing him closely. "Date insurance?" she said. "This girl plays hard ball."

"This girl can connect me, Bridgett. I am not going to be sitting in Sparky's all day long for ever."

"Let me see her splash-card." Brian handed it over. "Hmm. Big time. Getting up into the Christie's and the Guggenheims isn't that easy, you know. The downs on the implant alone'll ruin you. How many hooks you got? You're struggling now, right? Too many niches, you can't cover them all."

"Bridgett, you gotta have ambition. The only way is up."

But Bridgett was right; he *was* pressed. He had the morning's failed loss attractor to annul. He stood to go. As he did so, a Retinad laze from the street caught him directly in the eye. The laser beam left its glowing afterimage hanging in the air in front of him in blue letters, obscuring the room until it faded. 'Church of the Free Spirit welcomes all mavericks. Keep your purity. Unaffiliated cafeteria open twentyfour-twentyfour.'

"To heck with those religious nuts!" he exclaimed. "Can't I even have a Sparky's Fine Ground Ever Smooth Mocha in peace?"

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**Andrew Kennedy** lives in the Basque country and writes both fiction and non-fiction in a variety of guises.

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