

Edith enters the foyer at the research centre to speak to Georgina, who is on duty as receptionist.

The doors that lead to the computing laboratory fly open as Caroline Ruralby and Caroline Appleby burst through, heading for the main entrance. Caroline Appleby looks quite distressed as if she has been crying.

As they head across the car park Edith is concerned.

John enters the foyer.

“Don’t worry, she’s alright, she’s happy, the emotion has got to her.”

“My office?”

Edith’s office. Both Edith and John are stood.

“So, from the top please.”

“The telephone rang. I answered it. Georgina. Personal call for Ms Appleby. Caroline to the telephone. The rest of us kept quiet. ‘Yes, please put her through. Yes, straight away, Bye.’, Caroline looks at me as if about to speak, then bursts into tears. Being male and older I did not know what to do, but fortunately Caroline Ruralby went over to her. It appears that Caroline, Caroline Appleby, has a boyfriend. They met at university and after graduation they decided to marry, but he was involved in some accident that was not his fault and has been in a coma since. Well apparently his mother rang to say that he has woken up and asked if she would like to visit him. So she asked me if she could go and I said ‘Yes’ I know I should have asked you, but”

“Yes, fine, you did the right thing.”

“Anyway, Caroline Ruralby told her that she was in no fit state to drive and offered to take her and Caroline accepted. She asked where he is and Caroline said ‘In the hospital at Eaglechester’, then Caroline Ruralby asked me if she could go and I said ‘Yes’ I know that as an observer she did not need to ask me, but I just said ‘Yes’ and they got their coats and headed for the door. As they were leaving Caroline Appleby said ‘Can you tell ma’am please?’ and I said ‘Yes’, and here I am.”

“Well, if she rings tell her she can have as much time as she needs as compassionate leave.”

“Right. That’s good of you.”

“So, maybe she’ll back tomorrow, maybe next week, maybe never. Time will tell.”

A pause.

“A strange thing, she referred to you as ‘ma’am’, not as ‘Ms Gatford’ or ‘the Secretary-General’. I’ve often heard some of them address you as ‘ma’am’, but I had never known until now of you being referred to as ‘ma’am’. I wonder where it came from, it is not in the staff handbook.”

“Rose.”

“Rose your secretary?”

“Yes. After I had appointed you and Henry, the next person appointed was Rose. Then, except for Edward, everyone appointed has been shown into my office by Rose, who has always addressed me as ‘ma’am’ when doing so. People seem to have followed her lead as the culture of the research centre. I must admit I feel quite flattered.

“I’ll tell you something, just between us, to go no further.”

“Right.”

“Well, when I interviewed Rose she told me that we had met before. I didn’t remember.

Flashback to Rose’s interview.

“It was when you had a previous job and you visited where I worked.

“The receptionist was a lippy young woman. She was me. Looking back I feel awful about it, I was so rude. I’m sorry.”

Edith remembers, but says nothing.

“You arrived and said to me ‘Edith Gatford, to see Mr Albert’ and I replied with ‘Mr Albert isn’t available, you’ll have to see Mr Watson’, but you remained poised and replied nonchalantly ‘Ah, yes, I’ll be pleased to see Mr Watson’.

“Afterwards I was telling Ms Hove and she, very calmly, explained that I should not have spoken to you like that but that I should have said something like ‘Unfortunately Mr Albert isn’t available, would you be willing to see Mr Watson please?’

“After that Ms Hove acted as my mentor and encouraged me to go to evening classes and I learned shorthand and wordprocessing, and I earned a lot of wordprocessing certificates, including the French and German ones, and the specialist medical and legal ones. With Ms Hove’s guidance I became polite, efficient and courteous.”

The flashback ends.

Edith smiles.

Later.

Edith is explaining what happened with Caroline, on a confidential need-to-know basis, to Rose and Georgina.

“What was the name of the person who rang Caroline?” Edith asks Georgina.

“Primrose Appleby.”

‘Strange,’ thinks Edith ‘I am sure John said it was the boyfriend’s mother who rang.’