

# Full Cycle

Inspired by and  
dedicated to happy family holidays.

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# Chapter 1

On a traffic island in the outskirts of Geneva was an enormous dining room chair. The chair stood tall by anybody's standard: gigantic. Measuring it by eye would be easiest in double decker buses. It was perhaps two or three high, with a broken leg. In spite of the broken leg – broken off and missing – it stood squarely on smoothly laundered grass on the roundabout at the end of our road. I passed it every day on the way to the office.

I had passed it so many times that its appearance was no longer of any note. It was scarcely more remarkable than the neat modern apartment blocks and tree lined roads. It blended in with the lamp standards and direction signs, the parking meters and the traffic lights. It posed less importance than the *tabac* sign outside the newsagent where my subscription for the Figaro, the FT and the Daily Telegraph was as usual overdue. In the same way that figures, funding and finance were part of my working day, the chair was part of my everyday life.

My everyday life revolved around the internationally renowned, highly respectable accountancy establishment of Andrew Underhand. Their widespread esteem and longstanding reliability was a household by-word and I liked to think that my own reputation reflected these putative sentiments.

They were sentiments that my father held dear and although not following exactly in his footsteps, it is surely thanks to his rigid adherence to ideals and strict moral principles that I can boast of my present venerable position.

My father, Simon Clive Down, was a major in the Queen's Own Riflemen and amongst his undisputed beliefs and confirmed prejudices was an immovable faith in the benefit of independent education. The little known private school to which he chose to send me was momentarily in the public eye when its matron, attempting to avenge the headmaster's termination of their illicit affair, set fire to a recently completed science block.

Another of my father's peculiarly idiosyncratic beliefs concerned names, and the important part they can play in influencing an individual's achievement level and ultimately determining their failure or success.

It is unclear though, if my designated moniker indicates in my father a distinct lack of sensibility or reveals an inkling of an otherwise well-hidden sense of humour. My name is Neil. One Christian name only; short and unaffected. My full name: Neil Down.

Traffic this morning was circulating like corpuscles through a faulty tricuspid valve. Cholesterol was building up rapidly. At ten to nine, impervious to flexitime, there was an eagerness of movement that would warm the heart of a mountain goatherd. Would-be commuters were homing in on personalised parking places and from the comfort of real leather upholstery and tinted electric windows, I cursed at the cretinous actions of lesser drivers carving their way round the roundabout.

Evidently the guy in the metallic red Subaru had yet to discover the whereabouts of his indicator switch. As I compensated for his deficiencies with drastic use of the brake pedal, my attention was further distracted by a sudden movement from behind the sound front leg of the dining room

chair. A male figure appeared to lurch and almost fall before articulating across the grass in the fashion of an Indian fakir on a bed of burning hot coals. With a final leap he achieved a running landing on the base plate of his *Trottinette électrique* spectacularly intersecting the nose of the Beamer and the Subaru's rear number plate.

John Poulter glided effortlessly away as if taking part in the European Speed Skating Championships, weaving expertly amidst the slow moving cars soon to become indistinguishable from the distant changing traffic lights. I knew it was him, the shiny bastard; who else would go to work wearing day-glow orange and lime Lycra tights and carrying a metal bottle with long plastic drinking tube.

By the time I reached the office, John was already established behind his desk, no evidence of physical exertion, a picture of professional competence. He was dressed now in an elegant pin-striped suit, button down collar and Paisley pattern tie. His fair hair fell casually over innocent blue eyes as he gazed with composed efficiency at the screen of his laptop.

'Late as usual.' He looked up impassively as I put my briefcase down on the adjoining desk. We shared the far end of an open plan workspace on the tenth floor of a modest twenty storey block just off the *Quai de la Poste*. From the plate glass windows you could look down on trams rattling along the *Quai*, the darkly flowing Rhone and the ornamental fountain fluming its ceaseless jet of water skywards beside the *Pont du Mont Blanc*.

The lake stretched away into the distance its parameters lost in an Autumnal haze. The snow-capped Alps were barely

discernible through a bank of low cloud settled around the far end of the water. But today the view was wasted on me.

‘It’s called flexitime,’ I retorted, removing my glasses to wipe away a smear of condensation with the bottom of my tie. ‘It’s designed to facilitate the dictates of a fluctuating work load.’ If Penny had been more cooperative this morning my contact lenses might have turned up. ‘To accommodate varying peak performance targets throughout the day, starting and finishing times must be flexible.’

John snapped his laptop shut, focussed his attention my way.

‘That’s more than your muscles are, Neil.’ He pushed back on his swivel chair, eyeing me critically. ‘You’re so unfit you can hardly flex a forefinger. You’re developing a gourmet’s gut.’

Veronique, our shared secretary was watching, fingers poised above her keyboard. I glanced down at my waist, at the straining buttons of my Dolce and Gabanna shirt. ‘Penny had the Seimens on the wrong cycle, that’s all. It was too hot.’

But he was right; ascending from the basement car park, even by the lift, brought out beads of sweat on my forehead and an embarrassing redness to glistening cheeks. At thirty four, long working hours and an expense account diet were having a twofold effect on me. Finances had never been healthier; but it wasn’t only the pounds in my bank account that were on the increase. Physically I was a wreck.

‘It’s middle age spread.’ John insisted. He could be really annoying. ‘You’re getting fat.’

I could have kicked the bastard. Being one of the few other English members of staff his companionship was usually to be appreciated. Today was an exception. ‘Anyway, you were only looking at porn before I arrived.’



I liked John yet he could be so annoying. Making friends had never come readily to me so it seemed appropriate, being the only two Brits on the same floor, to cultivate at least some sort of understanding, a flair for camaraderie, something more than mere colleagues. There were aspects of John which reminded me of a friend whom at the time, if questioned on the matter, I would have presented as my best friend. Gareth, as he was called, was vaguely related though I'd never worked out the exact genealogy. His existence had always been common knowledge but it wasn't until the age of nine or so that I first became acquainted with him.

We were attending some relative's funeral at the time, or it might have been a wedding; a large family affair regardless, where children filled with sausage rolls and trifle soon became ignored by a generation of adults filled with self-interest and alcohol.

Gareth was nearly two years older than me and as such, at my impressionable age, became a new found mentor of startling ability and superior knowledge. Discovering me idly dipping paper serviettes into an apparently lethal homemade punch he drew me to the secret confines of a securely locked lavatory and began teaching me to whistle.

From then on, such was his influence over me – an influence with the subtleties of subliminal advertising, the blatant persuasiveness of a Taiwanese lap dancer – I would have followed him like an eager duckling to the brink of a raging weir. Like a fanatical football enthusiast I would have been led willingly or otherwise, to places of inexcusable peril, to perform feats of immeasurable daring or grotesque stupidity. But that was all many years ago, laid aside and long forgotten. For various reasons we had lost touch, gone our separate

ways, drifted apart. Eventually we ceased even to recognise each-other's existence. Now he was barely a memory.

John's comments this morning were as welcome as a peptic ulcer. He was ridiculing me in front of Veronique, the lovely Veronique. Veronique of the sultry eyes and smouldering lips, the sexy little numbers and Mediterranean passions. God, how I fancied her. But then, there weren't many women under the age of forty who didn't seem attractive these days. Not many that is, except for Penny. Somehow Penny had come to epitomise all that I found tedious and dull.

Our relationship had slipped into a marriage of convenience which on reflection was not even convincingly convenient. If anything it seemed that it was I who was being made a convenience. I provided financial support, gave more than my fair share of attention to domestic duties and spent as much time as possible fulfilling a fatherly role. Penny, though devoted, rarely lent support in any way since her devotions were directed solely toward the Lopino Stud Farm. Although it was she who was the expert in riding, it seemed it was I who was being taken for a ride.

Penny had been the girl next door, my childhood sweetheart, the sister of my best friend at school and the first member of the opposite sex to have intercourse with me. She also possessed a consuming obsession with horses, or ponies – call them what you will, provided they needed mucking out, grooming and a domineeringly forceful hand.

Though harbouring what can only be construed as an in bred mistrust of horses, I had been the one most easily persuaded to carry the shovel, to hold the bit, to pass the brush. But then, I was in love with Penny, besotted by her natural ability, her psych and physique, and in the same way

that she coerced all her obedient mounts, she had taken me confidently by the bridle and, walking with measured rein, led me by way of the aisle to the bridal suite.

We honeymooned in Geneva, in the diplomatic rooms of the Grande Metropole Hotel with magnificent views of the Lake and the snow-capped mountains beyond. The scenery was breath taking, the cuisine and service unparalleled and Penny visited the famous Arabian Stud Farm of Lopino. That same year, six months later, she received her most special Christmas present a week early. On the seventeenth of December Julia Anna Louise, our first born, came into the World.

From early on Julia developed a precociousness far in advance of her age. After just four more years she was already exhibiting familial traits as she played with her new baby brother, removing the batteries from his musical potty to use in her *My Little Pony* trap and awaiting the advent of her latest sibling, as yet only a growing bump in her mother's tummy.

Career prospects rather than consideration to earlier nuptials dictated the abandonment of England in favour of semi-permanent residency in Switzerland. Here, my insufferably long hours and devoted attention to duty would hopefully claw me further up the ladder of success. The long carpeted corridor leading to Andrew Underhand's boardroom was supporting family and friends in the manner to which they had become accustomed, feeding fuel into the BMW and paying for Penny's not infrequent visits to the Lopino Stud.

But the embryo developing in my wife's womb was developing no more rapidly than a deep seated dissatisfaction lurking almost subconsciously in my own inner sanctum.

Suppressed, and until now ignored, there evolved with equal inevitability a determined desire for change, an insatiable urge to break out, an insurgent seed of disruptive revolution.

‘She’s feeding you too well.’ John could not leave the subject alone. ‘Mothers you, does she?’

He was near enough my own age but had resisted the advances of an endless string of females wanting to marry him. His father had been a vicar and whether parental pressure had any bearing on the matter or not, John now used women as other people used paper handkerchiefs.

‘You must be joking,’ I said, ‘if we don’t eat out, it’s usually me who cooks. Penny’s idea of preparing a meal is hitting the defrost button on the microwave. But we have booked a babysitter and reserved a table for two at *La Grenouille* on the Rue *St Honoré* for tonight. You know, that intimate little candlelit place near the Cathedral? Thought we might try to rekindle some of the flickering flames of passion, revitalise our wavering relationship, get close to each other again.’

‘You mean you need a shag.’

I was taking off my jacket. I draped it round the back of the chair choosing to ignore John’s remark; giving it the rejection it deserved.

‘Oh,’ he added casually as I bent down to throw the mains switch on my computer, ‘Ramon wants you.’

‘Now?’ Taken by surprise.

John began leafing through his desk diary, checking on appointments. ‘As soon as possible, he said. I believe it’s important.’

Michel André Ramon, to credit him with his full title, was also affectionately known as the Fat Controller; not for any obscure reasons connected remotely to railways but because

of the size of his girth. Not only was he in overall charge of Geneva, he was a dominant share holder with a casting vote on the Board in America. Such was my dizzying rise to power that he was also my immediate superior.

I slipped my arms once more into hand sewn worsted and straightened my tie. 'I'd better get going then.'

Ramon's office, if the term is not misleading, was little less than a luxury penthouse, enjoying panoramic views of the City and surrounding countryside, and benefiting from an adjoining billiard room and ensuite jacoozi. To reach this level of opulence, a pass key was necessary. Without this, arrival at the twentieth floor was impossible. The lift only had nineteen buttons. I was one of the privileged few to hold one of these magical tokens.

I hesitated, before knocking boldly on the door, and entered without waiting. The Fat Controller admired confidence in a man as much as deference. Besides, Claudia, his doting secretary had already waved me through.

'Sit down my boy.' He was arranged behind a polished mahogany desk, his gross backside wedged into a groaning leather bound armchair. The room smelt of stale cigar smoke and was ornately adorned with what to my inexperienced eye, might have been furnishings of the late Italianate style.

'Good to see you looking so well, Down, though I've noticed you piling on the pounds of late.' There was scarcely a trace of Spanish ancestry in the sharp Oxford honed drawl that greeted me. 'That wife of yours been overfeeding you, has she?'

I sat down, smiling enigmatically in a way that was hopefully appropriate and said nothing, waiting patiently to discover the reason for this summons.

'I hear the Rattigan deal is proceeding nicely.' He opened the lid of an inlaid cigar box carefully grouped on his desk with other items of similar value. 'Smoke?'

Declining the offer as politely as possible I patted my stomach meaningfully. 'Don't want to get too unhealthy.'

'Never done me any harm.' He paused to trim the end off of a full sized Havana before holding it in readiness before his puffy lips. 'But to business.'

'Indeed.' The sooner the better.

'I want to ensure that this deal with Rattigan is rock solid, that it goes through like shit from a shovel, no hiccoughs, none whatsoever. Do you understand?'

He paused to light the Havana. Breathed out a cloud of blue smoke.

'Absolutely sir. No question about it.' Truthfully I felt pretty confident about this one, having spent considerable time with Rattigan and personally scrutinising his books with due diligence.

'Do you see Duval's offer as entirely creditable? He does have the financial clout he boasts I suppose?'

I didn't particularly like Duval, finding his French bourgeois background lent him an arrogant and condescending attitude that far outweighed the expertise of his business acumen. Rattigan, though outwardly more friendly, was a self-made business man whose entrepreneurial skills had earned him a reputation that induced caution and respect amongst rivals. Both men were hard headed and ruthless. I hadn't completely enjoyed dealings with either of them although the joint value of their accounts far exceeded that of their sociability.

'I've found Duval's claims unimpeachable. Neither he, nor his books can be faulted.'

'You know he has fingers in many pies? There are subsidiary companies, not necessarily in his name. Presumably you have taken all this into consideration.'

'Naturally.'

'And you foresee no problems?'

'None whatsoever.'

'I have every confidence in you Neil.' Ramon pressed sweaty imprints onto the highly polished surface of his desk with the podgy fingers of his left hand.

There was another pause. He said nothing but sat tapping his fingers thoughtfully. Finally he spoke. 'Not doing anything tonight are you?' Not so much a question, more a command.

Remaining momentarily silent I despaired inwardly. Another domestic arrangement falling foul of work. You didn't need to be a Tarot reader to know what was on the cards. Penny was going to have to amuse herself this evening; the conciliatory dining *a deux* postponed.

'I've told Rattigan and Duval you'll meet them at eight thirty. You can dine with them at the Metropole, finalise details, tidy up loose ends, set their minds at rest, that sort of thing. The table's booked.'

He drew heavily on the Havana, pressed the intercom button connecting him with Claudia. Her responding buzzer signalled the conclusion to our interview. 'Excellent,' I said, standing to make my departure. 'Tonight, eight thirty at the Metropole.'

'Oh, and by the way.'

I paused at the door. Turned back. Ramon looked up, his fingers crushing the remains of his cigar on the edge of a heavy glass ashtray. 'I like a man who carries a bit of weight.'

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Back in the office I found John's desk vacant. 'Ee ad to go zumwar,' Veronique said in her best English. 'I zinc e go for le chien.'

'Pardon?' she must have finished with the latest in a long line of lovers. Nothing else would surely encourage such unsubtle flirting. It was common knowledge that her marriage to a wealthy but boring bone surgeon was made possible only by a continuation of torrid, if brief, affairs. Surely her arrows were not pointed at me. It was extremely doubtful.

'Ee goes to zee a *chien*, a dog.'

'Ah, you mean he's gone to see a man about a dog.'

'Yes. Of course. This is what I say. *Oui, il va pisser.*'

She looked pensive. 'Mister Poulter, e ave a large Richard?'

'I'm sure he'd be only too pleased to show you in person.' My jacket flopped smartly on the back of my chair as I wondered what hope there was for meaningful relationships or even casual sex.

Talking of dogs had somehow reminded me of Penny. She would need to be notified of the evening's change of plans. A task preferably avoided but nonetheless necessary. When would I be fully in control of my own life? I picked up the phone and punched in an outside line at the same time casting a lazy eye over the black cat screen saver endlessly chasing its own tail on my computer's desktop.

As Penny's impatient voice finally picked up I couldn't help noticing a new Email pinging up on my screen. Though short the heading was riveting. If only I'd known then to ignore it, to disregard its quivering pixels and condemn it to my ever receptive waste bin. Its brevity, concise and minimal, did not fail to catch my instant attention. Curiosity punched me in the chest. It was so sudden. Out of the blue. So unexpected. Eyes



raking over the words. Ignoring penny's irritable complaints.  
Brief and to the point. Full of promise yet equally puzzling.  
'Be in touch soon. Gareth.'

## Chapter 2

Dusk was already settling as I descended the marble entrance steps of the Andrew Underhand building into the brightly lit city streets. The concierge raised a hand in brief acknowledgement as I left.

Outside, people hurried past, going about their predetermined business. Trams ground complainingly on metal rails, lighted windows pressed with faceless commuters heading zombie-like for the suburbs. Fast food outlets secreted a predominant smell of frying onions which blended with the acrid fumes from too many vehicles still not powered by batteries. Cars, buses, vans and taxis moved in a slow formation dance, threatening competing pedestrians who wove forcefully between minimal gaps. Yet even amidst the bustle of a busy city centre, an unseen reminder of nature's meandering presence permeated the heavily polluted air. A delicate hint of burning leaves flavoured the existing olfactory ingredients and challenged the senses.

I glanced at my Rolex. It was later than I thought. Clearing a backlog of paperwork and making careful preparations for this evening's meeting had robbed me of more time than intended. It was too late to return home to change. Penny would have given up expecting me long ago. She'd now be busy with the children's bed time. Twenty past seven. Still too early for the meeting. I remembered *La Grenouille*. A gentle stroll in that direction to make the cancellation in person would fill in time nicely and keep me in favour with the restaurant management.

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Antique dealers and antiquarian book sellers were beginning to shut up shop as I walked up the steep narrow streets of the old town leading towards the cathedral. Footsteps echoed on now deserted cobbles, the clamorous city left seemingly far behind. It felt like entering a different place, almost another era as ancient buildings closed in, redolent of previous centuries, weather worn stones smelling of age, revealing glimpses into a bygone era.

*La Grenouille*, on the other hand, when I stepped into its low doorway to a dimly lit interior, was only just opening. Waiters in white shirts with long black aprons were setting out cutlery, lighting candles, polishing wine glasses. The *maitre d'* stood behind a reception desk coaxing soothing background music from an uncooperative sound system. He looked up on my arrival. On offering him my sincerest apologies for such a late cancellation he readily expressed his deepest sympathy for any inconvenience and, pocketing the twenty euro note I pressed on him, said I'd be most welcome to return at any time.

Outside, I ordered a Uber to meet me at the *Rue Napoleon* in fifteen minutes to go directly to the Grande Metropole. With this in mind I was wandering leisurely down the clustered pedestrian streets when an open shop doorway drew my attention. Someone was late in closing. Amidst the conservatively decorated frontages of its neighbours, *Bigger Books* stood out like a football supporter in a monastery. Its garish lighting and fluorescent signs were totally out of keeping. Bold luminous advertising posted diagonally across its windows in fifty centimetre high lettering claimed it to be one of a new chain of similar, cut price book stores opening nationwide.

While musing on the probabilities of this being a justifiable excuse for such vulgar décor a particular book caught my attention. *A Brief History of The Lopino Stud*. Its exaggerated size seemed to deny the possibility of its brevity. However, it was exactly what Penny would appreciate. A very suitable *sop to Cerberus*. Something with which to placate, on finally returning home.

With still time to spare I stepped decisively into the brightly lit interior. Who could say? Such a purchase might even benefit my own frustrated requirements. A contented Penny was always a happier bunny. The atmosphere within was far from the usual hushed reverence of bookshops normally frequented by myself. I blinked in the harsh lighting. Paused to gain my bearings. A group, perhaps students, were huddled in a far corner. A woman wearing what was probably a work issue T-shirt refilled shelves from a cardboard carton at her feet. As I edged along the nearest aisle a title halted my progress abruptly. *The Iconography of Eroticism in Recent times*. Unable to resist, I pulled the pages from their tightly packed companions. The heading on its plain brown cover left little space for further enlightenment nor did it provide sufficient indication of the richly illustrated text within. Seldom had the history of art been more arousing. A compilation of explicit examples could not have been more complete, a hypothesis no better illustrated.

‘Can I help you sir?’

She was standing next to me; suddenly very close. Close enough to acknowledge her perfume if not to name it.

‘You see we are about to close. If there is anything I can do for you?’ Her smile was electrifying. Her eyes locking on to mine. Their colour uncertain though they appeared to flash.

Hastily I squeezed the book back between its neighbours. 'Just having a final look round if that's OK.' Sauntered away to take cover behind the next aisle.

Surely I wasn't breathing heavily. My face couldn't possibly have turned a violent shade of puce. Matron's severe admonitions regarding night time emissions were crowding through the mind of an eleven year old, crippling the present. In a daze my feet headed for the exit vaguely aware of being the only person left in the shop apart from the young woman with the eyes.

'Don't you want your book sir?' she was standing next to the pay desk. 'I can get it for you.' She was about my own height, nice clothes, everything in the right proportion. Brown curly hair straight from a shampoo ad. 'We don't close until the shop is empty.' Voice warm and amiable. Speaking French but with an accent I couldn't quite place.

I was helpless. 'Er. . .'

'Don't worry. I'll get it for you.' Aware of her moving away, disappearing behind the far aisle. Returning almost immediately. Book held prominently in front like a prize.

'It was this one wasn't it?'

I nodded. Capable of nothing more.

'I'll wrap it for you.'

She busied herself with paper and scissors conjured from who knew where. 'There you go. By card? It's a contact machine.'

She'd made no reference to the book's subject. Not a word. Why should I be embarrassed?

'Before you go sir, can I interest you in our Club Card.' She pulled one out from nowhere. 'It's completely free and gives

you twenty percent discount in any number of shops throughout France Switzerland and Germany.

As if hypnotised, like an obedient child or an innocent lamb to the slaughter I signed on the dotted line.

'That is your address, is it sir?' Those eyes once more piercing into mine. Lasers burning my retinas.

I was wandering out as if blindfolded. 'Don't forget your book sir.' Her laugh was pleasing, like an unopened box of chocolates. I reached for the package. As she placed it in my left hand her right hand held on to my arm. 'If I may say so, sir, it was an excellent choice.'

I walked out of the shop having completely forgotten all about the *Lopino Stud*.

The Grande Metropole was not affiliated to a Worldwide chain of similar establishments but a privately owned undertaking in the hands of the same family since its inauguration in the late nineteenth century. Much of the opulence designed into its original features remained intact. Therein lay its uniqueness. It occupied a prime site on the busy but stylish *Avenue du Foch* with easy access and tree-lined lakeside frontage. Its Art Nouveau embellishments were now tastefully illuminated by cunningly concealed floodlighting as my taxi drew up outside the pillared entrance.

A uniformed footman opened the door as soon as the car glided to a halt. His dress was enough to impress upon me a regret at not having changed out of my tired working clothes. Instinctively I reached inside my jacket pocket for the reassuring feel of embossed Moroccan leather. My Gold Master, Diners and American Express cards remained a continuing source of confidence. I slipped the doorman a

jingle of change from my trouser pocket and took the steps two at a time. The revolving doors opened automatically.

Out of habit I had arrived early, giving me a slight advantage over my clients. A clock above the reception desk showed eight twenty five. The magnificently appointed foyer wore the appearance of an affluent old lady with its aging decorations and faded elegance. It maintained the vanity of exclusiveness and breathed out decades of superior perfume. The elaborately tiled floor reflected an age of earlier ideals. Carved wooden columns supported a moulded ceiling of higher grandeur. Hushed voices amplified with distortion round echoing walls. Leaving instructions with the receptionist to tell anyone asking after me, where I was, I went through to the bar.

A murmur of muted conversation rose from deep leather upholstery and thick pile carpeting. I ordered a gin and lime and moved to the smoking area. Although myself a non-smoker, both Rattigan and Duval, I remembered, were hardened addicts. A waiter brought my drink and placed it on a low table beside me. Within minutes Rattigan's bulky form appeared in the doorway. He was wearing a coat as if he might have arrived on foot. After scanning the room briefly he walked directly over to where I was sitting watching him.

Since he made no attempt to be seated I stood up and shook hands cordially. He was a thick-set man in his mid-forties, with wiry hair that was more ginger than fair, and a handshake like the grip of a mole wrench. When he spoke, there was more than a trace of County Wicklow in his vowel sounds.

'Would you like a drink?' I asked, trying to gauge his mood.

He didn't answer at first, but took a gold cigarette case and lighter from his coat pocket and lit a King-size with obvious