



**SPREAD  
THE WORD**



Longlisted 2017:

An extract from

*Attack of the White Van Woman*

by Lizanne Davies

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## **CHAPTER ONE: HEAD LIKE A HOLE**

24 June 2011. That was the day everything changed, for me. The day started pretty much like any other, with me riding shotgun in my mate Vince's Beemer, passing comment on how the skyline had changed yet *again* as we crested the Bow Flyover (building work going on in earnest for the forthcoming Olympics, only a year away), and looking out for Babylon hiding out with their speed guns in their favourite place; at the corner of a side road near the Porsche dealership. It was a Friday, and we both knew we had a long day ahead of us, because the twice-yearly stockcheck was due. This meant extra money in our pay-packets at the end of the month, plus the promise of pizza at half-time. Possibly an early finish for the drivers, too, if everything went swimmingly. Seeing as we were the first to turn in in the morning, apart from the storesman, Mark, who was always in at six to take delivery of the parts arriving on the lorry from Milton Keynes. I had had a late night the night before and was feeling tired; already regretting my agreement to meet up with a mate for a drink in the Aldgate Exchange on the day before Stock Check. Not that I had drunk to excess – as a “professional” driver, I cannot afford to run the risk of being over the limit the following day; but an early night would probably have been the sensible option.

Me and Vince are Parts Van Delivery Drivers, to give us our proper title. We would spend the first hour or so in the warehouse, picking our orders from the fresh stock that had come in, giggling over double entendres like Prince declaring that he needed a screw, and Mark wailing that he'd dropped his nuts all over the floor again; gather our orders together, check them off against our

invoices, mark them up, load them onto our vans, write out our delivery sheets, and ship out. This particular morning seemed busier than usual for some reason. Everybody under pressure. Especially “Superlan” who had expressly asked to be put in charge of the drivers, because he “likes drivers”, an attitude I find something of a rarity within the motor trade. Our happy band of drivers were a particularly close bunch. Something I’ve noticed about drivers anyway, wherever I’ve worked. I don’t know whether it’s because once you are out on the road, you’re essentially on your own, so it’s doubly important to know that your mates have your back. But I especially loved the banter with Vince, Prince and Metin – I looked forward to it every morning. We WERE the Four White Van Drivers of the Apocolympics. Metin and Prince were Famine and Pestilence, I was War, and Vince was “Deff – because I am!”

Well, he was. He had these state-of-the-art little hearing aids off the NHS, only the batteries used to run down on them really quick, so he’d often end up inadvertently blanking us more than he would have otherwise.

When they were fully charged, they were the nuts, mind. I think that shocked him. One morning I discovered him wandering round the warehouse with a pair of ear protectors in his hand.

“What are you doing with those?” I asked.

“I’m going to take them home to do the washing-up with.”

“Really? Most people use rubber gloves, Vince.”

“Oh! The crockery’s really LOUD, in our house...”

Another one for the back pocket... Did I mention, I’m an aspiring stand-up comedian? Something I came to late in life, admittedly – I could never have

done it when I was younger. However, the first time I got behind a mic in public, at the grand old age of forty-one, I felt right at home. The last time I felt like that was when I got behind the wheel of a car for the first time... Eleven years a professional, twenty-two years a keen amateur.

In an ideal world, I'd be the sort of person who Does Stuff. I'm a writer, a comedian, an artist and a driver. But, so far, there's only one of those things that's paying the rent, so the others have to go on the back burner as and when.

24 June 2011. So far, all things considered, I'm pretty happy with my lot in life. I'm forty-three years old, probably not most people's idea of a typical forty-three year old woman, if indeed there is such a thing. I live with my cat, the Lady Gizmo, in a one-bedroom housing association flat in a very nice part of Hackney, thankyou very much. I drive a sixteen-year-old Golf GTi that's in pretty good nick, still, for it's age (much like it's owner!). I'm not in any debt. I try to do one Open Mic night a week, at least (money, time and energy permitting). I have also set myself the thankless task of writing a short story for EVERY ONE of the stations on the Underground network. I usually do this on my lunch break. Park up somewhere and just write. If I want to let my hair down (not that I have much hair to *let* down, favouring a short, practical style), I go out drinking or raving with my mates. Unlike many of my contemporaries, successful career women all, I am not bemoaning my lack of a partner. I had a relationship once. It was crap. Been there, done that, read the book, bought the T-shirt. Thrown the T-shirt away... Anyway, where would I find the time, in all honesty? No – footloose, fancy-free and fully employed. That's me. Can't complain. Well, I *would* like more money, but, then again, wouldn't we all?

24 June 2011. I need a bumper, to go with this one order. Where is the bumper? It's in stock. Wedged in tight within a row of other bumpers, on top of another row of yet more bumpers. All bumpers in cardboard boxes, by the way. Topped off with yet another box, this one containing a steering rack. I'm going to need help here. I don't like asking for help, partly because I am an Independent Woman, partly because I don't like to trouble people. And they're all clearly busy. But, right about now, I don't have much of a choice.

So, I enlist the help of the lads, who are only too happy to assist. To ensure that the box containing the bumper I require has a free run, I set about clearing the makeshift table that Mark has created out of an empty bumper box parked up just in front of the bumper storage area, free from random stock and other paraphernalia. I'm bent over the "table" when the bumper that's being freed slips out of my workmates' hands and lands on my head. "Ow!" I've bitten my tongue.

Prince finds this amusing. Well, I suppose I would too, if our positions were reversed. I haven't been knocked out, or even to the floor (yeah, I'm hard!) but I am feeling somewhat stunned, to say the least.

One for the accident book, I think. So I report to the office, only to be told that the accident book is "online" now; I will have to report to the Big Boss, in his Ivory Tower. The Big Boss can't access the online "Accident Book" right now. Can I come back when I've returned from my deliveries? He then advises me to get myself a glass of water, and "walk around the car park for a bit".

"HE SAID *WHAT?*" thunders Curly, my shop steward; the next person I bump into, "You need to go to hospital and get checked out. Get one of the lads to take you."

I don't like to make a fuss. But what Curly says makes sense. Metin agrees to take me to the Homerton. If I get sent home, I can walk from there. Newham would be more of a problem.

“Metin, you've missed the turning.”

“Here we go! Round and round the Mulberry Bush!”

I've never seen Metin in anything other than a good mood. Just as well, I guess; he could cause a lot of damage if he got the arsehole.

Metin, the gentle giant.

I remember when the rest of us were spitting feathers about Trackers being fitted to our vans. Now, Management can see exactly where you are, exactly how fast you're going, the ignition going *on*, the ignition going *off*, - even which way round the van is facing. Don't know if it can tell which way *up* the van is – I suggested we try a little experiment one day.

Metin just piped up, cheerily “I timed myself, going for a poo. It took me EIGHT MINUTES!”

(I should just point out at this juncture, that the Tracker is not an exact science. Superlan showed me when he brought it up on his computer one day. It had pinpointed Metin's van as being parked on the ROOF of the building...)

Anyway, Metin drops me off at the main entrance to Homerton Hospital, and I shuffle off to the Accident and Emergency Department. There but for the Grace of God go I, I think to myself, as I'm sat behind a young girl whose long hair is caked in blood.

I don't have to wait too long. The young doctor who sees to me is a very pleasant fellow, from somewhere up North I think, putting me at my ease by

joking with me that half the tests he is performing on me to gauge my reactions are purely for his own amusement. He is confident I will be fine, although I will probably feel “pretty grotty” for the rest of the weekend, strongly advises me against returning to work that day (so no overtime, or pizza, for me), adding that if I start vomiting at any point, I am to return to the hospital IMMEDIATELY.

I go home and fall asleep watching a DVD of Kung-Fu Panda that I’ve borrowed from a girl down the landing.

The next day, I feel weird. Kind of out of it. I take a stroll over the common to pick up a few essentials from Tesco. I notice that part of my head feels numb – like that part of it was missing. Keep thinking that my brain could fly out at any point, and I’d end up having to chase after it all over the common. Kind of like Robin Williams’ body trying to catch up with his head in the Baron Munchausen film. The more I exert myself, the more noticeable this feeling becomes. So I take my time and settle for a gentle stroll.

Driving is out of the question for the time being, I think. I had arranged to drive over to Acton, to see Ray, an old friend I have known since I first started working as a driver in the motor trade. To know Ray is to love him. He’s like everybody’s Grandad.

I could take the Underground, of course. But I REALLY don’t relish THAT prospect. What if I have a funny turn while I’m on that?

So I make the call.



“Oh dear God, Lizanne! No – of course you can’t come, my dear. Those bastards! What if you have headaches for the rest of your life, now? You might never be the same again!”

Funny enough, the one thing I haven’t had, since the box fell on my head, is a headache.

“Well, you never know. You don’t know HOW it’s going to affect you. You might never be the same again. Well, you take care, my dear...”

“Righty-ho, Ray. You too, mate. Speak soon.”

Sunday morning. And I’m feeling proper rough. Nauseous, for the most part. It doesn’t matter if I stand up, sit down, or lie down; I can’t shake that feeling that I might chuck up at any moment. Come midday, I’ve had enough. So I call NHS Direct. After all, I haven’t actually *been* sick, as such... They advise me to go back to the hospital.

It’s a nice, sunny day, and I don’t anticipate I’ll be in there long. Probably more of the same, what I got on Friday, and go away. Might give me something for the nausea, is what I’m hoping. Although, I reckon I’ll have a bit of a wait...so I take some reading materials; namely a trio of One Eye Gray periodicals, selections of supernatural short stories with a London theme, that I bought from an anarchist bookshop in Kings Cross one time. I got through the lot by the time I was seen.

The doctor who saw me was the same one that I’d seen on Friday. He put me in for a CT scan, under the circumstances. The CT scan showed up what *looked* like “bleeding and swelling on the brain”, so my doctor then contacted a neurosurgeon who was, at that time, performing a very delicate operation in

the Royal London, so it took him a while to review my scan and get back to my doctor with the advice that I be kept in for 48 hours observation.

Luckily, at that time, my cat, Gizmo, was staying with my cousin Audrey in Primrose Hill. She had been there for several weeks while my kitchen and bathroom were being renovated as part of the Government's Decent Homes programme for social housing. Best all round, I thought.

I must have changed beds three times before I was allowed to settle down in one for the night. Still, I should have been grateful for that I suppose. You do hear stories, don't you? Just count my blessings that I wasn't abandoned on a trolley in a corridor somewhere – or shoved in a cupboard. Not that I was able to get a full night's sleep, mind you. I was awoken every hour, on the hour, by a nurse who would shine a torch in my eyes, then write her findings in the notes at the foot of my bed.

Spend the next day drifting in and out of sleep, catching up on what I've missed. Which is a blessing. Not much interaction with my fellow patients. In some cases, English is not their first language, and they all seem much sicker than I am. I feel a bit of a fraud, if I'm honest. And bored – beyond belief. This boredom somewhat relieved by speaking to work, to tell them where I am, and running errands to the nurses for a lovely old dear who reminds me a bit of my Gran. I also have a couple of visitors – Audrey, who tells me Gizmo is fine, and Jennie, a friend of mine who I do pub quizzes with; bringing me magazines and a packet of Haribo sweets, telling me conspiratorially that "Most people bring grapes to the sick, but I don't, I bring Haribo. Something fun." Haven't the heart to tell her I hate Haribo, and would much rather have had the grapes. Cadge a fag off her before she leaves.

Manage to get through the magazines quite quickly, despite the intermittent need to sleep, and despite my eyes playing tricks on me. They take turns on going in and out of focus, or else have a complete spazz, and shoot up and down the page, so that I keep losing my place.

The next day, having discovered I have a taste for NHS toffee yoghurt, I manage to cadge an unwanted one off another patient before the nurse takes it away. Get told off by the nurses for sitting on the windowsill. It's a very hot day, and I am roasting on the ward. Only wanted to cool off, but apparently I'm in breach of Health and Safety.

I also get sent for another CT scan. The results are inconclusive, so I am later sent for an MRI scan. The doctors now suspect I have an aneurysm, and they want to keep me in. I know an aneurysm is pretty serious. Before I was hit with this bombshell, my major concern was that I got home in time to watch Luther. Now it looks like I might potentially have a life-threatening condition. Time to deploy the emergency fag. I repair downstairs, and outside to smoke the cigarette and phone my mate Tash – I have to speak to someone. Break down on the phone, in floods of tears (bearing in mind I am not normally the sort of person who cries at *anything*. The last time I cried, prior to that, can be measured in years, and consisted of, literally, one single tear squeezed out when I spotted the corpse of a dog that had just been knocked down by a flatbed truck in Holloway. Seconds later, I was back to my old self, swearing at the traffic once again). To her credit, Tash does a sterling job of talking me down, which can't be easy.

Composing myself, I decide to make the best of a bad situation. I feel skanky and am in desperate need of a shower; having worn the same T-shirt and

leggings, never mind the underwear, that I turned up in on Sunday, for three days straight. I ask the nurse for a pair of paper pants. She doesn't have any – best she can do is provide me with a pair of adult nappies. As my options are either these, my nasty skanky pants I've already been wearing for three days, or going commando, I decide that in this case, beggars can't be choosers, and accept the adult nappies with good grace. After the shower, I feel much better. Emerge from the shower room feeling fresh, to the immediate news that I do not have an aneurysm after all, it would appear – although there is some anomaly on my scan that requires further investigation, my records will be forwarded on to Barts Hospital, in the meantime here is a note signing you off work for the next ten days, congratulations, you can go home.

And so I am discharged from Homerton Hospital, wearing an adult nappy, and a pair of what look like Hispanic gangsta socks. Support stockings, to stop me getting blood clots. The walk home from the Homerton would, under normal circumstances, take less than quarter of an hour. Today, it takes me at least twice that long.

Still, at least I get to watch the latest episode of Luther. In it's entirety.

A phone call from my mate Metin lifted my spirits no end. As did the thought that I have plenty of new material (and not just the adult nappy and gangsta socks). I could say something about chasing my brain across the common, only to have it elude me by hiding itself in the sausage bushes on the islands of cheese. I could mention that the hospital, in their efforts to find me a bed, initially put me on E-BAY, before quickly taking me off again – probably not

getting enough bids for a slightly damaged van driver. And the comment the nice old girl made, to the young girl in the bed opposite, who reminded me of a young Una Stubbs and had previously worked in an old people's home – “You make a good nurse. Hurry up and grow up so you can become one, won't you?”

Then there was my mate Jan, one of my punk mates from up North, who, when I told him my tale of woe, responded with a horrible hospital tale of his own. In these sorts of situations, there's always Someone who has to go one better than you... He went in for some tests, the doctor put his finger up his bum, wiggled it about a bit before asking “Does this feel normal, to you?” In just half a week, enough material for a whole new routine.

Also got a phone call from the doctor. Why is it that conversations which start “I don't want to worry you, but...” always have the opposite effect? Am told I have an “asymmetric brain” (always *knew* I was special!) and have been recalled to the Homerton for another MRI scan on the 19<sup>th</sup> July.

Take it pretty easy for the rest of the week. In conversation with the housing association about the “snagging problems” resulting from their Decent Homes programme. Thursday is the first day I notice my eyes are no longer going in and out of focus independently. On Friday, I venture out to the South Bank for a couple of hours to meet up with “the girls”. Optimistically looking forward to spending the rest of my time off working on my project, the Tube tales. The following day, I need to rest.

Get a phone call from Richard, the friend I met up with in Aldgate the night before the accident. Richard is a Train Driver. He thinks I should be a Train Driver, too, as I have all the right qualities, he reckons; he has been helping me to try and achieve this. I have known Richard for just over a year. He's an old punk rocker, who loves cats. Of course we'd become friends. We met when he joined the Whitechapel Society 1888, a historical society that looks at life in London in the Victorian and Edwardian periods; periods that I find particularly fascinating for some reason. As the date 1888 would suggest, this society is pretty Jack the Ripper-centric. I joined the society a couple of years earlier with a free voucher to a meeting that I discovered within the pages of a copy of *East End Life* that I picked up in York Hall, after a swimming session. The Society meets up on the first Saturday of every month, alternating between structured meetings with guest speakers, and "interims" – basically getting together for a piss-up. Today, Saturday 2 July, is the date of an Interim. Richard is phoning me to let me know he will not be going. I tell him I will not be going myself, and the reason why. He is shocked.

Sunday. Get in my car for the first time since the accident. It feels good. I am going up to North London. Audrey has invited me out to watch a play that a friend of hers is appearing in (and it turns out I know the director; small world eh?)

Pick Audrey up from her home in Primrose Hill; we drive over to Kentish Town, where the play, a comedy entitled *Immaculate*, starring Audrey's friend in the role of Lucifer, is being performed in a pub. One of those new-fangled Gastropubs that are cropping up like mushrooms everywhere, where a simple

Scotch egg will set you back three quid. We head off to the nearby Pizza Express afterwards instead.

Return to Primrose Hill, where I swap Audrey for my cat Gizmo. It is great to have my baby back, this is the longest time I've been without her since I took her in. Am a little concerned, however, that the cat has become finicky with her food again (mostly sucking the jelly off and leaving the rest) but she has form for being a little sod like that from time to time. Also her poo seems somewhat more watery than usual, but I put that down to her only eating the jelly. Otherwise, she seems fine.

The following day, I'm recovering once again from all this excitement when Richard calls. "If you're bored..." he says, telling me he has some time off, and asks me if I'd like to meet up for a drink and a curry.

I am far from bored – boredom is not a word in my vocabulary – but agree to meet up. If nothing else, to avoid the calls from BT trying to sell me broadband. They are amazed that I do not own a computer.

"I don't blame you," says Richard, "Stay that way for as long as possible. If you bought a car, and it crashed as many times as a computer does, you'd be taking it back the same day."

I know I can't avoid the twenty-first century forever. For one thing, it's making my life as a comedian very difficult. All the events seem to be organised on Facebook, for a start. As a compromise, I have recently updated my mobile phone and contract. I am now the proud owner of an HTC Wildfire with 250 MB of "free" Internet access. And I'm still trying to get my head around that.

The following day, I am on the floor. No reason for it – I only drank two bottles of Rekorderlig in total yesterday; really slowly. And I had a curry in between. Nevertheless, I spend most of the day asleep.

The day after that, I visit the doctor. Who signs me off work for the rest of the month.

Wednesday. Have a routine appointment at the dentist's. My dentist is in Forest Gate. I have been going to that surgery for the best part of the last twenty years, since I lived in Forest Gate. Never changed over when I moved. National Health dentists are thin on the ground as it is. Generally, I don't have a lot wrong with my teeth. I had a small filling done on one of my back teeth when I was twenty-five. This has since needed replacing. Today I discover that it has cracked. The dentist gives me two choices. One: that I get a new white filling for £200. "Sacre Bleu!" I cry, and the dentist wants to know if this is my "bad word"?

"Madam, I work for the motor trade," I reply, "You don't even want to *know* my 'bad word'."

She agrees.

I go with the second option, a silver-coloured NHS filling for £47. Which cannot be done today, because my dentist has appointments back-to-back all day. An appointment is made for the work to be done on Tuesday.

Metin comes round the next day to collect my sicknotes for work, and I give him Lottery money, for the Drivers' syndicate, to cover me for the rest of the month. He also tells me a Hallowe'en story about a mate of his, who, it was discovered, had "legions" on his brain that turned out to be MS, and he was



banned from driving temporarily. “But,” adds Metin, cheerily, “He’s a bus driver now.”

There is hope for me yet.

In the evening, I take Audrey up to Edgware to see an “am dram” performance of a play about the life of Amy Johnson, the famous aviatrix.

Really feel guilty that I don’t know a lot more about her – she’s such a pioneer, should be a real heroine of mine. What did *not* come as a surprise, however, was the attitude of her male “rival”, Jim Mollison. After all, what’s the best way to take out the competition?.. Why, MARRY it, of course.

I knew I made the right decision, staying single... Not that anyone much would see ME as competition. Especially right now.

On the Saturday, I drive over to Aveley, to read Tarot cards at the Caring For Cats charity Open Day. I am very much in demand, and spend the next few days taking a well deserved rest. Slightly concerned that I may be getting into a little bit of a rut with Jeremy Kyle, Ice Road Truckers, Animal 24/7, Deal or No Deal, Quiz Trippers, The Simpsons and Hollyoaks.

Back to the Nazi War Criminals... I mean the dentist’s. Filling done.

“This filling wasn’t done properly in the first place,” the dentist remarks.

“Funny, that’s what you said last time...” I reply, and she becomes somewhat embarrassed.

On Friday, I pull my finger out and write, not one, but TWO stories for my project. Reward myself by watching a video; The Mothman Prophecies. With hindsight, possibly not the *best* choice for someone with brain scans pending.

On Saturday, despite the fact that it is pissing down with rain, I decide to Give Something Back. There is a demonstration going on about NHS cuts: Hands

Around The Homerton. I have certainly been getting my money's worth out of the NHS just lately, so it would be rude not to, I feel. The idea: well, to do what it says on the tin, pretty much. For everyone to link arms and encircle the hospital (leaving entrances and exits clear, for obvious reasons). In the end, no more than 50 people turn up, so this objective was never going to be reached. But we all join hands anyway, chant "Whose NHS? OUR NHS!" (Not Run's House, then..?) for a bit, then three cheers for the Homerton and all bugger off.

Gizmo is sick into one of my Fit-Flops. A major achievement, I feel.

On Monday, I head up to the Citizen's Advice Bureau. I want to find out exactly what my rights are, following an Accident in the Workplace. I had spoken with the CAB on Thursday, and the woman that I spoke to advised me to turn up at eight, despite the Bureau itself not opening till half past. The reasons for this soon become clear. There are already people waiting when I turn up; if you turn up at half eight, you are unlikely to get seen. As it is, there are nearly riots when some queue jumpers turn up at the last minute. Feel like I am in the queue for the Labour Exchange, or the soup kitchen. Wonder how long it will be before I actually fall over. Amuse myself by watching two council workers racing each other on those street-sweeping machines that you sit on. What do you call those? Kerb Crawlers?... Actually, they move along at a fair old lick, and I think I've found my new dream job...

## About the Author

**Lizanne says:** I have been writing for seventeen years, about the same length of time as I have been a Professional Driver. Born in London in 1967, I have lived in London for most of my life, mostly in the East End. Since I was little, I have been fascinated with cars and driving, always wanting to grow up to be a Lorry Driver. I grew up in the Eighties, with Thatcherism and high unemployment; by the time I started secondary school I couldn't see a future in which I had a job at all. But, in over thirty years, I have only been unemployed for four months altogether. Mostly factory work, initially; my redundancy package from the Ford Motor Company giving me the freedom to work for an Agency while working out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. [@Lizanne\\_Davies](#)