

10:25 am

It is Saturday morning and Edith is driving to the village of Rhyming Fiction, which is the next village to Long Fiction.

Edith has seen posters advertising the opening of a new store of the Supermarket chain Gluten-free Vegan at Rhyming Fiction and that the opening is at 11 am by an unnamed 'surprise celebrity'.

Edith reaches the village of Rhyming Fiction and sees the roadside sign.

RHYMING FICTION

A village where, from time to time,
people like to talk in rhyme.

Edith smiles.

The new supermarket is off to the right and Edith turns into its entrance and parks her car. As Edith gets out of her car she notices the large sign.

Our choice of food is very wide,
Please have a look at what's inside

'They are entering into the fun of it', thinks Edith, and smiles.

A small crowd is already gathering, due perhaps to some combination of wondering who the surprise celebrity might be and the advertising promise of special opening-day offers.

Edith enters the foyer of the new supermarket and notices the long green ribbon across the entrance to the store itself, tied with a bow at each end and in a long graceful curve. The foyer is quite large and people have left a respectable distance between themselves and the ribbon, quietly waiting for the opening event.

There are two men in suits on the other side of the room.

A lady in what looks like it might be the staff uniform, carrying a clipboard, approaches the two men and speaks to the younger one. He follows the lady into the store. Edith notices them talking, the man looks concerned and then follows the lady through a door.

Edith wonders what is happening.

A few minutes later the man returns and speaks to the older man, who then goes with him into the store and through the same door.

The door leads to the Manager's Office, the younger man is the Store Manager, the older man is the Area Manager. The lady is still in the office.

"I've just had a telephone call from her agent. She's not coming."

"What, it is almost time for the opening!"

"Well he's very apologetic about it and seems very annoyed at her. Apparently she rang him just before he rang me and said she'd had a telephone call on her way here and been offered a last-minute opportunity to appear on a live television show and so she had accepted and asked the driver to turn the car round and go to the television studio. There was apparently nothing he could do about it as the driver is her employee, not his. Indeed he seemed both embarrassed and furious and indeed said that she would be needing to find a new agent, and added that he would have liked to have sent someone else but there was no way to get anyone here for quite a while."

"So what do we do now?"

"Well, I suppose that you could do the opening, as Area Manager."

"Well, not really, it would look bad if after advertising a surprise celebrity it was the Area Manager."

A pause.

The lady with the clipboard speaks.

"May I make a suggestion?"

"Please do", says the Area Manager.

"There is a crowd of people out there, maybe one of them could do it."

"That sounds good, but it might be risky, someone might be an observer from a competitor, that would not look good in a publicity photograph in a trade magazine, we could look very foolish. And what if someone, faced with an audience watching them, got into a muddle."

"Well, yes, but I would not ask just anyone, I would try to find someone who might be used to addressing meetings - maybe a schoolteacher or someone like that."

"I suppose it might be worth a try go on then, it might seem better to have a female doing the asking maybe best to try to find a female to perform the opening."

The lady then leaves the office and walks back to the foyer and has what she hopes is a discreet look at the people gathered there.

The lady notices, to her right, Edith, smartly dressed in a white suit.

'She looks like she might be able to make a good job of it, the green ribbon with that white suit as a background would make a good photograph - but I need to make sure that she is not from a competitor.'

She looks around and sees Caroline Appleby some distance away to her left.

She lifts the ribbon and walks over to Caroline.

"Excuse me, can I ask, do you know who is that lady in the white suit?"

"Possibly, I'll ask her", says Caroline as she walks over to Edith.

The lady with the clipboard thinks 'Oh dear, I did not realize that that would happen!'

"Good morning ma'am, ... the lady with the clipboard asked me if I knew who you are, so I said 'Possibly, I'll ask her', and so here I am."

"Good morning."

Edith notices the lady with the clipboard, who is looking rather embarrassed and concerned and goes over to her.

"Good morning, I'm Edith Gatford, how may I help?"

This puts the lady with the clipboard at her ease as she feared a possible angry confrontation.

"Hello, I'm Margaret Johnson, ... we have a bit of a problem in that the surprise celebrity has cancelled at the last minute and I am wondering if can find someone who might save the day for us and open the store ... but - well I don't want to seem rude - but ... I need to make sure that it is not someone who is here as an observer for one of our competitors."

"Ah, yes, well, if it helps, my employment is as Secretary-General of a research organization that is researching on communication through the language barrier - we are an independent organization - it is not part of any of your competitors at all. I try to take an interest in the research but my job is basically as an administrator."

"Like a Chief Executive?"

"Indeed."

"So you are alright about addressing a group?"

"Yes, it is part of the job."

"Would you be willing to help us out please?"

"Well, if I can, I'm here, it depends what you want me to do."

"Well, would you be willing to come to the office and have a chat with the Area Manager please - I'll be there too."

"Very well, I'll gladly hear what he wants done."

“Thank you.”

With that, Margaret lifts the ribbon and they both go under it and go towards the Manager’s Office.

‘This looks interesting’, thinks Caroline, who has seen, but not heard, the discussion between Edith and Margaret.

The Manager’s Office.

Margaret introduces the Area Manager and the Store Manager to Edith.

The Area Manager speaks.

“Well, Ms Gatford, the truth of the matter is that the surprise celebrity has let us down and cancelled in the last few minutes. Basically we are wondering if you might perform the opening for us. We will pay you a reasonable fee.”

“Well, I am flattered, and I will if you wish open your store for you, though I must not accept a fee or anything else for doing it. I am, however, happy, subject to our agreeing to what is to be done, to do it to help you out, just on the basis of being a member of the public who happened to be at the opening when the problem of a no-show arose.”

A pause.

“Very well, no fee. We would just like you to say a few words of welcome to everyone and to cut the ribbon. Our photographer can take a photograph for a press release.”

“Well, it seem a bit of a pity to cut such a nice long piece of ribbon, could I just untie it at both ends and then you could give it whole to the Rhyming Fiction Museum of Local Life?”

“Well, we are rather wanting a photograph of the cutting for the press release.”

“What if I pose for the picture, then hand back the scissors and untie the ribbon?”

A pause.

“Oh alright.”

“And in the press release you may mention my name, but not my employment just that I am a local person who was here to watch the opening ceremony and whom you asked to help out when the planned surprise celebrity cancelled.”

“Yes alright.”

A pause.

“So,” says Margaret, “good, all agreed, the show can go on. Shall we go then?”

Edith and Margaret turn towards the door, with Edith ready to perform the opening ceremony.

“There’s just one thing” says the Area Manager.

They pause. The Area Manager gets a printed sheet of paper from his briefcase.

“Could you just sign this form please, just write your name and address at the top and then sign and date it, it is all in order.”

“What is it?” asks Edith.

“Oh it just gives permission for us to use the photograph in a press release, it’s all in order, it just needs filling in and signing and dating.”

“I will need to read it before I sign it.”

“Well, time is pressing - it is all in order.”

“Nevertheless.”

Edith reads it.

“What’s this, Indemnity from me to your company over your paying for legal expenses if any third party makes any claim, whether by formal legal action or otherwise, about my performance! I’m not signing that!”

“It’s just a requirement from head office if anyone who is not our employee represents the company.”

“It’s your head office, not mine. No, I am not signing it.”

“It’s harmless.”

“It might be harmless to you, but it puts my house and savings at risk. No way, I am not signing it.”

“Well, I can’t allow you to do the opening unless you sign it.”

“That is a matter for you. You asked me to do it to help you out. Forget it.”

“You’ve let me down.”

Margaret intervenes, speaking to the Area Manager.

“How dare you! It was all agreed and we were ready to go and then you brought that stupid form into it and ruined the whole thing.”

“Don’t you speak to me in that manner, you are only the secretary to a store manager, behave yourself.”

“I am not ‘only’ anything. I am carrying out what was described at my interview as an important and responsible role. Do not try to label me as ‘only’ anything. And do not think that what I do at work is all that I can do either!”

The Area Manager looks very annoyed at this.

“Now you see here young woman, if you continue like that then then then you are clearly very self-confident and articulate - you can open the store.”

“Me! I’m not signing that document.”

“You don’t need to, you are an employee. You need to get ready, you’re on in five minutes.”

Edith speaks. “The leaflet through my letterbox mentions a clothing section, perhaps you might be allowed to get an outfit there - I’ll come and advise you if you like.”

Margaret replies “Well, alright, thank you, do you have any ideas of what would be good?”

“A stylish suit like someone might wear as a guest at a summer wedding, smart but not upstaging the bride. And maybe the Store Manager can convince the Area Manager to let you keep it as your own afterwards, at no cost, as a thank you.”

The Store Manager looks at the Area Manager.

“Oh very well, you drive a hard bargain Ms Gatford. Well done. Off you both go, try not to take too long.”

Margaret and Edith leave the office.

“Well, if the store gets opened and we move on, well, it’s worth the cost”, says the Area Manager.

After a while, Edith and Margaret return. Margaret is now wearing a styling, quite expensive suit in a delicate pink colour, a colour that the label describes as ‘Rootstock Rose.’

Margaret performs the opening ceremony well, explaining that she is a store employee who has stepped in at the last minute due to the unfortunate unavailability of the planned surprise celebrity.

Margaret then takes the scissors, holds them by the ribbon while some photographs are taken, then says that it is a pity to cut the ribbon, hands the scissors to the Store Manager, and then goes and unties the ribbon at both ends and thanks publicly the Area Manager for agreeing to donate the ribbon to the Rhyming Fiction Museum of Local Life.

The Area Manager feels a bit annoyed at this, as the promise was intended just for Ms Gatford, but when a female voice from the audience calls out “Well done” and some people clap, he realizes that that is good for the company image and smiles graciously.

Margaret declares that the store is open.

Edith claps and everyone joins in and people enter the store and start to look at what is on offer.

‘I recognise the voice that called out’, thinks Edith and turning to her right sees Caroline smiling at her from the other side of the foyer in a self-satisfied manner.