

From the moment she steps out into the laneway before her morning shift, Hazel Bates, tea lady at Empire Fashionwear, has the curious feeling of being watched. She glances around but sees no one. It's early, the lane is quiet and shadowed, and the air sweet with the smell of hops from the nearby brewery. Lifting her gaze to the strip of blue sky above the buildings, she's startled to see a face in an upper window of the abandoned bond store across the lane. The woman stares down at Hazel, her pale face almost ghostlike against the dim interior and, with quick urgent movements, traces something in dust on the window, and disappears into the gloom of the old building.

'Kovac's late again!'

Hazel turns with a start to see Irene Turnbuckle, tea lady from Silhouette Knitwear next door, standing out in the lane. She pauses to light a cigarette and walks up to join Hazel. 'Becoming a nasty habit with him, don't yer reckon?'

'I just saw someone in the old bond store,' says Hazel, pointing towards the window.

Irene glances up briefly. 'Doubt that. It's a bloody disgrace leaving that place empty all these years. That's why we've got so many rats round here.'

'I definitely saw someone . . . a woman, standing in the window.'

Irene squints through the cloud of cigarette smoke. 'Could've been a trick of the light. Or get yer eyes checked. '

'Irene, dear, I know what I saw. She was youngish, pretty, with long, dark hair.'

'Nothing wrong with yer imagination, then.'

Hazel notes the location of the window and wonders how the woman could have got in there. The two roller doors at the back of the building are padlocked, so she must have a key to the front entrance. 'It is strange. I can have a better look when I'm upstairs.'

'None of our business, anyway,' says Irene, who has firm but wildly contradictory views about who can mind whose business, especially when it comes to her own business.

'Irene, dear, we're tea ladies – everything is our business,' says Hazel with a smile.

Irene gives a snort of laughter. She gets a well-worn flask from the front pocket of her apron and takes a quick swig. 'Breakfast,' she explains. 'These foreigners,' she continues, 'they're all up to something. Little backhanders on the side. Shifting things around off the back of trucks onto the back of other trucks. Kovac's a cunning so-and-so, if you ask me.'

Hazel tries to see the best in Irene, making an effort to overlook her unfounded suspicions (not to mention her many unsavoury habits). In all the years Hazel has known her, she has worn the same outfit to work every day: a faded wraparound apron, shabby green-plaid house slippers and a shapeless pot-lid hat. In summer, a maroon cardigan, and an oversized black coat in the winter. She either has a cigarette glued to her lower lip or a pipe gripped between her teeth. That's Irene – everyone knows her and anyone who has crossed her in the past knows to keep their distance.

'Seems there's nothing wrong with your imagination either,' says Hazel mildly. 'But I do agree he's slipping a little. He was fifteen minutes late last week and twenty minutes the week before. It's not like him at all.'

'No flies on Hazel Bates, ladies and gents,' Irene informs an invisible audience. 'Memory like an elephant and ears to match.'

Hazel laughs. She is quietly proud of her memory and, for that matter, her ears which are normal size but quite unique in their own way. But Irene doesn't know about that. It's one of Hazel's little secrets. Her memory has always been strong – she's good at remembering people names, plus their children's and grandchildren's names and birthdays. She loves to match her wits with contestants on her favourite radio quiz show, 'Ask Me Anything', and there's not many folk who can say they've never had to make a shopping list. Of course, she would never brag about her abilities. There's such a thing as modesty.

When Hazel joined Empire Fashionwear as the full-time tea lady, her memory came into its own. She knows the name of every employee of the last decade, their favourite biscuit and how they like their tea or powdered coffee. Most people are 'white with one' or 'white with two' apart from the figure-conscious office girls who only eat half a grapefruit for breakfast and take their tea black without sugar, and there are always a couple of people who go the other way and insist on equal measures of tea and sugar. More importantly, she remembers whose mother is poorly, whose husband is out of work and where people spend their holidays. For her, remembering these details is as natural as breathing, not dimmed by the passing years, but honed and sharpened.

'About bloody time!' says Irene when the delivery van appears at the top of the laneway, as if they've been waiting weeks rather than minutes.

The van comes to a halt and Mr Kovac leaps out, hurrying around to open the back doors. 'Good morning, ladies!' Normally he's neatly dressed and groomed with his dark, wavy hair slicked down with a razor-sharp side part but today his hair is awry, his duster coat crumpled and his shoes missing their usual leathery glow.

Before Hazel can ask if everything is all right, Irene gets in. 'We've been beside ourselves here, haven't we, Mrs Bates?'

'Slight exaggeration,' corrects Hazel. 'Mildly concerned.'

Mr Kovac quickly loads boxes onto his trolley. 'I am very sorry, Mrs Bates, Mrs Turnbuckle. There was engine trouble.'

Hazel knows he's not telling the truth but assumes he has his reasons. He's a very decent sort in her view.

Irene flicks her cigarette butt down the grating. 'Yer told us that before. Get yer story straight, Mister.'

'I can only apologise,' says Mr Kovac, with a deferential nod of his head.

Hazel opens the back door wide to allow his trolley through and walks ahead down the hallway to unlock the storeroom. 'Just leave them in the hall if you like, Mr Kovac. You get along and catch up on your deliveries.'

'It will only take one minute,' he insists, swiftly moving the boxes into the storeroom. 'Again, I give you my apologies.'

'It's biscuits and tea, Mr Kovac. Not fishes and loaves. No one will starve to death.'

'This is the food of industry. And let's not forget the toilet paper. We do not want to be the cause of a revolution.' He then pulls a slip of paper out of his pocket and offers it to Hazel, hovering anxiously while she glances at it.

'Mrs Bates, could you ask upstairs about my invoice? The truth is there has been a problem at the wholesalers because my account is behind. If I could pick up the cheque this afternoon that would help me very much.'

'That's very odd. We're usually so prompt. Of course, I'll take it up on my round this morning.'

'Oi!' shouts Irene from outside. 'What are yers doing in there? Apart from making me late and getting me bloody fired.'

'Thank you, Mrs Bates,' says Mr Kovac with a grateful smile. 'I will return at the end of the day with hope in my heart.'

'I'll do my very best,' Hazel assures him as he leaves. She locks the storeroom and goes into the kitchen to fill the tea urn and the large teapot with boiling water. She slips on her pinny and runs a comb through her hair. She checks her trolley is in order with cups and saucers, a jug of milk, a canister of sugar, teaspoons and a tin of plain biscuits and sets off along the wide hallway to the factory floor.