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The Alibi

by MaryPat Campbell

Discipline and fairness kept Jim afloat. Ex-army and brim full of rules and regulations, he spent his time at work in the PR department of a large packaging company cheerleading, deflecting criticism, managing crises on the shop floor.

Lately, he found himself going into work on Saturdays when the factory was empty. He told himself, and Sally, he liked to keep an eye on the premises, the machinery, the banks of flattened cardboard boxes, the huge rolls of tape and strapping, the supplies of void-filling padding and cushioning.

This was Jim's excuse to drive to the factory, park in the managing director's parking space, let himself into the warehouse and stroll around. His shoes rang on the concrete floor, his hands clasped importantly behind his back, like an army captain surveying his troops. Here, Jim was able to indulge his fantasy that he was in charge, responsible and competent, keeping a look out for signs of trouble.

There was plenty of trouble at home. Bickering voices clamouring for attention. Sally called him a workaholic. Her voice had an edge to it as she teased him for not being able to achieve at home what he could at work; sort out the competing priorities and head off the crises that always threatened. At his worst moments Jim feared that he and Sally might hit their own crisis soon and where would he be then?

One wintry Saturday after a morning at home with more than the usual arguments over jobs that needed doing round the house, who was taking Tilly to swimming and Mike to football, Jim walked out of the house in a rage, got in the car and drove to the factory. He parked, as usual, in the manager's Saturday empty parking space and let himself quietly into the factory, turning off the alarm as he entered. He lit a cigarette to suck in and blow out the comforting taste of smoke in his lungs.

Suddenly the fire alarm went off with a loud whine. Jim dropped his cigarette, stamped it into the concrete floor and ran to switch off the alarm. The fire brigade arrived soon after and the men rushed into the building as Jim hastened to tell them everything was alright, no damage done.

One of the firemen presented him with the stamped out cigarette in his fingers, and asked Jim if he knew anything about it. Jim flushed and went quiet denying all knowledge of it, and tried to look blank. They asked him why he was here on a Saturday morning. He said he'd popped in to collect some documents he needed to work on at home over the weekend.

Jim left as soon as he could and instead of going home drove down to the seafront and sat staring through the rain soaked windshield sick with worry. He knew what it looked like. How on earth had he managed to light up when everyone knew that smoking in a packaging factory was asking for trouble. It was Jim who had set up the rules for the employees on exactly this point, and had insisted on penalties for anyone known to flout them.

No innocent person ever has an alibi, he remembered this from Military School. Now he sat looking out at the choppy harbour trying to concoct a plausible story about what he was doing at the factory on a Saturday morning, and the catastrophic damage he could have caused. How could he tell them about his habit of coming to work on Saturdays to stride round the factory so that he could feel important for a change, parading round like he owned the place, and feel again his longing to be a hero whose job it was to fight and die for his country. Jim had no alibi, how would he get out of this one?