

Mistaken Assumptions 2

One of the hazards of working in a major supermarket is dealing with shoplifters. In a place the size of ours this was a daily occurrence. Sometimes two, three, even four incidents occurred during a busy period.

They were mostly the usual suspects - career thieves who believed we owed them a living and there was nothing wrong with robbing a supermarket. The only crime they recognised was getting caught.

One particular guy - he called himself Rambo - was a nasty piece of work. Built like a brick shed with tattoos on his tattoos, he didn't have a neck. There was just a bullet head sticking out of his enormous shoulders. No one challenged Rambo unless they had a posse of security guards to back them up.

Anyway, one morning I had to go in early for some reason. As I rolled into the deserted car park the sky was clear, the sun was shining and the birds were chirping happily in the surrounding trees. I was totally relaxed as I got out of the car, until there was a shout like a fire-cracker from somewhere behind me.

'Oi!'

I spun around, and my heart nearly stopped. There was Rambo lurching towards me, little puffs of dust spurting up from where his knuckles pounded the ground. In one nanosecond a million scenarios flashed through my mind.

Is this how it ends? Torn to pieces in a supermarket car park? Will Jennifer ever know what really happened? Is this how the kids will remember me, pieces stuck back together with superglue? Is my life insurance still good? Who'll get my collection of Andy McNab hardback books?

Then he was beside me, blocking out the daylight.

'Listen,' he growled.

'What?' I knew I said the word. I just couldn't understand how it came out of a mouth that was drier than a Bedouin's sock in the Gobi desert.

'The birds. Can't you hear them?'

I tried to hear them, but all I could hear was my heart thumping in my ears.

'Aren't they beautiful?' Rambo continued, pointing around at the trees. He took a deep breath through his nose, sucking in so much air that a wayward shopping trolley came rolling towards him.

'I love this time of day,' he purred. 'So beautiful and calm. I love the peace and quiet.'

Suddenly his eyes glistened and he sighed. 'What is this life, if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare.' I swear there was a sob in his voice.

Then he was gone, lumbering off across the car park with the shopping trolley following in his wake.

I never looked at him the same way again. Though I still wouldn't challenge him unless he'd been tazered five times and wrapped in duct tape...