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opening extract from

Operation Ward Ten

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PROLOGUE

Everyone says something they don't mean once in a while; everyone does at least one thing in their lifetime that they regret. (Some wear impossibly voluminous trousers for years.) But people learn from their mistakes, once they have recognised them. Even robbers and muggers can eventually see the errors of their ways. ~~Though I doubt it.~~

Agatha Bilke sat in the Accident and Emergency department at the Rottington Hospital and regretted the past few hours. This was not because she had decided to become a decent human being, it was simply that she had become a victim of her own vanity. For all the attention and help she'd received, Agatha was still bad. The Worst Girl Ever Known to Humanity still hated everyone and everything.

Agatha had been caught in a fire – but, incredibly, she had not caused it. She was annoyed with herself. She had endured many months of being told what to do by various people, some of whom were experts in such matters and some who were just nosey parkers. How could she have been so careless as to end up in hospital with burns to her face and arms?

Agatha looked around. Next to her a man was shivering uncontrollably. Another person sitting opposite clutched her head and moaned. Someone in the corner was a bright yellow colour. A&E was not a good place to be.

1. CAULIFLOWER TRINKLE

"*Brilliant!*

The ward was full, but not especially brilliant.

"Exciting!"

There were staff and patients milling around, but it wasn't particularly exciting.

"Glorious!"

Hmm.

Everyone was aware that a child in the corner bed was shouting. But this did not stop Cauliflower Trinkle. Some observers might suggest that she enjoyed it.

Now there is a very serious problem that some people have and it's called Tourette's syndrome. You may be familiar with it, especially if you're a keen watcher of TV documentaries. Or perhaps you might know someone with



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the sufferer might shout out random words

the condition and you are aware of how distressing it is.

Sometimes in situations of stress the sufferer might shout out random words – the first thing that comes into their mind. It may not be polite; it may be *very rude*. The root of the condition is still a mystery to medical science.

Yet, until Miss Trinkle, no one had even dared to suspect that the *inverse* might happen; that she might be in the habit of blurting out complimentary – not offensive – adjectives at any time of the day or night. As someone might swear and look cross, she would exclaim how charming the world was with a big grin on her face. She couldn't help it.

"Have you thought what it would be like to have no ears? *Incredibobble!* We could all wear hats down to our shoulders."

Downstairs in A&E, a nurse wrapped bandages tight around Agatha's head, her long fingernails clipping Agatha's ears. *Silly woman*, she thought. *Can't she see that the skin is tender where it was burned?* Agatha's arms hurt and her cheeks were stinging. She wished she were somewhere else.

How had this happened? It had all started in the park, with a small child and his endless gifts... but the pleasant afternoon had ended abruptly because of Agatha's boundless ambition. She had been stupid, she told herself. Now she could be stuck here for weeks, and she needed to get out, as fast as she could.

2. GIFTS

The toddler handed Agatha a twig.

"Diss Urgharggh!". Next, he fetched a bottle top. He beamed at the girl, and giggled.

Under normal circumstances, a sunny Sunday afternoon in the park was horrible for Agatha. There were people running away from wasps, grown men with no tops on, wet dogs slobbering on dry dogs... But she was rather enjoying this little game. There was a look of sheer joy on the boy's face, bestowing these waste items as if they were pieces of gold. The child's mother – sitting in the nearby café, dolled up and in high heels – was paying no attention to her son at all, preferring to talk to a friend.

Agatha could smell the charred remnants of a disposable barbecue close by – people weren't allowed to bring them

to the park but they did so anyway. It made her feel hungry. She wondered whether she should ask the child to get her a sandwich next, but he looked too little to understand. His next offering was an improvement: a lipstick, from his mother's handbag. This was closely followed by a small diary (with nothing written in it), some mascara and a can of hairspray. Agatha started putting the make-up on. (It was probably a bit wobbly – she had no mirror.) This was fun. Perhaps she might be spotted by a passing film director and asked to star in a top movie, with John Cruise in it. She was just thinking about what sort of fight scenes she might be asked to do, and the basic physical fitness regime she would need to start (supervised by a trail-blazing instructor and accompanied by a leading nutritionist), when she was interrupted by the best gift of all: the bag itself.

Now *this* was something. It was made from buttery, soft leather. The tag was marked "Ballencialloise, Paris – Rich Persons Only". It had tassels and locks, buckles and studs. There were perspex sections, a suede pochette for vitamin supplements, four MP3 players (for different moods) and an ornately-embroidered strap. On the front, dead centre, was a diamond in the shape of the Palace of Versailles. Agatha looked over at the owner sitting in the café but she had yet to notice that her belongings had gone.

"Grurghh dat *siiieeeess!*" said the boy.

Bilke decided to keep the bag; she felt no pang of conscience. The woman should have been looking after her son and her property. Ha! But if Agatha was going to carry her new accessory around – for the rest of the day, at least – she would have to look the part. She already had the make-up, now she would get the "big" hair – to look like a Frucci model. She took the hairspray and liberally applied it to her wayward locks.

This was a mistake.

The highly flammable spray flew in a majestic arc over Agatha's (much-examined) head and hit the barbecue behind, which was still smouldering. Giant flames shot up at once, enveloping the notorious problem child.

A moment later, the woman realised her bag had gone and started shouting in a beaky sort of voice: "Thief! Someone has stolen my bag!" And, as if to prove a point: "It's Ballencialloise, you know!"

As a stampede of angry people in even angrier shorts began to hunt for the culprit, the blaze engulfed a bush next to Agatha.

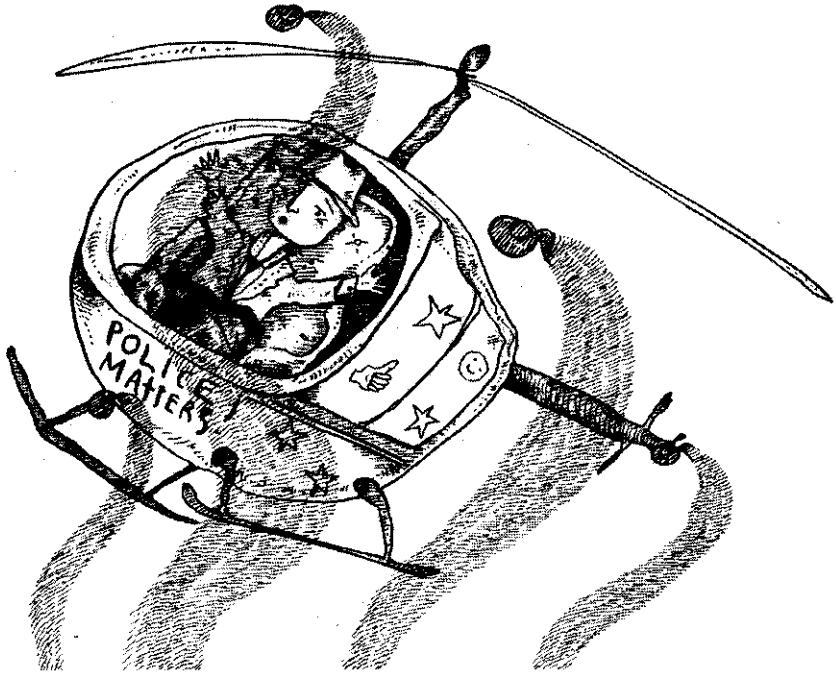
People who had never known fear like it, started to waggle their arms in the air at the sight of the flames, which were growing bigger by the second.

"This is global warming gone mad!"

A teenager took some footage on his mobile phone, in case *Rottington Tonight* needed it later. (NB It was all blurry – you couldn't make out any detail.)

"Oh dear. Oh dear oh dear... WATCH OUT!!!!!!!!!"

The last voice came from the local policeman, Inspector Coddles, who happened to be in a helicopter, trying to land. Today was his special day – the inaugural *Police Matters* presentation by the ponds where he would give a medal to a brave Auntie who had saved her entire family from a hideous (it is true, he wasn't attractive) burglar. Coddles had chosen this particular form of air transport in order to make a spectacular impression. But, as he descended, thick black smoke obscured the ground – he could not see what he was doing. He was about to crash and look quite stupid. Worse still, he might be added to the death toll.



Crang! Chopperchopper-booooooof! The flying machine shuddered violently and swung from side to side like a mosquito might, after too many colas