

Innuendo Un (Ltd)

By Steve Barley

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Standing in the narrow alleyway by the grey-brick, four storey office block, Richard double-checked the directions on the work experience letter given to him by Mr Marlton, his careers officer at school. On the walk from Barbican tube station, he'd assumed 'head up Back Passage' meant some sort of short cut, but the London Borough of City sign he'd just passed proved it was a genuine street in EC1. The entrance to number two, where the sponsor of his work placement was based, was a few paces on. A brass plaque on the glossed ebony, security door confirmed he was in the right place. It read, *Innuendo Un (Ltd)* and was accompanied by the firm's logo - a winking eye.

Richard carefully re-folded the letter and returned it to the inside pocket of his smartly pressed school jacket. Using the plaque as a mirror, he smoothed an unruly hair that had dared to cross his parting, straightened the knot in his tie, and prayed the anti-spot cream he'd lathered over his face that morning would keep further eruptions at bay. Pressing the buzzer on the door's intercom, he coughed nervously and waited.

'Come!' ordered a woman's voice as the latch clicked and the door swung open. Inside, there was only one way to go - up...and up...and up again. Always last to be picked for teams during sports, Richard wasn't noted for his fitness. In fact, at school, Richard wasn't really noted for anything. Out of breath and red-faced, he reached the third floor reception. A slender brunette, looking like a Dolce & Gabbana model on a break from her photo shoot, was sitting behind a glass and gun-metal grey desk. Richard had to stop himself staring at her cherry-red lipstick. It didn't help that there was a large winking eye on the wall behind her.

'I'm...I'm...' gasped Richard.

The receptionist smiled and there was a flash of Hollywood. 'Yes, it makes me breathless too,' she said in a husky tone. Richard's face got redder. 'We did have the option of the lower floors,' said the

receptionist, 'but Charlie – that's our boss - said he preferred being on top. Besides, No 2 (Upper) Back Passage has a certain ring to it don't you think?'

Richard gave a hurried nod. Not daring to speak, he offered her his letter.

'Oh, yes. We're taking you in hand for the week aren't we? My name's Scarlett.' She pointed at a pink leather sofa next to a double set of frosted glass doors. 'Rest your bits over there while I inform Charlie you're here.' Richard sat on the sofa. It gave an embarrassing warning squeak whenever he tried to change position. Just as he was worried about cramp setting in, the glass doors burst open and a bow-legged man wearing beige cargo pants and a T-shirt bustled in. From his graying temples, and the crinkles round his eyes, he looked to be in his late fifties, but the smile he gave Richard radiated more youth and energy than a toddler on a sugar rush. Beneath the picture of a winking eye on his T-shirt were the words, *Always gagging for it.*

'You must be Dick,' said Charlie, pumping Richard's hand. 'Wasn't expecting you until ten. Early riser, eh?' Charlie winked and Richard immediately knew where the company's logo came from.

'I...I wasn't given an exact time,' stuttered Richard. 'Mr Marlton only gave me the details yesterday...after my other work sponsor fell through.' He wasn't sure whether to admit he hadn't a clue what sort of business Innuendo was in to, but didn't want to appear rude.

Charlie beamed. 'No need to apologise.' He turned to the receptionist. 'We like lads who are keen, don't we Scarlett?'

The receptionist pursed her lips at Richard, arched one eyebrow, and nodded. Richard's throat felt dry yet his palms were sweating profusely.

Charlie held open one of the glass doors and said, 'Would you care to enter my domain?' Richard did as he was told and was escorted down a corridor with hardwood flooring and sunken spotlights that changed colour as they passed. 'I suppose you want to know more about what we get up to here?' said Charlie.

'I...I did wonder,' admitted Richard.

‘Innuendo was conceived back in 1972...’ said Charlie. He made a sweeping gesture with one hand, ‘...and we’ve grown bigger ever since. We’re the only company in the UK that specialises in puns and double entendres.’ Charlie smiled at the sceptical look on Richard’s face. ‘Hard to swallow isn’t it? But it’s true, and it pays well. Here, let me show you our headlines section.’ He stopped at a door with *Tabloid Department* stencilled on the frosted glass. Underneath was blu-tacked part of a newspaper headline that read ‘Knockers only’. Charlie did as instructed and they both entered.

The tabloid department was a small room with two facing desks surrounded by teetering piles of discarded newspapers. A recycling bin in one corner was overflowing with individually crumpled sheets of paper. Every wall was filled with framed headlines from issues of *The Sun*, *The Mirror*, *The Daily Star* and *The Sunday Sport*. What was more surprising to Richard than the suggestive titles everywhere, was that the tabloid department consisted of two women.

‘Ladies, this is Dick, he’s with us to gain a bit of experience.’

A rotund, middle-aged black woman with braided hair, lycra leggings and a cleavage deeper than the Grand Canyon eyed Richard in his school uniform and said, ‘Well, you’ve come to the right place, love.’ She blew Richard a kiss that, if it had landed, would have had more suction than a Dyson.

‘Leave over, Joy,’ said the second woman; who, if she toned down her make-up, could have doubled for Dame Edna Everage. ‘Nice to meet you, Dick. I’m Mona and this is Joy. So, how long do we have the pleasure of your company?’

‘A...a week,’ stammered Richard.

Joy leaned forward until her top was as strained as Richard’s voice. ‘I’m sure we’ll be able show you a thing or two,’ she said.

‘Are you finally on top of that celebrity contract for the *News of the World*?’ asked Charlie.

Joy nodded at Mona, who picked up an A4 notepad. She crumpled the top page and threw it over her shoulder. It landed on top of the recycling pile.

‘Good toss, Mona,’ said Joy with a smirk.

‘Trained by the best. Right, Charlie?’ said Mona as she sifted through her notes. ‘Ah, here we are.’ She raised the notepad. ‘So far we’ve got: “Becks All Round” for the footballer beer belly piece. “Lovely Jubblies” for the glamour model in the *Only Fools & Horses* remake and, to go with that photo-sting in the strip club, we’ve got, “Caught in the act - Simon scowls” ’

‘Excellent,’ said Charlie, ‘keep ‘em coming, ladies.’ He ushered Richard out. The next door was labelled *TV Sitcoms*. ‘Not such a profitable business these days,’ said Charlie, ‘but used to be enormous.’ They went in. ‘Dick, meet Willy. Willy single-handedly pulls off all our sitcom work.’

Richard tentatively shook hands with a beanpole of a man wearing tight, Farrah polyester trousers and a flower-patterned shirt. Willy’s receding hair was cut short and dyed day-glo yellow. ‘Oo, love the name,’ said Willy. ‘How about I wet your whistle, Dick?’ Richard looked startled, until Willy pointed at a tray on his desk. It contained a seventies style, Hornsea tea service – steam was rising from the spout of the teapot.

‘Er...no thanks,’ replied Richard. Charlie declined too. As Willy poured himself some tea, Richard noticed the room contained an awful lot of chintz.

‘Willy’s had ‘em all in his time haven’t you,’ said Charlie with a wink. Willy nodded. Charlie pointed at the black and white photographs on the walls. ‘*It Ain’t Half Hot Mum*, ‘*Allo ‘Allo*, and that one over there’s from *Some Mothers Do Ave ‘Em*.’ Richard was too young to recognise any of them.

‘Golden age of sitcoms that was,’ said Willy, ‘Kept things throbbing in this room, I can tell you...unlike now.’ Richard watched him pour the milk. ‘The jugs aren’t the same these days either.’ Richard’s eyes widened until Willy waggled his retro milk jug and smiled.

‘Which reminds me of the cash cow of them all,’ said Charlie. There was awe in his voice.

Willy paused with his teacup and little finger raised. His eyes took on a far away look. ‘How could I forget? Mrs Slocombe was my best customer. Good lines and good times...’ Willy sighed. ‘Nowadays it’s all vamp not camp, and nothing’s subtle anymore. Chocolate finger, Dick?’

Richard shook his head when offered the box of Cadbury’s Fingers. Charlie took two and used them to wave goodbye to Willy. Outside, he said, ‘Let’s see if we can find a slot for you,’ and they

continued down the corridor. Passing several doors, Richard caught titles to departments named *Stand Up*, *TV Ads*, *Greeting Cards* and one for something called *Viz*. The further they went, the more Richard wondered whether Mr Marlton knew what sort of work experience Innuendo offered.

‘Did my careers officer speak to you about my...er, role?’ braved Richard as they turned a corner.

Charlie stopped suddenly. ‘Yes, nice chap, but a bit flustered on the blower. Said something about an administrative cock up with the work placements, and needing to trawl through the business ads for his boys.’ Charlie shrugged, ‘When I told him we’d done a lot of work for St Trinian’s he couldn’t get my details down fast enough.’

Richard gulped, and his next words came out in a rush. ‘But did Mr Marlton agree exactly what I’d be up to, I mean what position I’d be in, that is...what I’d be doing here all week?’ His bravery exhausted, Richard eyed his polished shoes.

‘I did tell him that what we offer is a bit crude,’ Charlie beamed, ‘but he said his lads were happy doing big *or* little jobs. Once he proposed your name, Scarlett got to grips with the mail side of things, and bingo, here we are!’ Richard gave a nervous smile. They continued a few paces until the corridor ended with a final door. ‘Expect to be working flat out here,’ warned Charlie. ‘Business is bulging at the moment. People can’t get enough of it.’ Charlie opened the door with a flourish. ‘I give you...the *Caption Department!*’

Richard gasped as he was propelled forward like pirate’s captive on a plank. In the largest room he’d seen so far, Richard could feel the blood race to his acne as he was exposed to the devouring gaze of a dozen ragtag people sitting at desks laden with photographs. Everywhere he looked, pinned to walls, stuck to cupboards, strewn on the floor, he could see glossy images of animals, politicians, members of the royal family, celebrities, sports people - all caught in unusual poses, or with strange facial expressions, and all appearing to be staring directly at *him*.

Vaguely aware of Charlie pointing out members of staff, and saying something about contracts for *Have I Got News For You* and celebrity magazines, Richard’s heart beat so fast it was all he could do

to stop himself fainting. When random people with names like John, Thomas, Titania, and Percy began to wink at him, Richard felt a rising, almost desperate, urge to hide.

That was when Charlie declared in his most dramatic voice, ‘Ladies and gentlemen...
...I give you Dick!’

‘Shame about that lad from St Cuthbert’s not working out,’ said Charlie.

Scarlett finished sorting Friday’s mail into piles on her desk and handed Charlie those addressed to him. ‘A little premature if you ask me,’ she said. ‘He was hardly here five minutes. For a lanky lad, he sure shot off fast.’

‘Pity,’ said Charlie, shaking his head. ‘The caption department could have used another body. The customers have been coming thick and fast all week. Youngsters these days don’t seem to have the staying power...’

He was interrupted by the sound of someone bounding up the stairs. A teenage boy with spiked hair and sporting an earring walked confidently into the reception area. He was wearing ripped jeans, canvas sneakers, and a baggy T-shirt with an image of a winking eye – the words *Always up for it* were written underneath.

‘...apart from young Dick of course,’ finished Charlie.

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