**Tic tacs**

‘The first time I saw her, she was drawing faces on tic-tacs’, read Dylan. ‘That’s what it says here.’

‘Are you sure?’ I asked. Dylan works in the post room and his reading skills aren’t the best. When the Facilities guy did the job spec, he’d put ‘reading ability’ on the essential skills list. Then HR made him take it off because it needed to be more ‘inclusive’. I.e., including people that couldn’t read. This resulted in the hiring of Dylan which has added interest to the daily grind because the post delivery’s now a random lottery.

‘Yeah, Trev, look.’ He handed me the spiral-bound book which he’d taken from the stack. We were in one of the training rooms waiting to learn some core skills. We got taken over by a big American company a while ago, and as well as installing blast-chiller air-conditioning and a ton and a half of mission statements, the invaders also started a program of lifelong learning.

To start with, this was self-directed learning, which meant that a leaderless group met once a fortnight and decided what to learn. The things we learned were chiefly how to make a smoke break last three hours, how to win all Matthew’s lunch money off him playing poker and how to watch Homes under the Hammer on the big television at the front.

But all good things come to an end and someone, somewhere got wind that too much fun was being had and not enough learning was being done. So then the Powers that Be started the core skills program, which means that the groups have to spend their training half-days suffering death by powerpoint on the company’s corporate objectives and watching films about what happens if you leave boxes in front of the fire escapes or climb on the chairs.

The cover was plain white and bore the words: Subject: classified. Date: classified. Trainer: classified. Not very helpful, although about par for something produced by the training department. ‘Classified’ was probably an American version of Compliance’s ‘TBA’ which meant that they hadn’t decided yet. Myhill, who’s in charge of Compliance, doesn’t decide on a lot, except for what sort of biscuits they should have at their meetings.

You can tell a lot about Myhill’s attitude towards you by the biscuits you are offered. If he wants something from you, it’s chocolate digestives all the way, or even full-on chocolate chip cookies if he’s forgotten to do something and wants you to help him cover it up. But if you’re in his bad books because you haven’t finished all your audit action points, you’ll be lucky to get a custard cream.

I opened the booklet. ‘We’re going to be learning industrial espionage today,’ I said to Dylan. A bit more interesting than the previous training session, on how to use the shredder. (You are only supposed to shred paper, no more than five sheets at once, and not cardboard, paperclips or your tie.)

It was just me and Dylan in this early because we work staggered hours – we stagger in at eight and disappear at four. I’ve done it since the year dot to avoid the worst of rush hour. Dylan’s supposed to start at eight so everyone gets their post nice and early. In reality, what happens is that everyone gets *everyone else’s* post nice and early, but at least they can start swapping it over, so the confusion is generally resolved before lunchtime, all ready for the lucky dip of the second delivery.

The training kicks off at nine, and it’s not really worth starting any day-job work first, so we’d gone straight to the training suite. Via the 4th floor, of course, to sneak a cup of proper coffee from the directors’ machine. It’s strictly out of bounds to us riff-raff, but since the ruling class’s car park is bursting with new Jags and Mercs, I think they can afford a few extra bags of Rich Italian Roast. And as they don’t crawl in til gone nine, they’re not around to guard their aromatic treasure.

Brisk footsteps could be heard outside, and the door was opened smartly. It was Matthew from HR, he of the inclusive forms. He looked around suspiciously. He always looks like that, whether he’s actually suspicious or not. I reckon it’s something to do with the way the light bounces off his steel-rimmed glasses.

‘What are you doing?’ he demanded. ‘Are you looking at the manuals? You’re not supposed to do that. You’re supposed to…’

‘We’re learning industrial espionage today,’ I said, to forestall the lecture about pre-training conduct. Normally I can pretty well tune out Matthew’s dulcet whine, but loaded with caffeine from the directors’ carafe, every sense was too switched on.

‘Well, we can’t be because no-one told *me* anything about it,’ he said, his face pinching up. Matthew’s taken the invasion harder than most because there are now two HR departments, and everything he does has to be approved by the American one. ‘Stop being silly. Why…’

‘Says it here,’ I told him, pointing. For a long second, Matthew averted his eyes, reluctant to commit the cardinal sin of Looking At The Training Manuals Before They Had Been Officially Handed Out, but then curiosity got the better of him and he looked. He did more than look; his eyes widened in double -glazed astonishment and he began to leaf through the rest.

‘You’re not supposed to look at the manuals before they’ve been handed out,’ I reminded him, and took another one to have a nose through.

The sound of wheezing could be heard and Myhill came in. He sat near the front, not because he’s keen on training but because it’s not so far to walk. He managed the challenge of wedging himself between desk and chair.

‘We’re learning industrial espionage today,’ I said. Myhill looked at me blankly.

‘What’s that then?’ He took a gulp of his coffee.

Matthew sniffed the air. ‘Is that the directors’ coffee?’ he asked.

‘Noooooo,’ said Myhill, pointing to the plastic cup. None of us were stupid enough to use the luxurious cardboard cups next to the forbidden machine. We used plastic ones filched from the floor below.

‘It means that we’d go to another company that does the same as this one, and get similar jobs to the ones we have here, and find out what they do differently,’ I said.

Myhill thought it through. ‘Does the other company have a canteen?’

‘It’s not an *actual* other company,’ I said. ‘It’s probably telling us what we’d have to do *if* we went there.’

‘Which we’re not,’ said Matthew. ‘Because if we were, then someone should have presented a business case to me, and…’

‘Well, what’s the point in learning something that we’re not going to do?’ asked Dylan.

‘We had to learn the fire stuff, didn’t we?’ I pointed out. ‘And you’re not going to set the building on fire by wedging a bagel in the toaster, are you?’

‘No,’ said Dylan. ‘I don’t like bagels. Horrible, floury things. Why would I toast them when I don’t even like them? Anyway, what’s all this business about drawing faces on tic-tacs?’

Matthew inspected his copy of the manual. ‘It’s a code. It’s what you say to another industrial spy if you want to have a meeting and you don’t want to arouse suspicions.’

Myhill frowned. ‘Well, why don’t you just say, ‘let’s have a meeting’?’ he asked.

‘We don’t all work in Compliance,’ I said. ‘It would be suspicious if Dylan suddenly started wanting to hold meetings.’

‘It would be *more* suspicious if Myhill *wasn’t* calling meetings,’ Matthew agreed. ‘How many meetings did you have yesterday, Myhill? Four?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘It was only one.’

The incomers had a strict policy regarding acceptable meeting frequency, and HR was in charge of monitoring adherence. Anyone found exceeding their quota would have to fill in a meeting justification form every time they wanted to book a meeting room.

‘It *was* four,’ insisted Matthew. ‘I looked in your calendar. ‘Four meetings. One at nine, one at eleven, one at one and one at three.’

‘No it wasn’t!’ Myhill protested. He was anxious to remain an issuer of stupid forms, and not a recipient. ‘The third one was the only *actual* meeting. The second one was the pre-meeting and the first one was a planning session for the pre-meeting. And the fourth one was the post-meeting de-brief.’

Matthew didn’t look convinced. The atmosphere between them had been frosty since Myhill had audited HR and awarded them an amber-starred rating which, if you cut through all the compliance-speak, meant that if they didn’t pick their socks up, they could wave goodbye to a bonus.

‘Is that intern back, then?’ I asked, as that might explain the sudden reckless dalliance with the acceptable meeting frequency threshold. A disconcertingly eager young chap on some sort of work placement periodically did the rounds of the departments. On his first tour of duty, he’d latched onto Myhill and followed him about, peppering him with unanswerable questions on ISO9000 legislation and asking him why he was doing x when the regulations clearly said that he should be doing y. Myhill now found it expedient either to give the kid assignments that involved the archived files in the basement or to fill up his own schedule with meetings.

‘He’s moving onto HR from tomorrow,’ he said, with some satisfaction. *Our* HR. Enjoy, Matthew.’

Dylan was getting bored. ‘So what about this tic tacs business?’ he asked. ‘If we’re supposed to be incognito, won’t we draw attention to ourselves if we start banging on about tic tacs? Why can’t we say something that no-one would pick up on? Like, ‘I see your lads done good on Saturday’. That could mean we want a meeting.’

Myhill furrowed his brow. ‘But you support Forest, Dylan. So if anyone wants to suggest a meeting to you, they can only do it if Forest has won.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Dylan, who wasn’t all that struck on meetings. They tended to involve questions like why all Actuarial’s post was delivered to the top floor, which was home to Marketing, when Actuarial was on the first floor. Although as it turned out, that one had a simple explanation. Dylan thought that it said ‘actual aerial’ and that it was to do with aerials, a top floor delivery being the closest he could get. What was never explained was why Dylan thought that aerials would receive so much post. No harm was really done as Actuarial’s post is mostly comprised of excoriatingly boring professional magazines, circulars about conferences and a surprising volume of adverts from dating websites who have found a captive market and who like a challenge.

‘But we’re not even going,’ I said.

‘We must be,’ said Matthew, who had kept reading. ‘It says it in the training manual.’ Training manuals being one step above the Bible in the chain of command in Matthew’s little world. Only Official HR Policy could trump a training manual.

He showed us the relevant page, and indeed, it did have a ‘date of insertion’, although true to form, it was Classified.

‘Well, they’d better give me an office over there,’ Myhill said. ‘Otherwise I’m not going to go.’

‘You’ve barely got an office at the moment,’ observed Matthew.

This was true enough. Myhill’s belly fought to occupy the same area as his desk in a sliver of space which used to be a sick room and had housed a narrow bed. Under the bed had been two first aid kits. The first had been the official one and had contained all the nonsense that nobody ever needs, like sticking plasters, that funny gauze stuff for burns and triangular bandages. There was also the *unofficial* one housed in a box file which had things you actually wanted, like alka seltzer, headache tablets, pile cream and a rather optimistic condom.

The bed had been removed because our American friends thought that it encouraged ‘the wrong sort of behaviour’. The little room certainly encourages the wrong sort of behaviour now because it allows Myhill to take as long as he likes over the Sun crossword, to pick his nose to his heart’s content and to sleep off his lunch undisturbed.

‘So, no-one can ask me to go to a meeting unless Forest win?’ said Dylan hopefully.

‘We could change the code,’ I suggested. ‘If we want to invite *you* to a meeting, we could say, ‘I see your lads *got caned* on Saturday.’

‘But then we’d have to wait months to ask Myhill to a meeting because he supports Man U,’ Matthew pointed out. ‘And by that time, he might have died from going cold turkey on meetings.’

‘Or starved from lack of biscuits,’ I said.

‘Unless we got Man U to throw a match,’ suggested Dylan.

‘Or unless *you* dump Forest and support Man U while we’re over there,’ Matthew said. ‘Then we can always say the ‘lads done good’ thing.

‘No,’ said Dylan, alarmed. ‘I can’t do that. I’ve got the Forest mug and mouse mat and scarf and everything. They can’t make me, can they?’

‘I think we’re losing sight of our primary objective,’ said Myhill, which was Compliance-speak for ‘I’ve lost the thread of this conversation, so I’m going to start a new one’. ‘We’re supposed to infiltrate the other company and see what they do differently.’

‘Okay then, we need to find out what they do differently,’ repeated Dylan, eager to divert the conversation away from Forest. ‘So firstly we need to find out what *we* do?’

‘You don’t know what we do?’ asked Matthew, pushing his glasses up his nose in disbelief.

‘Good induction program, Matthew,’ put in Myhill. ‘That’s some useful feedback to go in the appendix to my report.’

‘I’m pretty sure we don’t make anything,’ Dylan continued. ‘It’s not noisy enough, and there isn’t enough swearing.’

‘He *really* doesn’t know what we do,’ Myhill said.

‘Well, *no-one* knows what *you* do,’ said Matthew. ‘Except make sure you’re first in the queue for the canteen every day.’

‘But *I* know what *you* do because I wrote a report about it,’ Myhill retorted, ‘And I gave you an amber and not just any old amber but a *starred* amber. Serious operational weaknesses, and…’

‘Hang on,’ interrupted Dylan, ‘If *we’re* going to sneak in over there, what’s to stop *them* sneaking in *over here*? In fact, they might already *be* here, taking notes on us.’

This was a sobering thought.

‘What have you done lately that you wouldn’t want people taking notes on?’ I asked, to the other members of the group.

‘What have *you* done lately *full stop*?’ demanded Matthew, taking the question personally, his colour still high from Myhill’s goading.

‘He’s told people to switch things off and switch them back on again,’ said Myhill.

I wasn’t going to argue with that, because that was pretty well what I did. There was also an inclusivity policy regarding the hiring of IT staff to make sure people who didn’t know much about computers weren’t left out. An advantage of getting in early was that I could fix things before there were any witnesses. For example, if someone’s PC was playing up, I could swap it with an identical one in Accounts that *wasn’t* playing up. And then I *never* had to fix it because the accounts department was in the invaders’ IT jurisdiction. As a result, our reliability stats were a lot better than theirs, so we got a bonus and they didn’t.

‘There was some guy in the post room the other day who claimed to be from Marketing,’ Dylan continued. ‘He wanted me to show him how the franking machine works. Perhaps he was one of *them*, and was trying to find out our secrets.’

‘Secrets?’ scoffed Myhill. ‘*Secrets*? What secrets can you have in the post room, apart from whether to send things first class or second?’

‘Not to put anything in that round hole in the front of the franking machine where the handle used to be unless you want it franked with indelible ink?’ Dylan suggested. ‘Because it’s hard to think of what to write in the accident book?’

‘Well, it says here that we’ve got to assume our new roles and look for intelligence,’ I said.

‘Does it say not to bother looking in the HR department because you won’t find any?’ Myhill asked.

Matthew was getting edgy. ‘Perhaps these training manuals aren’t for us,’ he said. ‘Because someone would have *told* me about it. And if they *were* for us, they ought to have the ‘HR approved’ logo on the back.’

He began gathering them up, returning them to their neat pile.

‘Or HR will get *another* star on their amber rating for failure to produce training material in line with Official HR Policy,’ said Myhill.

‘Imagine if this is top secret,’ said Dylan. ‘If they find out that we’ve looked at it, they’ll have to kill us.’

‘Not unless they’re willing to sort out the procedures and the paperwork first,’ said Matthew sourly. ‘As our recent audit has kindly doubled it’

‘Or we could tell them that only *you* read it and that the rest of us tried to stop you,’ said Myhill.

The door opened and a very smartly suited woman came in. She looked around as if expecting a different audience.

‘Is this room 2.3.1?’ she asked, in a strong American accent.

‘Yes,’ said Matthew. ‘But there’s two of them. There’s this one, and then there’s the one over the other side, in the *other* building.’ This was as helpful as he was prepared to be to one of the usurpers

The woman gathered up the training manuals, looked round at us as if trying to gauge if we’d read them, then she walked out of the office and closed the door quietly behind her.