

Mr Wallace was the epitome of supply teaching mediocrity. He wasn't a master of his art, nor was he appalling. He did his job to the best of his ability, which was adequate. He dressed almost exclusively in Cotton Traders, and had even penned a request to visit the company's packing factory to see where relatives of his wardrobe were born, but had been denied. He had discovered early in his career that a splash of corduroy could pep up any outfit, but there was such a thing as 'too much' tweed.

He maintained his affiliation with the shades of beige and orange that were so befitting of the era of his heyday, the swinging seventies. His taste in music had

not mellowed over the years either; his dance-floor dispersing weapon of choice was still Jethro Tull's Aqualung.

Despite harbouring a genuine enthusiasm for teaching disinterested prepubescent teens about the industrial revolution, it did not compare to the thrill of ending a man's life. This was something Mr Wallace did on a regular basis.

Mild mannered, middle-aged and with an air of being quite unremarkable, no one had guessed his sinister secret. Yes, Mr Wallace was a hit-man, and one of the finest in the business. He kept himself to himself in the staffroom, so colleagues wouldn't question how his collection of ancient coins was worth nearly six figures, despite his meagre supply teacher's wage. No one knew that after a series lessons he was about to purchase his private pilot's license, or that every school holiday he went on a luxury wine tasting cruise. The closest call he'd had was when he'd popped out on a quick job one lunch time, and had uncharacteristically forgotten to wear his gloves. He realised to his horror that he'd left a smear of gunshot residue on the deputy head teacher's Star Wars mug, but fortunately managed to rinse it off before anyone noticed.

His extensive collection of guns and silencers were kept at home, nestling in a leather hold-all alongside back issues of the Angling Times. He liked to while away his evenings in front of Autumn Watch with a nice glass of pinot noir, dismantling and polishing one of his many sniper-rifles. It was a pretty fulfilling life: day-times spent teaching surly teenagers about history and geography, and in his free time being paid handsomely to rid the world of bad people.

But right now Mr Wallace had a problem, and was doing his best to stay calm. His latest job had been relatively straight-forward. It was his speciality, the 'clean hit'. This was a swift and discreet service that included disposing of the body: the target would simply disappear. The reason for its popularity with customers was because a missing person case won't get as many police hours as a murder, so less questions would be asked. For a minimal extra cost the Agency threw in the purchase of a plane ticket with the deceased's credit card and theft of his or her passport, which was more likely to make the disappearance an open and shut case. This represented excellent value, and in fact very few could deliver such a professional service, whilst matching the Agency's prices. They had an excellent reputation, for both efficiency and customer service.

Mr Wallace offered a turn-around time of six to eight weeks, which he would spend researching the routine and habits of the target. It would cost more to have the hit carried out on a designated day, and for a significantly greater fee he could even pin the murder on someone else. This involved leaving a body and planting evidence, before having a quick whizz around the crime scene with his Black & Decker Dustbuster. A hand-held portable vacuum cleaner is every discerning hit-man's best friend. You only needed to watch half as much CSI as he did to know that the tiniest hair fibre or crumb of DNA could link a suspect to the scene. His black leather lambskin gloves were also a must. They not only guarded against accidental fingerprints, but his were cashmere-lined for a touch of luxury.

Today's target was a professional con-man, who'd spent an illustrious career parting pensioners from their hard-earned savings. This meant the job did not compromise the Agency's strict ethos of only doing away with the morally incomprehensible. They always carried out thorough checks to ensure every assignment met these criteria, which was what had first attracted Mr Wallace to work with them. He'd had quite enough of freelancing when he was recruited; he couldn't bear the tax returns for one.

A target with a night-time habit like going for a run or taking the dog for a walk after dusk made the job much easier. Darkness had fallen, and Mr Wallace had waited until the low-life in question had returned home with his border collie at his side. It was a myth that dogs provided a problem, most would only attack if they felt threatened. As such Mr Wallace's mannerisms were never outwardly hostile, and he rarely went anywhere without a pocketful of Bonio.

As usual he waited until the key was in the front-door, before swiftly dispensing a lethal cocktail of barbiturates (causing instant loss of consciousness) and potassium chloride (to stop the heart and induce cardiac arrest) into the base of the neck, via a syringe. Quick, painless and humane. He didn't believe anyone deserved to suffer, no matter what they'd done. He'd once delivered a nasty Chinese burn to a target that he had inadvertently got into a scuffle with, back when he was a rookie. He wasn't proud.

The body sagged against him as he pushed open the door, closing it only after administering a couple of dog biscuits and an affectionate ear ruffle. If the target lived alone he would not leave the premises without locating and refilling the animal's food bowl. He didn't know how long it would take for the owner to be reported

missing, and he didn't want a staving canine on his conscience. Animal cruelty was one of his pet hates.

He checked the coast was clear, before dragging the body outside and easing it into the back seat of his car. It was another misconception that hit-men shoved their quarry into the boot. It was just too incriminating. If someone was to notice a prostate figure on the back seat it could generally pass as a slumbering passenger, who was ill or had had too much to drink. (A means of death with minimal or no blood is obviously essential.) But if you were spotted loading or unloading a body into the boot of your car, it just smacked of wrong-doing.

He turned the key in the ignition, and to his horror his Honda Accord (purchased for its fuel efficiency and quality of its electric power assisted steering) refused to start. He couldn't believe it; the engine cranked but it just refused fire up! One of his golden rules is to get his car serviced regularly. Breaking down when you're on a job can have catastrophic consequences. He knew he was due an MOT any day now, and cursed himself for not booking it in. He had meant to do it last week, but had been distracted by the discovery of some Neolithic remains on Time Team.

He tried cranking the engine with the accelerator down, in case he'd flooded the engine. He soon gave up, in case the noise draw attention to himself and his cargo. His mind raced. He considered calling the AA, but swiftly dismissed the idea. The figure slumped in the back may not necessarily alert suspicion, but he didn't want to tempt fate. He could also not run the risk of anyone being able to identify him or his car, and pin him to the time and place of the target's disappearance. Another option was to drag the body back inside, riddle it with bullets and make it look like a botched burglary. This would open up a different can of worms entirely: he would have to actually 'steal' things, which would then have to be returned. He was also likely to incur a serious penalty from the agency, for deviating from the agreed modus operandi. A slip up like that could seriously damage their impeccable reputation. Plus the client could not be expected to pay the full quoted price, (half the fee was paid upfront and half upon completion on the job) and the difference would be docked from Mr Wallace's pay. It also left him with the issue of how to get his car off the premises, as the moment the neighbours heard gunfire the place would be teeming with witnesses.

No, the only thing for it was to find alternative transport, and fast. Then it hit him: he was only half a mile

from the school. He could borrow the school mini bus that was used to cart the football and cross-country teams around!

He covered the corpse up to its neck with the tartan blanket he kept in the boot, so if a passer-by should peer into car they would think it was someone sleeping off a heavy night, or perhaps demoted to the car for spousal misdoings. He then set off at a brisk trot in the direction of the school.

Less than ten minutes later and there it was, his salvation, parked up outside the school gates. It's believed that hit-men are master criminals, but the reality is that few have the time and resource to develop more than a handful of illegal skills. Whereas many vocations allow you to be a 'jack of all trades', in this business it's much better to have specialist expertise. However, for emergency getaways the ability to break into and hotwire cars is essential. A hired assassin who is not well versed in the art of automobile theft would be like an accountant without GCSE maths. It wasn't ideal to have to break the law again this evening; when bumping someone off it's best to keep related misdemeanours to a minimum. But these were extenuating circumstances.

A deft tap to the window with a hammer (part of the emergency tool kit he always carried with him) and he was in. Getting the ancient thing moving would be trickier. The quickest and most rudimentary method of starting a motor vehicle without a key is to use a screwdriver or pencil in the ignition. Luck was not on his side – this didn't work. So he resorted to the classic 'hotwire' technique. This was not complicated, but had to be executed properly or it could lead to a nasty electric shock. He set to work delicately stripping back the insulation of the correct wires under the dashboard. Nowadays most cars have the ignition switch built into the steering column, which would have made life much easier. But it wasn't long before the minibus spluttered to life and he was en route back to the scene of the crime.

He bundled the body in through the minibus's side door and onto one of the rows of seats. Next stop was his garage, covered at the ready with plastic sheeting. There he would dismember the cadaver with his lightweight electric band-saw, and dissolve the parts in tubs of extremely corrosive hydrofluoric acid.

He would also have to go back for his car, which fortunately was parked midway up the summit of a hill. He would release the handbrake and freewheel to the bottom of the road, before pushing the car as far as he could to

safety. He would then leave it a few days before calling the AA.

Usually he would take great care to adhere to the speed limit so as not to draw any unnecessary attention to himself, but this evening his nerves were in tatters. His car breaking down was stressful enough, but he also knew he was covering Year 11 geography first thing in the morning and at this rate he wouldn't have time to finish his lesson plan. He knew he shouldn't have left it to the last minute.

To his horror as he was circumnavigating the roundabout at the end of the high street, the shrill blast of a police siren filled the air and his mirror was illuminated by flashing blue lights. Glancing at the dashboard, he realised he had been doing almost 80. His heart sank. What are the chances of running into a patrol car whilst careering through town in the dead of night in a school minibus, with a smashed window and a corpse in the back? Just his luck. There was no other traffic on the road, which allowed him to slam the brakes on as hard as he could. The dull thud of the body rolling off the seats and hitting the floor was sweet music to his ears: here it would be out of the eye-line of an inquisitive cop. He quickly disconnected the wires to stop the engine, and

tossed his cable knit cardigan over the dashboard so one arm draped down over the ignition.

The policewoman pulled over alongside him and got out of her car. Mr Wallace prayed she wouldn't notice the huge damp patches of perspiration emanating from his armpits, alluding to his guilt.

"Bit late for a school tip isn't it?" asked the policewoman, surveying the minibus.

Mr Wallace smiled nervously. "I'm a teacher at the school," he explained.

"Would you care to explain why you were doing nearly double the speed limit?" she continued, eyeing the broken window suspiciously. "And what happened there?"

Mr Wallace had winged many lessons in his supply teaching career, and was used to thinking on his feet. For example he had never been 100% clear on the exact names or order of the Chinese dynasties, and several times he had resorted to making something up on the spot and had yet to be caught out.

"I got a call from the school secretary saying joy-riders must have stolen the minibus, and then abandoned it," he said, feeling perspiration beading at his brow and running in rivulets down his back. "It should really be up

to the caretaker or one of the PE teachers to collect it but one of them is on holiday and she couldn't get hold of the others. I'm the only other person with the key, so she called me. I'm just taking it back to the school now."

He hoped the young officer wouldn't comment on the fact that he was hurtling down the high street in the exact opposite direction of the high school, nor would she glance at the dashboard. And he certainly hoped the body in the back didn't choose this moment to release any stinking secretions, or tell-tale noisy emissions of gas. Corpses were prone to make all kinds of sounds and smells when the muscles had relaxed. And the bacteria inside your gut don't die when you do; they continue to break things down, produce gases and generally move things along.

He made sure he maintained excellent eye contact during his fib, as he knew full well that glancing to the left could suggest that he was using his imagination rather than his memory. The officer seemed happy enough with his story, and let him go with a fixed penalty of £60 and three points on his licence.

When he was eventually able to pull away he made sure that he stuck to a sensible speed. Upon his return home he hauled the cadaver, which was rapidly

stiffening as rigor mortis set in, into his garage. He would have to dispose of it later; right now he had to get rid of the minibus. It was teeming with trace evidence and he didn't have time to do a thorough onceover with the Dustbuster.

He clambered back into the driver's seat, and set off for the wasteland behind the cycle park. It was a hotspot for joyriders, travellers and general non-law abiders, as it was a little way off the beaten track. To his dismay the fuel display was skirting perilously close to empty. He desperately hoped the tank would have enough diesel to get him to his destination, as he couldn't risk filling her up at a petrol station and being unwittingly recorded on CCTV.

But for the second time that fateful evening, his luck just about held out and the minibus shuddered to a stop just out of sight of the road. He doused the vehicle liberally inside and out with the two bottles of lighter fluid he had grabbed at home, before retreating to a safe distance. He used his zippo pipe-lighter in brushed chrome to set a dry twig alight, which he tossed towards the abandoned minibus.

Relief flooded through him as he sprinted away from the flares, wanting to be well out of the way before

what was left in the fuel tank ignited. His lungs burned and his heart hammered in his chest. Cursing the amount of cholesterol in his diet, he soon slowed to a trudge. He knew there was a risk that the police woman would identify him and link him with the crime. But he could claim that the joy-riders came back for the minibus, and there was little chance of any meaningful evidence being rescued from its blackened carcass. He was also confident that his forgettable bespectacled face and inoffensive dress sense would render him an unlikely suspect for the grand theft auto and arson he had just committed.

What a night! He couldn't wait to sit down with a nice cup of tea, then slide into a hot soapy bath. He hoped he had remembered to set his Sky Plus box for Cash in the Attic....