



THE BAD PLACE

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A.P. Atkinson

Seth Godwynn

The characters, places and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental, not intended by the author, and very clearly the result of crippling mental illness

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Foreword

The Bad Place began life as a short series of shorty stories to be posted on the site, leading up to Halloween. We'd recently launched '*Night Shift*,' our first horror novel and it had generated a flutter of interest. The plan was to capitalise on that by posting a series of daily short stories with Halloween themes that culminated on the 31st October. The thing was, we had so much fun writing them that what was originally going to be just three soon became five, and then seven, and then an entire book.

We began with a story about vampires, since vampires are the ultimate horror monster. There's something about the dark mirror of humanity, a creature hovering between life and death, retaining elements of its humanity but driven by the darkness that has engulfed its soul. It's a fascinating subject for stories, and has almost achieved the status of being a genre unto itself.

I have designs on one day using them as a theme for an entire book, but that's some way off, and will probably never happen. I was fascinated by the '*Blood Libel*' stories from the Middle Ages of Jewish immigrants arriving in Europe, abducting and murdering children and using them as blood-sacrifices. Personal research suggests this is the likely root of vampire legends. Of course, the modern religious community says such claims are absolutely false, based entirely on a complete absence of evidence either way. So that's that settled.

I decided a short story was not the right place to explore this, so instead I went off in a different direction. Another element that always interested me was the different ways that vampires are represented in the media. I chose to go with a story that presented the

dichotomy between these varying impressions of what might actually constitute what a vampire really was.

The story developed a dark edge, but fell short of actual horror. It ended up feeling more of a light-hearted introduction to a character than a real investigation into themes. But, it did set the tone going forwards. After this, all the stories in this collection used this tale as the bench-mark by which we measured the others, either leaning into the ridiculous or comedic elements, or going with something darker.

The next most obvious Halloween icon is the werewolf. I wanted to present a story that touched on this, but wanted to frame it in a new and interesting way. Werewolves are so commonly depicted in literature that almost every approach has been tried multiple times. It wasn't easy to come up with something genuinely original.

To break out of the routine, I entirely embraced the ridiculousness of the idea. At its core, this is the notion that a person can change their form from that of their natural body—the one they were born into—into something entirely other. It's scientific nonsense, of course, and the story that built up around it made an effort to show just that.

'*Brethren*' featured a support-group circle of people bemoaning their experiences. It gave an interesting opportunity to explore what might exist at the fringes of a group of people who really were cursed in such a manner.

That's when it all got a bit silly.

Seth started inputting stories himself. First he suggested a dream his Aya had told him about in excruciating detail, a dream that prompted him to come up with a tale of spectral terror on a personal level. I say 'his' Aya because we both have one. We both moved to really very different Asian countries and ended up married to

accountants with the same name. In and of itself, our reality is just as horrific as our stories. His planned tale reminded me of something my Aya had said, about dreams she often had.

We both went off in our own direction and wrote stories based on this. Seth's was quite concise and made a swift point about fear of the afterlife from the perspective of a child. Mine was a dark thing indeed.

It was around then that we decided that it might be fun to expand the idea into a collection of short stories that we might even publish as a book.

Continuing with the theme of mild horror, we both carried on writing short genre-inspired tales. '*The Slashening*' mocked the teen-slasher movie trend where young people, played by middle-aged actors, are violently hacked to pieces by over-the-top mask-wearing monsters. '*Monster*,' '*Ravenous*' and '*Buzz*' all continued with various dark takes on horror staples. '*Epilogue*' featured a pair of demons living in a retirement home, discussing the way they were able to impact the human world with their nefarious efforts, expanding on an idea someone mentioned about what you might ask for if only permitted a single wish.

Some of the stories we came up with had interesting, deeper metaphors and symbolism, while others were simply us having a bit of fun with the genre.

As usual, Seth drove things forward in terms of editing and formatting while I churned out most of the basic outlines. One story, '*The Other Foot*,' was based around a set of ideas he had that I just wasn't able to completely work into a story. I handed back a scaffold, a kind of unfinished story that was my take on what he had in mind, but knowing I had veered quite far from his intention and that he would have to hammer into shape. It was a complex idea, and it

ended up taking the pair of us working together to get it flowing in the right way.

We were both fans of the original series of '*The Twilight Zone*.' It was a smart, well-written show, with each episode presenting an intelligent and original story. Seth put together one of the original seven, '*The Second Act*,' as a homage to the show's episode structure, and that led to us putting the whole collection together under that same over-arching theme. We decided to call the collection, '*The Bad Place*,' mostly as an excuse to come up with juvenile slogans like, 'Edgeverse is going to touch you in... *the Bad Place*.'

We're not terribly mature, nor do we aspire to be.

Like the original season of the show, I wanted to end the book on a completely ridiculous story that mocks itself as the narrative unfolds.

I personally loathe '*Harry Potter*' and its dreadful author. She has apparently been in court ever since it was written, defending herself on charges of blatant plagiarism and we wanted to send her up, making a parody of the story as a sarcastic poke at the entire sub-genre.

We came up with a boy with a similar—yet legally, completely different—name, and followed the overall beats of the story. It was written in a deliberately appalling style, the narrator tripping over itself as it mocks both its origins and its execution.

The hope is that we came up with a collection of dark, twisted and sinister stories that bring a smile to the face of the reader. We most certainly had fun working on them.

—A.P. '*Jack*' Atkinson

Black and White

The two entirely fictional authors—let's call them Sack and Jeth—sat opposite a prospective agent. She described herself in her FriendBook profile as 'experienced, seasoned, a sharp eye for literary excellence.' Whether any of these things had any bearing on the truth remained to be seen, but for now, the two authors had established precisely one fact, and that was that her office smelled faintly of urine.

She looked up from her computer and said, with a low, croaky voice, as if she had been gargling razor-blades that had been gently simmered in a broth of stewed coffee, cheap whiskey and stale cigarette butts, "Are those your real names?"

"Dear God, no!" Jeth said diplomatically.

"Are you really an agent?" said Sack, a little less so.

She glared at him for a moment, snorted disapprovingly, and pointed back to a certificate on her wall from the 'Brizzledork College' which didn't just fail to answer the question, but actually posed several more.

"I've been looking through this collection of your work," she said.

Jeth sighed and said, "Point taken, we'll leave."

"Some of it was pretty good," said Sack with a frown. "I liked the one about the killer mosquitoes who pumped all the blood back into that guy until he exploded."

She raised an eyebrow and peered at him accusingly. "Oh," she said. "Is that what was meant to have happened?"

Jeth nodded. "I wasn't sure about that myself, to be honest."

"It made perfect sense!" Sack said with an annoyed expression. "Mosquitos can probably spray as well as suck, or else

what would be the point of them? It was a metaphor! You got that didn't you?"

There was a rather pointed absence of nodding.

She said after a moment of thoughtfulness, where not a single chin went unrubbed, "I've read through this entire set of samples, this collection of short stories, this 'portfolio,' if you will..."

"Right?" said Jeth.

"Why does your office smell of piss?" added Sack, for some reason.

She glared at him, her ancient, mottled and deeply-wrinkled face looking like someone was sucking whatever moisture was still in it, out of it.

"I apologise for my associate," Jeth said with a sigh. "He's... an author."

"It's quite alright," the agent replied. "I'm more than used to it by now. It comes with the territory. I made my terrible choices a long, long time ago."

"At Brizzledork College?" Sack asked. "Or was it the very same terrible choices that led you there in the first place?"

She rolled her eyes and said, "He doesn't get out much, does he?"

"For mostly legal reasons," Jeth explained.

She steepled her fingers together and said, "The problem is, all of this stuff is too... how can I put this... It's too... you know?"

"Thank you for clearing that up," Sack said with a grin, and rubbed his hand over his potato-like bald head.

She ignored him. "It takes you to a bad place."

Jeth frowned curiously. "Well, that was the point. In fact, it was exactly what you asked us to send you. You literally said to send you a collection of work called 'The Bad Place.'"

“People don’t like going to bad places,” she said, shaking her head.

“And yet, Thailand remains a popular tourist destination,” said Sack, rubbing his chin and frowning curiously.

“Thailand has other things to offer!” she retorted with a sneer.

He shrugged at his co-author and said, “I told you it needed more ladyboys?”

Jeth gazed straight ahead and said emptily, “And I told you it needed one less co-author?”

“Why don’t you just give me an idea of what else you can do?” she suggested, lounging back in a leather chair that didn’t look much like leather—or a chair.

Sack said to Jeth, “You can juggle a bit, right? I could crash a motorcycle if that would help?”

Jeth looked at him, flashing the expression of a tired parent who just doesn’t feel like explaining yet again that crayons don’t belong in your nose. “I think she means, what other writing we can do?”

She shook her head and let out a sigh like a tiny piece of her soul had died. She was an agent, so she couldn’t spare even the tiniest fragment—assuming they even have souls in the literal, human sense.

“Actually, I do have a piece I’ve been working on,” Sack said. “It’s a work of literary fiction.”

“Great,” she quipped with a complete lack of sincerity. “This is going to be good...”

Death now defined him. He could feel the heft of the carbon-steel at his back, the rapier-sharp blade carried on the rear of his belt. It was

brutality given form, the ultimate expression of a world that was losing its mind. It was a world where metal formed to cleave open bone and flesh was the last edifice of sanity that remained.

Hesitation robbed him of clarity for a moment, a moment that passed by quickly, thoughts and reason flashing through his mind in a blur. He barely missed a step. His decision was preordained, the path his life would lead him laid by fate, conspired since time before his creation. The world a machine, countless delicate cogs and gears all meshed together in perfect synchrony, and he was but a tooth carved in the smallest of them all.

He was but an observer, just watching from his toilet...

“No!” she said. “Too literary.”

Sack shook his head. “Aren’t you a literary agent?”

Jeth said, “The problem is that it’s the most compelling part of the narrative. We would need to meet the rising expectations of the audience.”

“This is why I’m like this,” grumbled Sack to the agent. “I just wanted to write jokes about toilets.”

Jeth said, “Well I have something else I’m working on that you might like.”

Sack glared at him. “You didn’t tell me about this!”

“It didn’t need any jokes about toilets. Not even one!”

Sack crossed his arms over his chest and looked away. “Fair enough,” he said.

Jeth took a deep breath, and then he began.

She placed her hand against the glass, and found it surprisingly warm beneath her skin. Beyond was the brilliant blue sphere of the Earth, gently misted by imperceptibly small streaks of white cloud.

A smile flashed across her lips. Her journey to this point had been perilous, fraught with danger, but in reality it had only just begun.

She smiled to herself with a deep sense of satisfaction. “By the time I’m finished, the world will never see mountain goats the same way again!”

“No!” she said.

“She’s right,” said Sack, nodding in agreement. “I could see at least five places in that opening alone where jokes about toilets were basically essential.”

Jeth glared back at him. “This really isn’t going well,” he grumbled.

“You know what?” Sack said, shrugging his shoulders. “I’m bored with these agents and their urine-soaked offices, vulcanised rubber faces, soulless disconnection from the reality of their audiences and certificates from the Brizzledorks of this world.”

“I’m right here,” she said, glaring quite angrily.

“Shut up, we’re talking,” said Jeth.

“Let’s just take this stuff and publish it, and let the audience decide. We don’t need an agent—we can fail all by ourselves. We’ve been doing it for years.”

Jeth blew out a lungful of air. “I guess if you think of it not as failing to succeed, but as succeeding to fail, then it isn’t so bad?”

Suddenly, as inspiration struck him, Sack held up a finger and his eyes widened. “Actually, there is one other thing one of our

newer authors has been working on. Her FriendBook profile describes her as ‘mother of stories, mistress of prose, queen of the written word,’ and I can’t think of a reason she would lie—she is a blonde after all. The videos she films of herself doing yoga from a low angle are most compelling, though better avoided when there’s a toilet-paper shortage. I think it might be exactly what you’re looking for!”

“Hey, I don’t speak like that!” said the first narrator.

“Like you would know,” said the second. “Dialogue was never exactly your strong suit—toilet jokes are more your forte.”

“Well at least I can actually write properly planned long-form fiction. I struggle to whittle my brilliance down to 2,000 words, whereas for you that seems to be an upper limit to one day aspire.”

“Nobody wants long-form fiction anymore. Isn’t that right, kids?”

You nod your head enthusiastically.

“Anyway...” said the agent, ignoring the two squabbling, entirely fictional narrators who continued while the plot of the story completely fell to pieces. “This thing your new ‘author’ has been working on: Is it strikingly original?”

“What new author?” Sack said with a frown.

“Nope.” Jeth said, nudging him in the ribs with his elbow, really quite aggressively.

“Good,” she said, looking vaguely interested. “Is it intelligent and thoughtful with rich metaphors and deep symbolism?”

“Nein.”

“Good,” she said, looking really quite interested. “And is it filled with rich, vibrant characters, quality writing and a complex, detailed plot that leaves the audience entirely satisfied?”

“Nyet.”

“Alright,” she said with a smile. “Let’s hear it.”

He walks into the office, his bucket swinging at his side. And he is singing. And I am looking straight at him, and I notice him straight away. I’m gonna make it my business to get him to notice me two or something. I pop open a button on my blouse, showing off my ample cleavage. My cleavage is very ample and very cleaved.

He notices. He turns and smiles at me, flashing a pack of perfect white teeth.

He comes over and says with a heavy accent, “Cigarette...”

“I don’t smoke,” I say and I give him a flirtatious smile—free of charge.

“No,” he says. “It is my name. I am Cigarette.”

“That’s exotic,” I think, but I think loudly enough for him to hear.

He hears and then grins. “I’m from African and I like your ample cleavage but I am too shy and naive to say so out loudly.”

I am doing my job where I am a call centre. “Do you work here?” say I.

“I am here to stick my plunger in your overflow pipe,” he tells me and I nearly explode in a passionate bout of moist fury right there and then.

“Ah,” says the manger. He is in charge of our office but I do not know his name because he is unattractive. His hair is empty so me and the other girls call him ‘manger’. I make sense most if you’re

drunk and I usually am. My doctor says you could spread my liver on a slice of toast but he won't because then I'll die. I don't really understand that because I like toast. He says, "You are the plumber. I can tell because you have a plumb in your hand."

"I am a plunger," says Cigarette.

"Our toilet is blocked," manger says. "His name should be a capital letter but I cannot grammar. It is why I am a call centre. I like vampires."

Cigarette say, "I am not rich or into kinky sexy stuff. I am new to this country and I don't know nothing. I hope you will not corrupt me with your wild ways."

I think to myself that this is my chance, not loud enough for him to hear. "Would you like to meet me for a drink?" I says.

He looks at me with his gigantic hazel eyes and holds up his plunger. "I don't know how to date woman. Will you teach me?"

"Little does he know that I am a dominatrix and I plan to do very exciting things to this man and write about it on FriendBook to spice up my yoga vides."

"You think very loud," he says, looking confused.

"Oops," I said. I think he heard.

Later in the plot, we went out for a drink. I took him to a special club I go to where a man like him has never seen before. It always starts out normal, just a club where people drink and then later there's a show up on a small stage. He has no idea what's coming. Nor have it, either.

The room we're in is red, which is a clue but has nothing to do with the title. Maybe it don't matter. Maybe it's green.

"I have never drink before," says Cigarette.

"Why are you call that?" I say.

He shrugs. "I am from african."

I drink again, which sort of explains it. "Do you think I'm sexy?" I say, sounding as sexy as a sexy person doing a very sexy thing while someone who likes all that watches on. Probably playing with themselves.

"No." He shakes his head, the one with the set of perfect white teeth in it.

I am frown.

"You are classy," he is saying as I jiggle my ample cleavage.

"is that better?"

He shrugs and gives me a funny look. I laugh.

I drink my brandy. It tastes like brandy, like fire mixed with water mixed with his eyes. He smiles at me. It is like honey mixed with... um... coffee mugs and... I don't know.

"I like classy," he says to me. There is nobody else there in that place.

"Another drink?" says the barman and I nod, handing him my glass.

"I am not like you!" I tell Cigarette.

He just nods and sips on a glass of cola. "I am a 6'4" man of african and you are a woman, short and mostly beautiful."

"I might surprise you," I say and lick my lips, because his are too far away. Maybe I am a bit short?

"He says," it is not my birthday. I can't believe I hear what I know I didn't hear, but I get the gist of it.

"I can make it feel like all of your birthdays come at once!" I say with a smile. My lips move.

Music is playing.

He says and shakes his head at the same time, “I would be dead though, wouldn’t I?” I like a man who can do two things at once with their head. And their fingers. Sexy talk continues.

Then a woman comes on stage with a whip and starts doing things with it – terrible things. Badly. I just remembered the room was brown all along.

Cigarette sighs and then coughs.

“I like whips,” I tell him. “I can teach you about whips.”

“To unblock drains?”

“I’m going to unblock your drain!”

“My drain isn’t blocked, I ate all my carrots.”

My house has a sex-dungeon. I am not like other people – especially people who don’t have sex-dungeons.

Cigarette is horrified. I can tell when he says, “I’m horrified.”

“My name is Ms Black,” I said, giving a little hint.

“And I am White,” said my African partner. “I’m Cigarette White.”

(Pretty clever). “That explains the title,” as I get closer to him and touch his chest with my hand and then my other hand and then my other foot, I say. My tongue licks his chest. “You probably take off your shirt,” I cough.

“I should probably take off my shirt,” he coughs back. “But, what classy lady will you teach to me for?”

“For sexy!” I say. “Tonight I will make you a man. I will own you and chain you up and do things that are intensively private and then write about them.”

“I don’t know what ‘intensively means’.”

I get closer and whisper, “Nor do I.”

And we have sex and stuff and everyone wants to buy my book.

“So, what did you think?” asked Sack.

“Do you want me to be completely honest with you?” said the agent.

“Here goes...” said Jeth with a sigh.

“That is a vast improvement over the vast majority of submissions I receive for consideration every day. However, I saw nothing about a sparkly vampire, a dystopian society where kids have to kill each other—or at the very least self-segregate into arbitrarily preordained factions—or a barely teenage wizard of not just ‘questionable’ but outright ‘asking to be questioned’ sexuality, despite that being borderline illegal.”

“I’m sure we... she could drop in a subplot along those lines,” suggested Jeth. “It’s not like we give a shit anymore.”

“Maybe even all of them,” added Sack. “And toilet jokes. We could add toilet jokes about mountain goats?”

“Well OK then,” said the agent. “It’s a good start, but I need more. Do you have anything else for me?”

“We do,” said Jeth. “Recently we’ve been ghostwriting poetry for a fictional character that doesn’t exist. Would that be of interest to you?”

“Poetry?” replied the agent. “Kindly get the fuck out of my office!”

Dead Air

The idea of it crept her out—as it did everyone else. But, also like everyone else, she found it oddly compelling.

With a sigh, she flicked on the radio. While she poured a bowl of low-carb breakfast cereal into a bowl and the kettle began rumbling away behind her, she listened with distracted disinterest to an advert where Orson Welles told her that a new kind of wallpaper-paste was the greatest thing he'd ever tried, although he was careful to point out that he'd never tried eating it. He laughed and you could somehow tell he was still really fat.

The radio—a digital one, not that she really understood what that meant—carried on with another advert where Bill Murray explained, as only Bill Murray could, that she really ought to think about her mobile-phone plan. She needed to communicate more.

She sniggered to herself and mumbled, “I didn’t even know he was dead.” Perhaps he wasn’t?

She took a bite of some rather tasteless crunchy flakes, which had a subtle nuance of cardboard. She scowled and considered how Marilyn Monroe had advised her poorly on what her healthy body craved first thing in the morning. What did she know about having a healthy body anyway, she sneered. When she died, her body was so full of drugs that a cremation would have been a genuine health hazard.

“Next up, we have a discussion with the world-renowned musician, and famous sexual predator, Michael Jackson, in our ongoing series of provocatively controversial interviews,” the radio announcer announced. “And, don’t forget... tomorrow, Adolph Hitler will be explaining why the Jews simply had to ‘go,’ by which he obviously means die, horribly. A panel of seven representatives from

the Jewish community who didn't want to die at all will be joining him, so that should be great fun. Yes, however badly you think you lived your life, you can relax soundly knowing that other people lived theirs much worse."

She heard her own voice humming in anticipation. The controversial interviews were always the best.

'Animal Planet' was a lot of fun too. They used implausible technology way beyond her 'care' threshold to interview animals about what they thought about stuff. It occurred to her that her least favourite creature that ever existed was the mountain goat—the hell and brimfire that those things came out with chilled her to her bones. She sometimes wondered what dinosaurs thought, but "Dinosaur Planet" was part of a premium package that was mostly pork: 1,500+ channels of children that never existed singing 1980s pop ballads—artificially badly, three sports channels dedicated to women's soccer, and a news channel where every story was a simulation of a carefully rehearsed corporate press release. It was almost worth it for the dinosaurs and 'Alien International' where the extraterrestrials talk about how it really was 'all them,' but the 'Subscribe' process was so convoluted she ended up just giving up.

Her favourite though was 'Dead Air.' It was much more civilised than most, in that they interviewed people that had actually been part of civilisation—at least before their lives had come to an unfortunate end—some less unfortunate than others, it appeared.

She poured some boiling water into her instant coffee, and stirred it with a stained stainless-steel spoon. Just for a moment, it occurred to her that a liquid that could permanently etch itself onto a metal whose own name broadcasted that it wouldn't allow such inconveniences to befall it, likely had no place in a biological body.

She wondered why she was so preoccupied by her biological body. Perhaps she needn't be?

She sipped it and smiled. It didn't taste of cardboard at all—just like Albert Einstein had said it wouldn't. She had to admit, that was an odd advertising slogan, but it had certainly worked on her. I mean, it was endorsed by Albert Einstein himself—it had to be good. He had probably invented coffee, or something, probably by accident while making nuclear bombs. He was very clever.

Michael Jackson's voice came out of the radio and she smirked. He explained that his dream had been to touch every child in America, and in return be touched by them, and that if Bill Clinton could get away with it wasn't fair to single him out. There was the unmistakable sound of fire in the background, so we all knew what that meant!

She stuffed another mouthful of 'crunchy-flakes' into her mouth and chewed on them, thinking to herself that she should probably get ready for work. Of course, she couldn't remember where she worked, or if she worked at all, and she was a little hazy about the details of what work actually was.

"I think I was a hair-dresser," she said, although nobody was there to hear it, except in the most tenuous philosophical sense.

Almost as if in reply, Michael Jackson said something about hoping he wouldn't be judged by the ignorant for what he did during his time on Earth—touching children is a beautiful thing, he added almost innocently.

She smiled to herself. It was funny that everyone always noticed how he changed his face and the colour of his skin, but nobody ever talked about what he did to his voice. She was so clever to have noticed, she thought to herself, while chewing on another mouthful of cardboard-tasting crunchy-flakes.

She wondered what Hitler had to say for himself. Amusingly, a spokesman for the ‘Bovine Coalition’ had argued on Animal Planet that it was ridiculous that Humans moaned about genocides while casually eating other creatures and never caring about how barbaric that actually was. Stupid cows, she grinned to herself. It was completely different—Jewish people aren’t delicious at all. Or are they?

Was she Jewish?

Michael was interrupted by Auntie Alice, who had died in an accident with an unstable industrial fridge in a manner that could only be described as ‘hilarious.’

“You’re a horrible man!” she said, outspoken as ever. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Only God can judge me,” he squeaked back.

She nodded to herself, and wondered if that meant he’d be guesting on the ‘Daily Deity’ channel. It wasn’t very entertaining, though the giant spaghetti monster that all the Scientists believed in never failed to deliver. Scientists really are crazy!

“That’s not how this works!” Auntie Alice screamed.

“You tell him, Auntie!” she said, sipping on her coffee.

“I can only be what I was made to be!” Michael argued. The radio presenter laughed at the irony.

Auntie Alice had been her favourite aunt. She made lemon-meringue pie every time she visited and it was just terrible, always tasting slightly of Marlboro cigarettes. The fridge had probably been a lucky escape. Her lungs must have looked like the dustbins round the back of a kebab shop. Of course, there had been no way to tell, since they literally had had to clean up the remains with a pressure-washer.

The radio presenter said, “No more Michael today,” and then he laughed. “We all know where he’s heading. Now, let’s have some more commercial messages from the station that shows you that death isn’t the end, and helps you adjust to your own untimely demise.”

She spooned in another mouthful of Marilyn Monroe-endorsed flakes of chinese cardboard, and wondered what he meant about adjusting to her own demise. She was still alive and well; she had a heartbeat and everything, not that she had ever checked. She had always just taken other people’s word for things like that.

Nothing had changed, except she now had the same recurring nightmare about being chased by a pack of Rottweilers through the local park.

She frowned to herself and wondered what she meant by ‘nothing had changed.’ Changed since what, she thought?

She shrugged and had an idea. “You know what these crunchy-flakes need,” she said to nobody, although perhaps Auntie Alice could hear her—she had no idea how digital radio worked. “Rum and raisin ice-cream.”

An advert came on the radio, and the unmistakable voice of Abraham Lincoln began to speak. “Rum and Raisin ice-cream is darn tooting.’ Of course, it can’t make you fat here, so eat as much as you like. Also, try the cocaine!”

“Thank you, Abraham!” she said, opening her fridge door. She sighed and looked at a mess of macaroni, glued to a piece of paper. She remembered making it when she was only four years old. She remembered clearly the day it had dropped off and the dog had eaten it.

Good times.

The Buzz

It all began two weeks ago, although it feels longer now. I used to have a normal life, a life where I worked on one of those cubicle things and people phoned up to tell me there had been a mistake in the medication and their wife now had a beard, and it was where her nipples used to be.

It wasn't the most rewarding job in the world, but it was normal—painfully, wonderfully, averagely normal.

That was before the world went absolutely mad.

We always knew that things could go crazy but we never knew what it was going to be that would trigger it. Would birds all suddenly attack for no reason? Would giant man-eating rubber plants scour the countryside? We imagined all sorts of terrible things from the safety of our cubicles but what really happened caught us all by surprise—and not in a good way.

I went to work on a Tuesday. My Tuesdays were basically like everyone else's Mondays, since I'm a rampant alcoholic. My boss, Mrs Savage always said she'd see to it that I'd lose my job over it but she never followed through. Frankly, the ultimate punishment for all this was just being allowed to carry on working there, and I think she realised that just as well as I did.

One time I had a phone-call from a woman who said her husband's nose had fallen off. We were meant to be selling him a special drug to fix a minor case of angina but somehow the 'nose-drop-off' medicine had been sent to him instead. She was remarkably calm about it all. I gave her a 20% discount on her next order and a box of free muffins. She was fine about it after that.

We have a lot of free muffins in an office down the hall. You get vanilla if your nipples get hairy, raisin if you go blind and

someone has to die horribly before we're allowed to send out the chocolate ones. I sent her them anyway, just because she was so nice about everything.

But it made me think. It made me realise just how lucky we are to have noses that have never dropped off. Most of us—at least! It also made me wonder, to a lesser degree, why there is medicine for that. Who knows? I remember feeling sure nothing bad would come of it.

And then, this dreadfully fateful Tuesday morning I arrived at work. As usual, for a Tuesday, I was a bit late, having stopped off at the bathroom to get rid of a bacon sandwich that my stomach decided wasn't in anyone's best interest.

Mrs Savage was there waiting for me, dressed in a charcoal-grey man's suit and her leathery face pinched down into a scowl. She was tapping her foot and looking at her watch. She opened her mouth to speak but there was this weird buzzing noise coming from all around.

Being an alcoholic who took his addiction seriously, I just assumed the noise was coming from inside my skull but as I turned to look, I saw other people had also noticed. Tracey, from delivery-management, stood up and watched, her mouth gaping open. She's very attractive and wears incredibly short skirts, which is why she still worked there while people's noses were falling off all over the place.

She covered her mouth with her hand.

Mrs Savage was backing away and looking really quite worried. I wondered if this was one of those dreams where you arrive at work naked, only it turns out it isn't a dream. I couldn't believe I had done that again, but I then realised I was fully clothed.

But it wasn't me they were staring at, it was Mrs Savage. She turned white and her eyes bulged in fear. She grew ever more pale and slumped to the ground, crashing down to her knees.

She gasped and a dreadful croaking noise emanated from the back of her throat. She blinked and managed to gasp, "Tell Alex from accounts... Don't send the Filoxophene to the Smith account. They're late paying again."

With that, her flabby white body crashed to the floor, gasping as her nose broke against the linoleum.

To my shame, I rather tastelessly said, "I'm glad you're finally dead, you dreadful, toxic old bitch! I hope you burn forever in the sulphur stench of Hell's toilet!" and I said it rather more loudly than I intended. Tracey turned to look at me with a sort of judgemental glare. I can't deny that it hurt.

Of course, it got worse from there. While I gently kicked my supervisor in the hope that my shoe might bring back the precious spark of human life, if only I tapped it into her ear hard enough, Mr Davidson began making a strange gurgling noise.

He turned a sickening shade of white—most unbecoming a man from India—and then he cried out at the top of his lungs, "Tell my wife I never cared for her cooking," before collapsing to the ground in a heap.

All of us gazed with rapt interest at our two fallen comrades. A thought passed through my head that any one of us could be next—and what a relief it was that nobody's nose had fallen off. Then, everyone began screaming and they ran off in all directions in a blind panic.

This, as everyone knows, was just the beginning.

A week later the city had been quietened. Bloodless corpses were falling everywhere. In a bizarre twist, I saw a man explode. He

was peacefully looting my favourite off-license and we casually began discussing the weather. He wasn't a drinker, and graciously stood aside as I emptied the top shelf behind the counter. I had never been able to financially reach such lofty heights but reaching them now was much less of a challenge since the exsanguinated corpse of the sales assistant was now ideally positioned for standing upon.

My new friend, Mr Soonbedead munched on some massively overpriced Kettle-Chips in smoked-oak-salmon and dill flavour, and commented about the unseasonal warmth. Then there was that dreadful buzzing. I took another deep swig of 100 year Lephriug single malt and told him we should probably get out of the way.

He gasped loudly and his eyes bloomed into an expression of sheer terror. He seemed to swell, he reddened and then he popped. His skin shredded like someone had put a tyre-inflation hose into the rectum of a large rat, which I saw on the internet once but never had the opportunity to try myself. It hilariously exploded, much the same way as Mr Nowbedead—or whatever his name was.

I shielded my eyes and fled, my bottle in hand as I ran into the empty, silent streets.

Why was I spared this dreadful fate that was silencing the world? I sipped some more whisky and pondered what it was that made me so immune, so different from the other victims. Then I drank some more, and some more again. I just couldn't figure it out.

Eventually I found 'The Village.' I stumbled upon it, a shambolic assemblage of overturned dustbins, filled with wood and debris, lit and glowing their effervescent life-giving orange.

It was occupied by street-drinkers, men of stout character who had weathered this terrible storm. I found myself among kindred spirits and I quickly was taken into their trust.

Wild old 'One-Eyed-Bob,' a man with shockingly few fingers, told me a wild tale. I sipped on my bottle of malt liquor, now filled with something that reminded me of freshly-painted walls, and I listened.

Bob said, "They banded together, so they did. They joined forces against the likes of man and they sealed our fate."

I wondered what he was talking about, but I chose to say nothing.

He continued, "It was them. They got smart and they turned against us."

"Who?" I finally asked, realising he was going to just carry on saying things like this until I asked.

"It were the mosquitoes!" he told me. There was a sober ring of agreement from the dreadfully un-sober people around us.

"The mosquitoes?" I said incredulously and scratched my head. Could it be that they would form a resistance against all mankind? What had we ever done to them? "That sounds like bullshit!"

"It all started when they drank the blood of a man dosed up with toxic medicine that made his nose drop right off his face," Old Bob said.

"Nothing to do with me," I told him, looking away. "There's a box of chocolate muffins that prove it."

And that was how the end of the world started.

But... we had a plan. A week later, when we had run out of paint-thinner and our eyesight had mostly returned. The last of us began an odyssey to the promised land. We were heading for the place where such dreadful terrors had been spared.

We headed out to Ireland.

The Brethren

“You know what I hate?” Dale growled angrily. His hands were clenched firmly together and he gazed at them awkwardly, averting his eyes from the dozens of expectant eyes that were staring at them. “I hate those goddam wolves.”

On the far side of the support circle, inside an ageing church hall with posters on the wall for a midsummer jumble-sale that happened so long ago that the poster might now actually be worth something to a collector, Sandra cried out, “Oh hell, yeah! Damn those hairy bastards to hell.”

Dale appreciated the support, as always. He was new to the group, and Sandra appeared to be a gigantic Mid-Western woman that looked like several large vermin had made a nest in the many folds of her foul-smelling flesh. He knew that such things were impossible—she would have devoured them long before that was remotely likely, possibly through osmosis.

“Now, Dale!” the leader said with a slight tone of weary admonishment. “We don’t hate anyone here—we’re all about accepting everyone and everything.”

Dale gazed at his hands and sighed. He didn’t feel very accepting, which was largely why he was there. “No, I can’t help the way I feel,” he said. “I hate those soulless wolf bastards. I hate them.”

“I’m offended!” a wiry man called out, as he crossed his arms over his chest and frowned his single eyebrow as deep as it would go.

“Shut up, Gary,” snapped Sandra, quite unacceptingly.

“No, I’m definitely offended,” he said more firmly. “Wolves are glorious, a beautiful, majestic creature.”

“You’re not a bloody wolf, Gary!” Sandra told him. “You’re a goddam racoon. It’s nothing like a wolf.”

Gary hung his head sadly and grumbled to himself. “Racoons are majestic too...” he said softly.

The group leader coughed and said loudly, some way below a shout, “Now, now. It does us no good to argue amongst ourselves.”

Dale scowled and crossed his legs, then crossed his arms over his chest. “Makes me feel better,” he grumbled.

“Tell him, Dale!” Sandra cried out, half laughing with a voice that sounded like someone putting out a cigar with a bottle of whiskey, while the whiskey was sealed, and while the person was still smoking it.

“Dale,” he said. “Wolves aren’t our enemies!”

Graham, the group leader was a thin, pale and largely pathetic man. He looked like he spent most of his time begging for change at street-corners and had been sent home to change into more respectable clothes. “Our true enemy is the lack of acceptance we get from society as a whole. We shouldn’t turn on each other.”

“You would say that, Graham,” Dale said angrily. “You’re a filthy goddam rat. Even other rats don’t accept rats.”

Graham glared at him for a tiny moment and then looked away. “We can’t all be wolves, Dale, but that’s not the fault of the wolves.”

Sandra shouted, wresting control of the group from Graham’s weak grip, “But we can all agree that goddam wolves are the worst, can’t we?”

“No!” Gary grumbled. “We can’t!”

“Shut up, trash-panda!” she told him, earning herself a laugh from Dale.

“That’s racist, or something!” Gary said, gasping in horror.
“How dare you? You goddam pig!”

Sandra grinned a partly toothless smile and said, with a glimmer in her eye, “I’m proud to be a pig, garbage-man!”

Gary looked away.

Graham said, standing up and waving for silence, “Alright, alright everyone.” The support group quietened down and stared at him. “I can agree that wolves annoy those of us who aren’t as fortunate…”

“Fortunate?” interjected Tom. He was a large, horribly dressed gentleman who had the style and grace you would expect of a colourblind gorilla on a mission to offend. “I aint envious of no wolves. I can tear a wolf limb from limb with my bare feet.”

Graham glared at him and then looked sheepishly away.
“Some of us can’t,” he said. “Some of us aren’t as strong as others.”

Tom laughed and quipped, “Sounds like some of us shoulda’ been gorillas.”

“How did you get to be a gorilla anyway?” asked Dale.

Tom shrugged. “How did any of us become anything? I don’t know how these things work.” He turned to Graham. “How did you get to be a rat? What happened?”

Graham sighed and gazed down at his own threadbare shoes.
“The spirit of the animal entered my soul, just the same as with all of you. In my case, the rat spirit joined my own, and then, once a month, I morph into the glorious form of a were-rat.”

Dale stifled a laugh and said, “And then you go on a ‘glorious’ evening of eating your own poop, under the silvery light of the moon?”

Graham glared at him, an icy state that didn’t contain very much acceptance at all. “Pretty much, yes.”

“And I’m a were-pig!” Sandra said proudly. “Once a month I can eat whatever the hell I want, but I have to look after my figure the rest of the time.”

Tom burst into laughter and shouted, “You looked after that thing? I would hate to see your car!”

Sandra scowled at him and narrowed her eyes. “Goddam were-gorillas. You hairy sonova-bitch!”

Graham turned his nervous attention to Dale. “You never told us what you are, Dale?” he said. “What is it you’ll be turning into tomorrow night?”

Dale’s eyes widened. “It doesn’t matter what I’m going to turn into!” he told them. “What bothers me is how werewolves are all romanticised and get cool movies made about them. What do the rest of us get? We get laughed at in weird online shorty stories by crazy indie-authors who can barely grammar propper. It aint right!”

Sandra shouted, “Hell yeah! Damn those lucky wolf bastards!”

“Yeah!” Tom whooped as he banged his chest. “I’ll bet you’re just as big a threat to life and limb as the rest of us. I bet you could shred a man down to his bones with your otherwise form’s bare teeth!”

“Hell yeah, I could,” Dale told him. “Yeah, I’m a savage. My otherwise form is a destroyer. I scare myself just thinking about it sometimes.”

“Cool!” Sandra said, unironically. “My were-pig form once ate a whole, live man. It turned out he was a mortgage advisor, so no real harm was done.”

Tom shouted excitedly, “Hell, yeah! What about you, Graham? You ever kill a man?”

He shrugged. "I'm a rat. I killed a cockroach once, but it was already missing two of its legs."

Tom laughed rudely and said to Gary, "I aint even asking you. No racoon ever did nothing worse than knock the lids off my dustbins, or run off with my dentist's remote!"

"That's..." Gary began, but gave up, sulking.

Tom gazed raptly at Dale who began to squirm awkwardly. "What about you?"

"I worry that I could..." Dale told him. "I worry."

Sandra said, "But what are you?"

"Nothing to be taken lightly..." Tom said, goading him sarcastically. "Come on, you ain't no rat or racoon, right? Can't be worse than that..."

"No..." he said, shifting awkwardly. For whatever reason, he found himself reddening as he blurted out, "Penguin."

"Penguin?" several people blurted out at once. And then, there was the least welcome silence that Dale had ever experienced.

"One of those bigish ones..." he said nervously. "The beak is quite sharp."

"Lucky for the rest of the human race that they aren't all made of dead fish, right?" Tom said, trying to sound serious but then bursting into really quite rude laughter.

"Penguin?" Sandra said, sounding bewildered. "You were entered by the spirit of a flabby fish-bird? Some people just ain't even tryin'."

"Goddamit," Graham said. "I know we don't judge but..."

"Penguins are serious business..." Dale pleaded.

Even Gary was grinning and shaking his head at him.

"I hate wolves," Dale grumbled to himself.

All these goddam groups were the same.

Monster

Detective Fallow sighed to himself. He rubbed his hand over his head, feeling the prickling sweat that moistened his forehead. Steeling himself, he pressed the button, playing back the interview of the suspect from earlier that day. He told himself that it just couldn't be right. It couldn't be!

The monitor flicked from black to a display of the inside of the cell.

Detective Trimble gazed at his prisoner. She was so ordinary, such a normal, everyday kind of person that it was hard to accept that she had done what she apparently had. Long brown hair cascaded down her back in long, very gentle waves. Her face was unremarkable: while attractive, she wasn't beautiful, and while smart, she was not unusually intelligent. She was a wife, a mother, an ordinary woman living an ordinary life that most would find perfectly fulfilling.

"Do you need some water?" he said, probably just to break the silence. She had been staring at the white, interrogation room wall for several minutes, just emptily glaring at it.

"No," she said dryly. She didn't even look at him. Her voice was thin but balanced, and came out as if it was piggybacking on the end of a shallow sigh. She was dressed in white robes, ones that had been issued to her by the forensic team who were now analysing her clothes.

There didn't really seem to be much point.

"Why don't you tell me your side of it?" he said softly, leaning forwards. He was inviting a confession; he was trying to seem like her friend.

“You wouldn’t believe me,” she said. She turned for a moment, gazed into his eyes and then blinked, shrugged very slightly, and looked away.

“I might,” he said, trying desperately to look as nice as any favourite uncle at any family party. He had been a good choice, he was a chubby, jolly kind of man with a rugged smile. He seemed like the kind of guy you’d want to have a beer with, and not like a man who had coldly shot and killed five suspects during his career—so far—and had required not a single word of counselling because of it, which was precisely what he actually was.

“I told the other officer. She didn’t believe me. Nobody is ever going to believe me.”

“I am ready to believe you,” he told her. “I know you killed your husband, and I’m ready to believe you when you tell me the real reason why you did it.”

“Killed my husband?” she smiled knowingly. “You’re really not ready...”

The detective flashed his most rugged smile. “Try me?”

“My husband used to say that,” she said. She turned her head slowly and her dark eyes peered into his. “Of course, that was before I went to the shed, picked up a hammer and beat him to death with it.

“The first blow hurt—he just cried out in pain. It took three blows to the skull to get him to the ground.

“Even then, after all that, he was still wide awake. He was crying out in pain and was bleeding from behind the ears. He had dark hair so it was difficult to know how bad it was.

“I knelt down and hammered again. The next one caught him right in his left eye-socket. He made a muffled scream and then

stopped. He huffed this horrible ragged breathing, gasping in what I can only assume was quite appalling agony.

“The hammer had gone right into the eye and it had just gone, burst open all over the side of his face. It was red and black. I remember being oddly surprised, in the little rational part of my mind that was quietly watching it all, that it seemed strange that a white eye had black liquid in it.

“He was still moving. His hands started clenching in and out and this rasping and huffing got worse. I imagine the pain was growing intense and he was also going into shock.

“I hit him again, three more times. I know I hit his forehead because it split open. The pink skin tore away and then the blood just poured out, gushing and spluttering. I could see little shards of bone, stuck to the dark grey metal of the hammer and all around his face, just floating in the blood and tissue. One of my blows caught his nose and it split right along, from the bridge, downwards. The rasping sound got worse and then started to come through his face, through the holes in his nasal area, accompanied by huge black bubbles of thick blood.

“But he was still moving. I hit him again and again. Each blow made his arms jolt. He sighed with each impact, groaning as if I had done no more than roll over in the night and poke him with my knee. Instead, I was smashing his skull to pieces and my hammer was now plunging into the soft, grey tissue of his brain. I could see in through the bone; I could see bloodied, pulped mass of brain-tissue inside where the tip had gone in about an inch.

“He was still moving. I got up then and just hit him over and over again. I don’t remember how many times, I just kept going until he stopped. Eventually he did. He laid there in silence, a growing

dark-red pool oozing from the mess of skin, bone and flesh that had used to be his face.”

She looked at him and narrowed her eyes. A faint, sympathetic smile crossed her very average lips. “If you need to believe something, believe that I did all of that, because I did. I’m not denying a single word of it.”

The detective was silent, and averted his eyes, sighing deeply to himself. “But why?” he asked. “Why did you do it? Why did you kill your husband?”

She shrugged and gave a tiny, almost imperceptible chuckle. “I didn’t,” she told him. “I just did what had to be done.”

Detective Fallow rubbed his head again as he stopped the recording. “Dear god, no!” he muttered to himself. He flicked through the menu of the various recordings. He knew there was a time when she had explained why, but it had been some hours earlier. He just had to find it. He had to assure himself that this was all wrong.

The file had proven rather easy to find, and as he clicked it, he sighed to himself. Surely this wasn’t what he thought it was.

He played the file.

Detective Ramirez was a seasoned officer, someone everybody respected, but this was new to her. It was a crime of such viscous horror that not many in the department had ever dealt with anything quite like it.

Still, it seemed that she was doing well: she had the trust of her suspect and was leading the conversation just as well as anyone could, under the circumstances.

“Why did you kill your husband?” she said.

The woman bit her lip and shook her head. She appeared confused. “I didn’t kill my husband,” she said.

The detective paused to glance up at the camera and sighed to herself. She blinked and continued. “Why don’t you tell me in your own words what happened, and why you did it.”

The woman looked at her, gazing into her eyes. “It started a few days ago,” she said and then looked away. She frowned as if struggling to remember, or perhaps struggling with the burden of remembering.

“Go on...”

“Jim came home from work,” she began. “It was a Tuesday just like any other Tuesday. At first, nothing was different. It was my turn to cook and he came in to see what I was making. It was pasta, since I can only cook three things.

“He laughed and said it was fine, he said he liked my pasta—which was a lie—and went off to change. As he went into the hall, he walked past a mirror. I thought I saw something, but assumed it was my mind playing tricks on me.” She frowned. “I couldn’t have seen what I thought I saw.”

“What did you think you saw, Mrs Dallis?” the detective said softly.

She looked at her, confused and worried. Then, the concern melted away and she said, “It wasn’t him. It wasn’t him in the reflection.”

“Who was it?” she said.

“Nobody,” Mrs Dallis replied. “It wasn’t a who. And what it was that I saw, I have no idea.”

The detective glared at her and pulled herself back. She glanced at the camera once again.

“I saw it again later. As I went into the bedroom, he turned and the light from the bathroom caught him. I just stared at what was there.”

The detective said, her voice low and professional, “What did you see?”

The woman shook her head. “It wasn’t my husband,” she said. “Then what?”

She hung her head. She said, somewhat mechanically, “I just did what had to be done.”

Detective Fallow had seen enough. He left the office and walked out towards the interrogation room where the suspect was still being interrogated after four days.

Detective Ramirez saw him and flashed him a weary smile. She held up her own cardboard cup of coffee and cried out, “You need one of these, boss? I’m going to get a top-up.”

He heard her but the words barely registered. His mind was elsewhere. His thoughts were a chaotic jumble. He was driven now by fear and was losing himself in it.

At the end of the corridor, Detective Trimble was looking directly at him. Except, it wasn’t Detective Trimble, even though it wore his clothes and, on most of its body, it still wore his skin. But the head was deformed, twisted and inhuman. The mouth reached all the way from the top of the skull on each side, right down to the base of its chin. Teeth, like a series of broken razors jutted in and out of the slashed flesh that carved across its leathery, grey face. The eyes were smouldering pools of blackness with glowing red dots in the middle, sucking in the light from all around, swallowing up sanity and reason.

Somehow, it started to grin at him.

“Boss?” He heard a voice beside him. “You need some coffee, boss? Is everything alright? You don’t look so good.”

His hand reached to his hip and he unclipped the safety bar of his holster before his fingers began wrapping around the butt of his firearm.

“Step back, Rimirez!” he told her. “I’m just doing what has to be done.”

Offend Me

Ms Mara Caldwell glared out from the monitor at the man she was interviewing, his own impression brought to life for her through a small camera mounted above. She hated him; she seethed with a broiling inner rage that she had to struggle against to maintain a veneer of professionalism.

The flat screen was filled with her angry visage as she impatiently chewed her lip.

“Mr Haynes,” she began with a sneer. “You are the man behind this horrible, offensive service. Is that correct?”

“Correct!” he told her. He peered back into the monitor she was displayed on and flashed her a smirk. “Of course, it isn't just me. There are many gifted people behind me who do most of the actual work!”

Her sneer returned. “Mr Haynes, it's come to my attention that your platform has caused a suicide. Does that not bother you?”

He looked unwaveringly into her eyes, his smile never faltering. “Not in the slightest.”

She looked away, appalled. Swallowing her urge to verbally attack him, she said, “What gave you the idea to make something so utterly reprehensible?”

“People like you!” he told her earnestly. “The ‘OffendMe’ service was an idea we had some years back. People are far too scared of offending people these days. They're afraid of being offended. We provided a forum where they could say absolutely anything they liked to anyone they felt like saying it to.

“The trick is simplicity: you simply sign up, allow the service access to your other social media, and the service does the rest for you. You're free to browse through the profiles of any other member,

saying anything you feel like saying. Anything! I'm actually surprised nobody else thought of it."

She crossed her arms over her chest as her sneer hardened. "Disgusting!" she muttered bitterly.

He laughed, a deep, raucous laugh of amusement, rudely aimed squarely at her. After calming himself down, he said with a light chuckle, "You're the one that's disgusting. I'm providing a free speech platform to consenting adults, whereby they can speak their minds, but only with other consenting adults who want the same.

"You advocate censorship and oppression, while we encourage open discourse; you want to silence people while we give them a voice."

She shook her head and grimaced. "May I remind you that a young woman is dead!"

He beamed a smug, but undeniably wide grin. "Young women die every day, and most of them don't deserve it. That's why our company donates to various aid-charities around the world. We don't even limit ourselves to young people, or women. We help everyone! I could show you a picture someone took of me for some reason, selflessly giving an old, homeless man my shoes!"

"That's not the point!" she snapped. "The point is that a young woman took her own life after someone made an offensive comment about her."

"An offensive comment that was made on a platform called 'OffendMe'," he reminded her. "Let's not forget that she signed up to the platform herself. She knew the rules, what she was in for. She joined our community fully aware of what might be said about her."

As her apparent anger continued to bubble, he shook his head in dismay.

"Why can I never get you to understand?"

“Perhaps I don’t want to?” she suggested coolly with a smug little smile.

“Yes, maybe that’s the problem? Maybe you’re so entrenched in your own myopic perspective that it just isn’t possible to open your eyes?”

She glared at him intently. “I think you’re conflating understanding with agreement!”

He took off a thick pair of metal-framed glasses and sighed. “This is the same response we always get,” he grumbled. “People like you project your own failings onto everyone around you. You accuse others of the very things you do yourselves.”

“Might I remind you about the dead girl!”

“Right!” he agreed, rubbing his temples. “The dead girl. What about her?”

She nodded to herself on the other end of the conversation, off in some other place. “You just don’t care, do you?”

“Well,” he began with a shrug. “Frankly... no I don’t.

"Behind the scenes, this service processes a great many analytical algorithms. And I know that’s a lot of long words, so I’m going to put it to you in simple terms!”

This earned him an angry frown.

“Most of what we do here is collect data and review information. The metrics we gather from unbridled social interaction is extremely valuable in building the future of artificial intelligence. Once we remove the checks and balances of conventional social niceties, we get to see how people really think. It’s no exaggeration to say we’ve been able to map the emotional core of people’s innermost thoughts on an unprecedented scale.”

She growled and clenched her teeth. "Stop! You're just trying to justify the death of this young woman! This poor girl was viciously bullied and attacked."

He smiled thinly and looked just a little annoyed.

"You know, I have reviewed the history and logs quite carefully." He broke into a smile and continued, "I wonder what you would do if I told you that she wasn't as innocent as you think?"

"What?" she gasped, choking on her rage.

"This girl... this poor victim of yours, made openly offensive comments to over one hundred members. She made disparaging comments on everything from dress-sense, weight, sexual orientation and physical appearance. She insulted a large number of men for their height, and a larger number of women for their width."

She frowned, and her lips opened to speak but nothing came out. On the second try she managed to say, "And that justifies her death?"

"Her suicide!" he corrected, holding up his index finger. "You see, it appears that five people banded together to insult her back. She took their comments personally and responded the way that she did."

"They ganged up on her!" the woman shouted defensively.

"Exactly!" He leant forward towards the monitor with renewed optimism. "Don't you see that her suicide was her own reaction? Can't you understand that her being offended wasn't the problem?"

"She committed suicide!" she screamed.

He shook his head and sighed deeply before putting his glasses back on and pushing them up to the bridge of his nose.

Softly, he continued, "This was a young woman with a great deal of emotional problems. She was overweight, she had borderline personality issues, she was a poor academic achiever and expressed

hostility towards anyone she perceived as different.” He paused to take a breath and shook his head sadly. “This young lady was a mess. A person like this has been failed by the school system, failed by the mental health community, failed by society, failed by the media, and failed by her own peers.

“She retreated into our service to take her anger out on strangers, and it was her that went too far. The offensive comments weren’t the problem, it was a reaction to the problem. Her suicide was inevitable because her life was already not worth living.”

She scowled angrily. “There you go again. You’re just victim blaming.”

“Yes!” he said, and laughed to himself. “I’m explaining to you that there was a reasoning behind her actions. It’s like the old saying, ‘It’s the last straw that breaks the camel’s back.’ We don’t blame the straw and call it the problem when the poor camel is overloaded with a ton of broken rocks.”

“I think you’re appalling!” she said, looking away in disgust.

He leant back in his chair and looked up thoughtfully. “Last chance!” he muttered.

She looked back and frowned curiously at his comment.

“Do you know that less than ten percent of the total comments made on this service are even considered remotely offensive by anyone? If you filter out members signed up for less than a week, that drops by over half, and most of what’s left would be categorised as friendly banter.

“People just aren’t as outwardly aggressive to one another as we’d previously believed. We monitor everything, and our analysis shows that people are generally accepting of race, gender and identity. The only thing that genuinely produces hostility is aggression directed towards them.”

“Tell that to the poor woman who killed herself!” she said with a sneer.

He grinned. “Well we might have been able to do that if she hadn’t just come here to attack everyone.”

“You really are appalling!” she scolded him, shaking her head disapprovingly.

He gave a weary sigh of exasperation. “Why won’t you understand?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Why won’t you?”

He pulled off his glasses once again and began wearily rubbing the bridge of his nose between his fingers. “This is groundbreaking research!” he told her. “The communication metrics we’re gathering will be behind next-generation AI. We need to observe truthful, authentic human interaction and we can’t do that if you sanitise people’s speech patterns until they’re incapable of expressing themselves. We need to give them the freedom and ability to say what they actually think.

“Your suicidal girl might not be dead if she’d been able to say what she really felt all along. Think what might have happened if people were able to listen to what she needed to say before it was too late for her to say it?

“You see, being offended is often good for us. We can take the comments people make, filter them intelligently, and decide if we really are at fault and if something about us needs to change. It can be good for us to hear that we’re making a mistake.”

“You think you’re helping?” she cried out in sarcastic shock. “Are you seriously telling me that you think you’re doing good work here?”

“Well what do you think you’re doing?” he laughed.

“I’m going to start by closing down your wretched service!” she told him sternly.

“Well, that would be the end of you!” he said with a wry grin. “With nothing to be offended about, you’d cease to exist, wouldn’t you? You’d be nothing.”

“What?” she gasped.

He stood up and motioned for a young female technician to come over with a roll of his hand. “Get rid of her. I’ve had enough.”

“Again?” sighed the engineer.

“Yeah!” he said wearily as the woman on the screen peered out at him in perpetually offended horror. “Just can’t get her to work properly!”

The very young, casually-dressed, computer expert rubbed her untidily braided hair and began tapping away on her tablet. “Maybe you’re expecting too much?”

“I dunno. It’s just not capable of learning!” he grumbled, gesturing to the monitor.

Mara Caldwell frowned, her face flushing red. “How dare you refer to me as a thing.”

He sneered at it and returned his attention to the technician. “It has no flexibility in the way it thinks. It doesn’t seem able to understand any perspective other than its own!”

“We could tweak it up a bit?” she suggested. “It’s only software, we can change it however we like.”

He shook his head and smiled at her wearily. “We can’t do that. We have to let the algorithms define it on their own terms. ‘Mara’ must only ever be a computer-generated character based on the raw data we gather. This study has to be done correctly if…” He let the sentence trail off.

“And the dead girl?” she asked. “You want me to restart both of them?”

“Sure,” he said. “Reboot both and update the database. Randomise race, age and gender characteristics and we’ll see how well they get on next time.”

“At least the suicide is an anomaly,” the technician suggested solemnly as she continued tapping away on her tablet. “That only happens once in, what? Ten thousand tries?”

“Yeah!” he agreed. “If only that thing was as capable of change,” he added, jabbing his thumb towards the screen. “We’d all be better off!”

“How dare you...” said Mara, horrified, as the monitor flashed once and her face vanished from the simulated background for all eternity.

The Other Foot

“Thank you for coming,” said the personnel consultant. “Please take a seat.”

The office was much like any other office you would find in a modern corporate building, aside from it being located on the ground floor of a stone cottage, and illuminated by candlelight. The consultant’s desk was made of dark and very old oak, and was considerably larger than it really needed to be. On it sat a stack of papers, a modern laptop adorned with satanic stickers, and a skull carved out of a rock that was exactly as inviting as you might imagine. Other than that, a perfectly ordinary modern office.

“Thank you,” said the prospect. “I’m really glad you made time to see me today. I’ve been interested in joining a modern coven for some time now—it’s been a dream of mine for years!”

The prospect was dressed in black, a tight, body-hugging dress that showed off her voluptuous curves, her long, shapely legs and perfect, lilly-white skin. A long cape billowed around her as she moved. She looked every inch the part of a modern witch—exactly what she would hopefully become, if today went well. She smiled to herself, her lips painted bright blood-red.

“Well we’re not quite there yet. Let’s take a look at your resume and see if you’re cut out to be a witch, and then we can see if there’s somewhere that’ll have you.”

The consultant perused the small stack of papers, occasionally humming to herself and raising her eyebrows as her eyes caught on something of interest. She made a sort of annoying clicking sound with her tongue every few seconds. An intolerant person would probably find it quite annoying, but the prospect of course was beyond such things.

“It says here you identify as a woman, is this correct?”

“From birth, yes. Is that a problem?”

“No, no... That is your right. We don’t judge here, we accept.”

The consultant continued perusing the papers, and then turned her attention to the laptop. After what seemed like several minutes of mouse-clicking, tongue-clicking, nodding, tutting and humming, she began to shake her head.

“Looking at your FriendBook account, you don’t seem to have posted anything particularly problematic in recent history, and I notice you have spoken out on a number of social issues that are currently trending—while offering no tangible assistance—so I really get the impression that you’re just better than other people. I particularly liked your recent comments in support of LGBTQ rights.”

“It’s actually LGBTQ+ now.”

“My apologies. It’s vital we use the correct terminology for our oppressed brethren. So that’s all good. However, your friend list is a point of some concern. It seems that around 25% of your friends aren’t quite as diverse as the other 75%.”

“Meaning...?”

“Well, it’s not a deal-breaker, but you might want to consider unfriending some of those 25% to improve the ratio. Or make friends with more people of diversity. It’s not a rule as such, but some of the sisters may feel a little bit threatened, and we have a duty to assure their safety.”

“Would around 15% be acceptable?” asked the prospect. “I can take care of that now.”

“Anywhere between 15 and 20% is fine. You don’t really want it to go too low either.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, like myself, you are a strong, independent person of diversity, capable of doing anything you put your mind to. However, this relies heavily on the pretext that at no point should you ever experience any adversity. You have a god-given right to go through life succeeding at everything you try, and it is the responsibility of that 15 to 20% to ensure that nothing stands in your way.”

“God-given?”

“It’s a turn of phrase, dear. And if on the off-chance something does go wrong, you know whose shoulders it falls on.”

“Theirs!” she said with a smile. “Makes perfect sense.”

“Exactly,” laughed the consultant. “You can’t blame all the world’s problems on people that don’t exist!”

The consultant closed the lid of her laptop, and reshuffled the papers, putting them back in more or less the same place she’d just picked them up from.

“Well, there don’t appear to be any problems this end, so is there anything you want to ask me at this stage?”

“Actually yes. I gather a coven over on West Side has an opening for a diversity officer? I spent around three years writing and enforcing diversity policy at Ogsfridge University, and found it very rewarding.”

“That is correct. Their last officer got into a bit of a scuffle with a sacrificial goat, because it seemed the goat in question had other ideas about the whole situation. Needless to say they stopped using goats after that, but as she lay on the floor bleeding out, she screamed some really quite offensive things. If she’d survived, she’d probably have been let go anyway. The coven has been striving to be more inclusive and progressive, and are expanding their social-justice measures all the time. I’m sure you’ll fit right in.”

“Sounds perfect! My previous experience gave me a real understanding of the need for suffering for the greater good. I can’t wait to get started.”

“Ok then. So what value do you think you could bring as a diversity officer?”

“Well, what I learned in my last assignment is that the best way to rid the world of bigotry is to keep it at the front of everybody’s minds at all times. Every word they utter is subject to policing in accordance with rules that change daily—words and phrases they can’t use, or must use, who takes priority in the diversity hierarchy. Micro-aggressions: assumed gender, pronouns, gender roles, jokes focussed on victim identification—you have to point them all out every single time.

“A good strategy is in accosting people over things they said or did in the past, in accordance with rules that hadn’t been decided then. As long as nobody knows what they’re supposed to be doing, they’re going to try all that much harder to get it right.

“Knowing who to target is the real trick. We’ve all seen bigots who are stuck in their ways—nothing is going to get through to them, so why waste your time? You get much better results targeting those who are really trying to be ‘better’ people, and the more they’re capable of following the rules, the harder you slap them back down.

“Complaints about bigotry increased tenfold during my tenure, which I think was a real achievement.”

“I have to say that’s all quite ingenious,” said the consultant. “I think the sisters there will really benefit from your experience. They need someone like you to put them in their place. If you’re happy with that, I can schedule your induction ceremony for this evening! There you will enter the secret hall to stand before the leaders and the senior witches, and proclaim the secret words, the words of power

passed down from one to another since ages past, never written, never seen by the eyes of the unworthy... That sort of thing.”

“Great!”

“Before that though, we must perform the ritual of forgetness.”

“The what now?”

“Strictly speaking,” she began. “Personnel services such as ours are against the rules, but the covens are willing to bend them a little, providing we make some accommodations. As you enter the secret hall, you see, it must be as if guided by the hand of Satan himself.

“I didn’t send you,” she added with a wink. “This meeting never happened.”

“Makes sense, I guess. So I won’t remember anything we just talked about?”

“Not officially. It’s mostly symbolic.”

“Symbols matter more than the real.”

“Exactly. Anyway, I’ll write out instructions on how to get to the coven and leave them in your coat pocket. Now let the ritual begin...”

The hall was much like any hall you might find at a local community centre. Aside from the presence of an altar.

The altar was cast in stone and darkened at the edges, stained with the blood of the innocent. It stood as an edifice to evil, a dark representation of all things unholy from the tiniest lie to the most mountainous of mountain goats.

The smooth, carved top held a metal tray and on it stood a silver challis, filled with still-warm, crimson blood, and the very easy and safe to kill chicken it had come from lay broken beside it. It was

lit with the flames of thirteen flickering black candles, and twisted, vile shadows danced around it.

The hall was large, so large that the outer walls were swallowed by the darkness. It was cold and the night air nipped at her exposed flesh. The sound of the prospect's heels clipping on the hard, stone floor echoed around her as she confidently stepped towards the centre of the great coven hall, a proud, brave smile on her blood-red lips.

But aside from these details, it was effectively just like a local community centre hall.

There was a small crowd waiting for her and an expectant air clung to the room. There was chattering, a drone of hushed, whispered voices. Four of them, sisters in darkness, gazed back as she approached. She could hear more, cloaked in darkness all around.

The prospect stepped up to a raised platform cast in black onyx and carved into a point, along with four others, made into the unmistakable form of a pentagram.

She said the words, the words of power passed down from one to another since ages past, never written, never seen by the eyes of the unworthy.

"I hereby claim membership of this dark union. I am your sister, and I humbly offer my soul in service of our lord and master, the Prince of Darkness. I swear by all that is unholy to never reveal the secrets of our order, and by my blood, I will protect all that we all hold dear. I am ready to be judged."

There was a ripple of whispers from all around.

The leader stepped forwards, taller than the others and with a large, craggy face with a heavy brow. She said, in a very unfeminine voice, "Oh no! She's one of those."

“She?” a smaller, slender witch stepped forward and frowned deeply. “You assume her gender?”

The first, gently fingered a silver chain around her neck and said, “You just called her a ‘she’. You assumed her gender when you accused me of assuming her gender. That’s actually worse.”

The second frowned in bemusement and said, “There! You did it again?”

The prospect gazed from one face to another. She said, “Actually, I do identify as a woman. It’s on my resume. I assumed all witches were women.”

“Oh no!” they both said in unison, stepping back as their jaws gaped open in horror.

“Is that a problem?” she asked, planting her hands on her ample hips.

The leader stepped forward and lowered her black hood, revealing a face that she had not expected. It was a craggy male face, a head that was almost completely bald except for a few straggly strands of hair jutting from the back. There was a lot of stubble—even for a witch.

He scratched his chin once more and said, “Times have changed. This coven is reflective of a more inclusive and tolerant era. We don’t tolerate dinosaurs like you anymore.”

“We’re not terribly thrilled about you wanting to be judged either,” the shorter and definitely more feminine of the two told her. “We don’t judge here—we accept.”

The prospect smirked. “But men can’t be witches—men have to be wizards, or warlocks!”

“You people...” he grunted, rolling his eyes. “Telling me what I can’t do because of some immutable fact of my birth. I’ll have you

know I can be anything I want to be. I am a witch. I am stunning and brave!”

“Exactly,” said the other witch. “Who does she... it... think it is!”

“It?” repeated the prospect, somewhat taken aback. “I’m not an ‘It.’ I just told you I’m a woman!”

“Are you absolutely sure?” the senior witch asked. “You’re probably in denial.”

“What in the name of our Lord Satan are you talking about?”

“No, no, no, no, no!” the tall, male... woman... whatever... coven leader said grumpily. “We now refer to him as ‘Iconic Being Satan.’ Identifying him as a male might offend some among the sisterhood.”

“You just referred to ‘Iconic Being Satan’ as a ‘him,’” said the other senior witch. “We don’t know his preferred pronouns, so I’m offended on his behalf.”

The leader nodded and said, “You referred to him as ‘him’ too. That’s actually worse.”

The prospect narrowed her eyes, trying to piece it all together. “You just called this a sisterhood, did you not? Are we not the daughters of Satan?”

“Men can be sisters and daughters,” he explained. “I myself identify as a non-binary proto-witch multi-feminine being of indeterminate gender specificity. I’m exclusively attracted to people who are not attracted to me.

“In fact, I was voted most female witch this year by a landslide of seventeen votes.”

“Hold on,” interjected a less senior witch. “Are we now allowing ‘female’ as a binary reference point with which to evaluate the level of one’s gender, because I thought we agreed last week that

it perpetuated a toxic stereotype, and that even the concept of gender itself as distinct from other fluid aspects of uniqueness such as race, age and sexual orientation imposes another de-facto binary, when they should all fall upon the same vast spectrum?”

“No,” said the leader. “We decided to abandon that later in the day, and neglected to tell anyone.”

“More importantly,” the more senior witch said with a frown. “How did you manage to get seventeen votes? There’s only twelve of us.”

“We followed the American electoral system. It’s more inclusive, in that it allows people who don’t exist to vote. In any case, I won and you’re just jealous because I’m more female than you.” He leaned back and scratched his balls.

The prospect looked at the faces glaring back at her. “I’m not sure I understand what’s going on here anymore. Is this a joke of some kind?”

“We don’t use jokes,” he told her. “Jokes are a micro-aggression focused on victim identification. They highlight unfairness and inequality so we arbitrarily banned them.”

“To be fair,” the other senior witch said, “It was much less amusing to be told the one about the person of indeterminate origin who held a permanent English citizenship, due to the inequalities of their previous habitational circumstance, the Irish person of unspecified gender (which is a social construct) and the Human from Scotland. In each case the punchline was reduced to them living a fulfilling and happy life where the boundaries of societal norms were forced to be fully accepting of their non-conventional lifestyles.”

“I thought witches were meant to be evil,” said the prospect. “Aren’t we meant to cast fear into the souls of mankind, bring

ruination, suffering and vile misery down upon them, that sort of thing?”

“We prefer ‘peopledom,’ unless they identify as animal-kin,” the masculine thing said. “We’re very modern here—one of us identifies as a dog.”

“Woof!” came a voice from the shadows.

The other witch looked away and grumbled, “Nobody identifies as someone to pick up after it though, I noticed.”

The prospect glared at them angrily. “What happened to you? Did a spell go wrong? Did a potion backfire?”

“That would actually explain a lot!” The shorter, more female female said to the taller, less female man.

“Ah, no!” he said. “We don’t cast spells anymore. It’s elitist, since our victims aren’t capable of casting spells themselves. In fact, do we even still have victims? I forget...”

“We have opportunities now,” the other replied. “We simply try to enlighten them to our forwardness. There’s a pamphlet on all this, if you would like to read it?”

The prospect took a deep breath and shook her head sadly. “I think I’m going to try my luck at a different coven.”

“Why would you do that?” the man—let’s just call it what it is—said with a curious frown. “We’re inclusive here, we accept everyone. We’ll find a place for you, get your dinosaur ways fixed. You could be our new diversity officer!”

“I hope it’s better than the last one,” said the senior witch. “Such terrible language. Why some people think that ‘dying in agony’ is an excuse for poor manners is quite beyond me.”

“I think I’ll pass,” she said, turning to leave. With a very very confused look on her face, she began walking back down from the

altar, slipping very slightly in something foul-smelling that had been left in her path.

The man looked at the senior witch and shook his head.

“Christ almighty, what a complete and utter bitch!”

Empty

The bags were straining in her hand. Taught polythene handles stretched thin and dug painfully into her fingers as she hefted her load along the street. She gasped softly to herself breathlessly as she shuffled along, the bags crashing into her legs as she did so. Above her, birds sang happy songs in a largely cloudless sky, the sun making a brief, rare appearance. It shone down brightly, warming her round young face.

She paced the last few steps to her house, lugging the heaving burden of groceries she had been forced to drag home from the local supermarket. She was sent out often, since her mother scarcely left the house herself.

Her Mum had problems, problems that had started long before she was able to remember. She didn't know what exactly the problem was, or when exactly it began. She had never been brave enough to ask what moment it was that had so thoroughly broken her, leaving her a shadow of her former self.

Whatever it was, it required regular visits to a clinic, pills popped out from bottles that were covered with severe warnings, a nurse coming to their house twice a month to make sure the medication was working, and a social-worker to check that she was coping with it all.

What exactly it was that she was meant to be coping with was open to discussion, since she rarely did anything beyond looking up from the television while dozing on the sofa between rounds of loudly demanding cups of tea. Her daughter took the brunt of it, since it was just the pair of them living in that tired, grim old house. Everyone else had left long ago.

Sam sighed as she made her way to the door. Their house was down a cul-de-sac, languishing in a dull little corner, shyly tucked away from the other houses on the street, a greying and tired building compared to the others.

Their neighbours regarded them suspiciously, and they had never been made to feel welcome, never seeming able to quite fit in. Other children rarely made eye-contact with her, and nobody ever knocked on their front door to pay them a friendly visit.

She put down the shopping and began rubbing the painful red lines that tracked across the inside of her hands. Sam grumbled to herself and began fumbling in her pocket for the house keys. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled with the sense that she was being watched.

It wasn't unusual to have eyes turned towards her and she tried not to notice, to convince herself that what other people thought really didn't bother her at all. But it did bother her. It chilled her to the bone that they might think exactly what she hated most about herself.

The key slipped into the lock, but refused to turn. She sighed to herself and tried again, wriggling it enthusiastically, but careful not to snap it off in the lock. If it were to break, the full and unreasonable force of her mother's rage could be turned against her, which was a fate she would prefer to avoid.

She breathed heavily, a frown on her young face as she pulled the door towards her, fiddling all the while with the key, hoping to shake the lock open. It started to turn, the mechanism feeling old and dry, as if it had not been used in many years. Eventually it yielded with a satisfying click.

Sam sighed heavily and turned back for the shopping. As she reached out, she noticed just how dirty her fingers were. The door

hadn't been cleaned in as long as she could remember. Still, it was much worse than it should be. It was never quite this bad before. With a shrug, she wiped her hands on her jeans and grabbed up the shopping, hefting the swollen bags of goods to her sides.

She nudged the door open with her foot and stepped gingerly inside, hoping that her mother would be sleeping, or be otherwise so engrossed in whatever she was watching that she wouldn't even notice her.

That would mean she could unpack and retreat to her room, stealing a few moments of peace for herself, tucked away from her horrible, empty life.

As she stepped inside, she quickly realised something wasn't quite right. The house smelled musty and stale and dust hung thickly in the air. There was no furniture, just peeling, yellowing walls with a dirty, threadbare carpet running between them. It was all lit by a sickly shaft of light peering in between a pair of tired old curtains, stained brown from age and countless layers of grime.

For a moment she just stood, staring with a frown on her face and a growing sense of unease that was beginning to claw at her stomach. She carefully put down the shopping and quickly went outside.

She peered about, wondering if she'd somehow chosen the wrong house, as if that might even be possible. She stepped back through the door, glancing around with a sense of urgency, convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was, and could only be, the correct place.

They had lived there for thirteen years; there could be no question that this was her home, as it had been her entire life. She began looking around with wide-eyed wonder. What could have caused this? Where was everything? There was no sofa, no

television, none of any of the things that usually littered the place. She slid in past the hall doorway, making her way to the stairs and quickly dashed up them.

She went from room to room, peering into every one in turn, her breathing heavier as she pushed open each tattered old door, every passing moment pushing her closer to panic.

“Mum!” she cried out, but her calls were met with silence. “Mum!” Her voice was louder, the words cracked as her emotions began to strangle her, tears welling in her little blue eyes.

She fled down the stairs, tears rolling down her cheeks as she looked around, edging closer and closer to losing control, to giving in to sheer, unadulterated panic.

At the top of her voice she cried out one last time, an anguished scream, “Mum!”

Her throat burned from the effort, her breath shallow as she stood in the centre of the room, her eyes flashing across every detail of the emptiness. There was nothing there but silence. She could hear her own heartbeat thumping in her ears, her breath blowing over her lips. There was nothing else.

There was nothing else left.

Nurse Baker shook her head sadly as she looked down at the woman, sprawled helplessly on the sofa, gazing up with unblinking, empty eyes.

“She’s catatonic?” a voice asked behind her. She turned to see him writing a report. He seemed to have no more concern than if they’d found an empty box in the house.

She glared at him and said, “It seems that way.”

He nodded, but never looked up from his notes.

“They kept increasing her medication because you kept recommending more—eventually it broke her,” she said sadly to the social worker.

He barely seemed to be listening.

“She’s lost in her own mind now; she’s not coming back from this!”

He looked up and their eyes met for a moment. He didn’t show any sign that he cared in the slightest, but simply shrugged and went back to his report. “So, I’ve got one less crazy old woman to worry about. I’m sure there’s plenty more where she came from.”

Nurse Baker bit her lip hard and tried not to let her feelings overwhelm her.

She found herself saying angrily, “You’ve taken a woman with severe mental health problems, and you’ve tightened and tightened the screws until you’ve destroyed her mind. Who knows what hell you’ve locked her into? There’s no way to know what’s going on in her mind now!”

He shrugged once again. “There’s nothing going on in there,” he said, gesturing with a nod of his head. “Personally I have no sympathy for her. She’s not the first woman in the world to have a miscarriage. Thirteen years is more than enough time to get one’s life back in order.”

The nurse shook her head and said sadly, “Everyone is different. Her mother abused her; she had a terrible life as a child herself. Maybe that contributed?” She gazed at the woman. Her chest moved up and down slowly but behind her eyes, there seemed to be nothing. “I hope wherever she is, that it’s better than this world.”

The social worker smirked and looked around the shabby house. Nobody had cleaned it properly in thirteen years. It smelled awful, the walls were grim, and the carpet was worn and threadbare.

She quipped, “What could be better than this?”

Have you seen my mountain goat?

Let me begin by stating for the record that this is not an analogy. That little bugger, Ronald, has escaped, again, the second time this week!

They say that hindsight is 20/20, and that perhaps keeping a mountain goat in a sprawling metropolis is not the smartest move. They're much more at home in the countryside, where they have all the space they need to roam freely, all the grass they can eat, trees and cliffs to climb. They're happy to go wherever life takes them. They couldn't be more different than—say—a goldfish.

But, we only get to play the hand that life deals us. The devil's deck is shuffled in secret, and it falls to us to do the best we can with the cards we find ourselves dealt. While this all makes perfect sense to a goldfish, it is a difficult concept for even an unnaturally gifted mountain goat to grasp.

I often wonder if it's any easier for us at times!

The fact is that I live in the city, I have to go out to work, and that means he's alone in our apartment for upwards of 8 hours daily. That's a lot of opportunity for a mischievous mountain goat to get bored, and even more so for a bored mountain goat to get mischievous! This situation is unlikely to change, wish as I might it would. So for now, this is our reality.

I've taken no end of precautions, believe you me, but no matter what I try, he always finds a way to slip out—to get outside and do a runner! I can normally find him eventually, if I look hard enough. The trick is always just to look up. He won't be on the ground: it would be a waste of time looking there.

As someone wise and remarkably cunning once told me, if the Sheriff of Nottingham had kept a mountain goat as a companion, he

wouldn't have had half as much difficulty capturing Robin Hood as he hid in Nottingham forest, as his instincts would simply be that much better honed for such endeavours. Sadly, mountain goats were far less common pets in Britain at the time than goldfishes, endemic as they are to North America. Also, that time never really existed, as I believe Robin Hood and his Merry Men were fictional characters. But I digress...

If there's a tree nearby, he's probably perched up there with the birds, and hopefully not relieving himself on car windscreens. It's far less hilarious than you'd think when it's your own mountain goat. You quickly get bored of dealing with the reactions from bewildered strangers to several litres of steaming faeces splashing down upon them, as you run towards it shouting, 'That's partially my fault!'

If there's a cliff, he's probably making his way to the top, enjoying the various exotic plants he finds along the way. Cliff plants are far superior to land plants! Learning such facts is just one of those things that makes mountain goat companionship so rewarding, especially when compared to a tiny aquatic creature with the memory span of a tube of toothpaste.

Sadly, there is little of either kind of plant where we live, but high rises we have plenty to choose from—too many in fact. It's best to start with the tallest: he's normally up on the roof, or climbing up the side, peering through the windows at the office drones, but it's not always easy to get him down.

The fire service have already complained, and a lot of buildings charge a fee to get up there to enjoy the view. I suggested they try putting barbed wire around the top, but I'd rather not repeat where they counter-suggested I stuff my barbed wire.

Eventually, I always do somehow find him. It's predestined! I bring him home, beef up my security and the whole cycle starts over.

At first, it wasn't hard to keep him there. There was a simple operator handle mechanism keeping the windows closed, and although he occasionally tried, he knew he couldn't just push them open. That was until he figured out he could put one foot on the operator handle forcing it down, and the window would then come open with a light shove. He was straight out on the balcony and up the fire escape. He only had to do it the once, and that genie was all the way out of the bottle!

I had to think fast! I managed to flummox him for a time by putting padlocks on them. It wasn't easy: I had to drill holes through the handles to get the locks through, kissing goodbye to my security deposit, but it did seem to do the trick. He still hasn't worked those out—at least not yet. I caught him a couple of times trying to manipulate the locks with a partially straightened paperclip, but he always stops and hides everything when he sees me come in. He knows I'm onto him!

He soon realised he wasn't ideally suited to lock-picking and instead went straight for the front door. The double-latch mechanism proved little challenge for him, as they just needed a simple turn. What a human can do with one hand, a mountain goat can quite easily achieve with the inner pads of two feet, if sufficiently motivated. So to counter this, I installed a key-coded auto-lock, and as a precaution changed the combination on a weekly basis. Being able to correctly enter the right four figure code was the only way in or out!

Unfortunately, one of the weaknesses of such a system is that they're vulnerable to brute force attacks. With only 10,000 possible combinations, it only took him a few days to crack it, and he only needed crack it once, because unbeknownst to me, he had been working on a more long term escape strategy.

I don't know precisely how he did it (though I have numerous ideas), but he was picked up at the local airport in an immaculately tailored pilot's outfit, complete with cap, aviator sunglasses, and all the paperwork required to show that he's a fully qualified airline pilot, attempting to board a Geneva bound 747 with the presumed intent of flying it himself. Having what appears to be a hairy quadruped pilot a plane to that part of the world evidently does not arouse as much suspicion as one might imagine. They only caught him when they checked his passport: it was professional work that would fool most serious inspections, but luckily the officer in charge recognised him from some of his previous, far less sophisticated attempts.

When I went to collect him, I had to say he looked very fetching in his little get-up, but I saw him let out a weary sigh as he realised he would not be getting on any planes that day.

It's not that he's unhappy living with me in my cramped apartment—it was practically his idea. He's the only one in this world I can trust, and he knows that he needs me as much as I need him. We protect each other from the ever present darkness, from the forces that would intend either of us harm. Not just that though, we've grown close, and had some great times together. Whenever I take him to the park, or out into the country for a day trip, he always comes back of his own free will.

It's just instinct that makes him do it! Mountain goats feel easily trapped, and the impulse to escape their captivity and retreat to higher ground just takes over. I can't blame him for being a mountain goat, any more than he can blame me for wanting to keep him safe and close by.

Yet, I can also relate in many ways. I know how it feels to be trapped.

My former wife was absolutely the loveliest person I was ever lucky enough to have met, she always insisted. Blessed were the many days we spent together. Yet in spite of this, I found myself developing an increasingly overwhelming urge to get the hell out of there.

It began innocently enough. She wasn't happy living with me in the countryside, so she found us an apartment in the city, which was fair enough. A change is as good as a rest, they say. I couldn't really afford it, but she arranged for me a high profile job that paid very well. Her father, once a man of the country himself, had remade himself in the city and had founded a very successful technology firm.

There I was tasked with training a revolutionary new AI algorithm through a specially made computerised single-player card game. Truth be told, I felt like a fraud. I didn't know anything about the technology itself. I would just play the hands I'm dealt all day every day, and it would analyse my responses and the choices I made, learning human behaviour in the process. With near infinite possible combinations, the more it observed the more it could learn, I was told. My work was vital to the company's future projects, and I felt privileged to play such a pivotal role in its development. The best part was that I didn't even need to leave the apartment—I could do it all from home while she was out shopping and doing lunch with her friends. Her leisure time was practically a full time job!

It did get lonely there though. I soon lost touch with all my friends, family, and she discouraged contact with them. She didn't exactly forbid it, but made it clear that any attempt to reach out would be taken as a heartless slap to the cheek. Surely she should be

enough for me, she always asserted, tears streaming down her assuredly beautiful face.

Before long, it became increasingly difficult to leave the apartment, even for something as simple as grabbing a snack from the little café round the corner. The building manager was instructed to report my comings and goings, and if I went out without permission, I'd get the cold shoulder for days. On one occasion I popped out to a bookshop and was gone a little longer than expected. Before I knew it, a couple of burly men had arrived to escort me back home, in case I'd somehow gotten lost. I knew I wouldn't hear the last of that any time soon!

Eventually I knew I had to get out of there, even though I would regret it every day. I found online an agency that could help me set up a new identity and a new home somewhere else. They normally helped people to escape abusive relationships, but they'd help those that weren't too—people like me—anyone who was willing to pay their rates, which were oddly excessive. It cleaned out our savings, but I knew it was the right move.

I couldn't risk leaving via the front door, as it wouldn't be long before they were hot on my heels to reel me back in. Then I'd really be for it! Instead, I headed for the roof where a chartered helicopter was waiting to take me to my new home, a new person, with a new future.

As we flew away and the agent briefed me on my adopted identity, I felt a strong pang of remorse about leaving her that way. It was, after all, my home, and she was my wife. We were a family, and I knew there was nothing she wouldn't do for me, even if I didn't always realise it was in my best interests.

At the same time though, I knew it was the only way. No man can live a prisoner, no matter how benevolently intentioned. That life

had been crushing me, driving me into a pit of despair. In the end, instinct took over.

Despite relocating to a different city, I occasionally still spot her father's operatives around town looking for me, trying to bring me back in. They're very persistent, relentless even. Thankfully they're also not very smart, and are easily hidden from.

Why does nobody ever think to look up?!

That was then and this is now, of course. We're way beyond all that. There are other methods of becoming invisible to those who seek you harm. When the devil's deck is dealt, it sometimes brings you fortune. But that would be us getting ahead of ourselves.

One day I will relay to you the thrillingly true account of how five years of corporate hell led to me sharing a one room apartment in London with a hooved mammal endemic to North America.

But it will not be this day. You see, right now, my mountain goat—Ronald—is missing, and it's very important I find him soon.

Because as I said, this isn't an allegory.

What Have I...?

You opened your eyes and a piercing shaft of light drove its way through your mind, making you wince loudly and reflexively turn away.

After a moment, you heard a voice saying, “You’re finally awake then.”

You groaned and hefted your body upwards, gasping to yourself as you shifted your body weight awkwardly against a floor that felt incredibly and unusually hard.

“I’m awake,” you said, rubbing your aching forehead. There was a dull pain that seemed to be running from the front of your skull all the way to the front, feeling like it was cutting directly through your brain.

You looked around the stone room. It was a grim thing, darkened, blackened bricks of rock with mould peering out from between the seams. Streaks of grey ran along the length from the damp ceiling down to the floor. The one small window was too high to see out though and was covered over with heavy metal bars.

“Where are we?” you groaned.

A dark silhouette melted out from the shadows in the corner. It was an older man, well past the prime of his life. He had a short, wiry greying beard on his well-worn face. “A holding cell. The last cell you’ll ever be held in.”

That sounded ominous and the effect wasn’t lost on you. You cringed. “My head...” you said wearily. “It feels like someone hit me.”

“Really?” the man said sarcastically. “When they sent me here, they gently carried me in on a silk chair, carried in by beautiful virgins.”

You looked up at him with an angry scowl. “Maybe I should put in a complaint?”

The old man sat down on the hard stone floor and looked you over. “I would suggest a strongly worded letter.”

You smiled weakly and huffed to yourself. “This is bad, right?”

The man nodded, “Oh, this is as bad as it gets. We’re here to be executed. I’m not sure there is any way this could get any worse.”

“What did you do?” you asked, wincing slightly as you gazed up at the opening, secured with the metal bars. You wondered if you would be able to reach it, could you remove the bars and would you even fit through the opening. Depressingly, all three of those answers appeared to be the same one. But, the same thought always went through everyone’s mind.

“What did I do to earn myself the privilege of spending my last remaining time on this earth with you?” he grinned. “My crimes were not against man nor woman but against a state that finds amusement in the fates of men like me. Let’s just leave it at that, shall we?”

“I can’t remember what I did,” you said solemnly. “I’m sure it will come to me when my head clears.”

The older man laughed humourlessly at the irony. “Yes, sounds about right. You were probably objecting to all that violence and murder. Nothing couldn’t possibly go wrong, could it?”

“Well, whatever I did, I never thought they’d send men to my house with metal batons to beat me into unconsciousness,” you grumbled.

“Yeah!” he said with a nod. “There should be a law against that.”

You wearily sighed and looked once more at the opening. It was long and narrow and there was no way a grown man would fit through, even if there were no bars. You felt the fear rising as the hope inversely diminished.

“They're going to kill us, aren't they?” you said grimly and looked over to the eyes of your fellow prisoner.

He nodded his reply. “They said they have something special for us. I've heard stories.”

“We've all heard stories,” you said as the very last of your hope diminished entirely.

“I think it's the acid bath,” the older man told you, horrifyingly calmly. “I hear they put you in a tank of water that has an electric stirring motor. Then, they slowly add some kind of caustic soda and the water turns acidic, slowly burning the skin from your bones.”

“What?” you cried out. “You can't be serious.”

“You know this is a semi-public execution, right?” he said with a misplaced grin. “The audience is watching—we have to give them a show.”

“Dear god!” you muttered. “I mean, I heard stories too, I just didn't believe it could be real. This can't really be happening.”

You were scared now and the fear was growing.

“I heard another one where your head is locked in place and they drop acid into your eyes. It burns down and eventually you die when it eats away enough of your brain.” He seemed moderately amused by it. “Of course, they measure the acid carefully. There's a fine line to maintain, they want you to experience it, not go into shock and miss out on any of the fun.”

“I didn't do anything to warrant anything like that!” you said angrily. “I imagined they'd just give us a lethal injection, or a hanging, or something.”

“Hangings can be quite brutal,” he told you. “If you’re lucky enough to have your neck broken instantly, it’s meant to be quite fast. Although nobody can speak to the experience of having that happen, of course. It might just be that your brain remains somewhat alive in your head as the blood stops pumping and you suffer an agonising demise as your life slowly ebbs away in silent anguish.”

“You have the world’s worst imagination!” you said in horror.

The man gazed at you and smiled thinly. “If not, you’ll be choked to death. The victim will usually dance around in panic as they struggle against the inevitable end. I can’t imagine the experience of dying that way, your brain fighting against itself in a blaze of instinctive torture, with your consciousness just dragged along for the ride, crying out in silent terror.”

You glared at the man in silence. “Enough now, I think!”

“I hear drowning is quite brutal too,” he continued regardless. “It’s only something like 30% of victims who pass peacefully as their lungs fill up with liquid and they quietly die from oxygen starvation. The rest die quite violently as their lungs try to save themselves.”

You turned away and found that you had drawn your knees up to your chest and had wrapped your arms around yourself. “I don’t want to hear any more.” Your voice cracked fearfully. Fear and anger were crashing into you now in waves. You were losing control.

“Nothing I say will be as bad as experiencing what’s coming,” the man told you, and it was hard to argue his point.

“I don’t need you to tell me that they might drop us into a meat-grinder, feet first, or fill our stomachs with bugs and let them chew their way out,” you told him sternly. Your voice was cold and hard. “Let’s just change the subject, shall we?”

The man shrugged. “They had some good ideas in Medieval times. The worst one I ever heard of was where they hung you upside

down in a frame. They then used a huge wood-saw to slowly slice you apart, cutting first through your genitals. The idea of keeping you upside down was so the blood rushed to your brain, keeping you alive and conscious longer. They reckon most people were still alive until the saw reached their hearts.”

“You’re not going to stop, are you?” you growled and noticed that you were clenching your fists.

“There was another thing I heard about where they just tied you to a wheel and left you to slowly die,” he said thoughtfully. “Mind you, they broke your arms and legs with a hammer first until all the bones were shattered and then threaded the smashed limbs through wooden spokes. I can’t imagine the agony of spending your last few days in that kind of torment.

“They won’t do anything like that to us!” you said, your teeth clenched tightly. You knew that the fear was plainly visible in your eyes. You noticed that you were trembling.

“Who knows?” the man sighed and then shrugged. “They said they had something special for me. That’s all they told me. I’ve been thinking about it ever since.”

“So I see,” you said gravely.

The man looked at you and flashed a very sad smile. “I’ve been here three days with nothing else to do but worry about how they’re going to kill me. The mind wanders—it goes to some very dark places.”

You sighed to yourself and closed your eyes. “I can imagine,” you said, trying to calm yourself with a couple of deep breaths. “But please stop.”

The old man nodded sadly. He then sighed quite loudly and peered up to the window, perhaps thinking of opportunities to escape that he knew were never going to present themselves. Finally, he

took a heavy inhalation of air and said, “There was this thing in the Middle-Ages where the Swedish would tie up their victims and put a tube into their mouths. Through that they’d pour a mixture of their own urine and faeces, forcing the victim to drink it until their stomachs tore apart.”

“What the hell?” you cried out. “That’s the opposite of stopping.”

“Burning to death is meant to be the most painful way to go, but I don’t know. It’s not like they can pass around a questionnaire afterwards, is it?”

“You need to stop now!” you said angrily. A red-mist was descending over you. The fear was flushing out of your mind and you were being swept away by pure rage. “I’m done listening to this.”

The old man looked at you sadly. “Nothing is going to stop what’s coming.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” you cried out, suddenly channelling all remaining fear into an outburst of rage. You were on your feet and pointing down angrily at your cell-mate. “Now shut up, before I lose my temper with you.”

“Taking it out on me won’t change things,” he began.

You lashed out, surprising yourself by punching the stranger hard in the face. Then you hit him again, and then again. You were dimly aware of pain in your hand, your fingers, your fist. You saw blood splattering from his nose, clinging to the fine hair of his unruly beard. But, you didn’t stop and you didn’t know why you didn’t. You just punched harder, smashing your hand into his face and neck, over and over.

Shocked, your chest heaving and breathless, you finally stepped back, gazing at the torn remains of the man’s face as he weakly gurgled on the floor, bubbles of blood coming up from

between his broken teeth. The old man's breath was laboured, his sternum raised and lowered, raised once more and then his body shuddered as a croaking, growling noise gasped out of him.

You just gazed at the old man and then down to your own hands. They were soaked in blood and, as the shock subsided, you began to feel the pain deep in the bones of your bruised fingers.

"What have I...?" you asked yourself weakly, stepping back until you found the wall behind you.

"Well, that's what you did. And that's why you're going to be executed—in case you were wondering.

"This was something new and it worked spectacularly well. We don't need to take any responsibility, we just pick the right people and let them do the hard work for us.

"You wait till you see who you're going to be sharing a cell with next. You've earned this..."

Nature of the Beast

The room she sat in was dark, the lighting grim and foreboding as half-burned candles flickered on broken shelves. Shadows danced against the peeling plaster walls. It smelled musty and dry, but there was a faint but undeniable aroma of death. Probably no more than the decaying corpses of a few rats below the splintered floorboards, she pondered. But, it could be more than that.

Brad sat opposite, across a table that appeared to have been recovered and repaired. He was slightly-built but had an air of confidence about him. He was lean and his skin was stretched tightly over functional muscles, the kind a man earns through hard daily labour. His black T-shirt had faded to grey and whatever was written on it had peeled so badly it could no longer be read. Beneath the collar, she could see a silver chain—white metal, at the very least.

“I like you,” he told her, and sipped at a glass of blood-red wine. His voice was grave and deep and he spoke with a certain authority.

She smiled back and flushed slightly. She gave a nervous chuckle and said, her voice barely more than a whisper, “I like you too. I was interested in you as soon as we started talking.”

She wriggled in her seat and reached out for her glass. It was roughly the same as his, but not a direct match. Nothing in the house directly matched anything else. She sipped at the wine and smiled at him warmly, sympathetically, and perhaps a little sadly.

He gazed at her fixedly under the gloomy orange light as the shadows shifted around the bony features of his face.

“Most girls are afraid when I tell them my secret,” he said. A scowl formed as he gazed away into his own thoughts.

She watched in silence, letting him get the words out. When she was quite sure he had nothing else to say, she said, "I'm not scared of you." A faint smile fluttered over her lips.

"Are you sure?" he asked darkly. His eyes flicked up from beneath his brow and met her gaze.

She nodded back. She was quite sure.

He grinned back at her. "I've lived in darkness so long, my face illuminated solely by the light of the moon. I am doomed never again to see daylight. I shall never know the warmth of the sun on my skin."

She sighed to herself and sipped again at the glass of red wine. "It must be terrible. Is it terrible?"

He stared away into the distance and his eyes narrowed. "It's a terrible price, but I see this as a gift."

"A gift?" she asked thoughtfully. She had never seen it that way. "Being a vampire is a gift?"

He turned to her and nodded very softly, his head scarcely moving. "It's not what you think. We're not like you see in the movies."

After a long pause, she said, "Then what is it like?"

He thoughtfully rubbed his chin. "We don't turn into bats. I don't even like bats, to be honest. We don't kill people to drink their blood, we don't have long, sharp teeth, and we don't have super-strength."

She looked somewhat disappointed. "So what is it like?"

"We are immortal, I think," he explained. "We are made this way by the power of the darkness. We just have to accept the night into our blood until it flushes away all of the light and warmth of our human soul."

“We live in twilight. We are unique, we are separate, different.”

She reached out and touched the back of his hand. “It must be very lonely to feel like that.”

He nodded. “It is. I have always felt alone, but now I have embraced it. Now I have become the darkness.”

“It’s wonderful that you have embraced the darkness,” she told him. “I’m so happy to have found you.”

He smiled at her. “It doesn’t bother you that I’m a vampire?”

She shook her head. “Vampires don’t bother me. I don’t understand everything you’re saying, but I’m not afraid.”

He took a deep breath and blew it back out noisily. A look of relief came over him. “I can’t tell you how good it feels to finally meet someone like you. I’ve been alone for so long—there’s been nobody! I’ve lived alone in this abandoned house, I’ve struggled so hard to survive, and reaching out to people on the internet had become the only way I connected with what little is left of my humanity.”

“That is all over now,” she told him with a smile. She squeezed his hand. It was warm beneath her touch, warmer than she had expected. “All that has finished forever.”

“I have never killed anyone,” he told her firmly. “It’s really not like the stories. We’re not bloodthirsty monsters, we don’t rip open people’s throats, and we don’t have razor-sharp fangs that we use to suck blood. I’m not dangerous.”

She gazed at him raptly, a look of burning desire in her eyes and she could feel her pulse quicken. “But you do like blood, don’t you?”

He nodded slowly. "I'm fascinated with it. Blood is the water of life, and because of its power, it scares most people. That's why I'm so alone; that's why I don't mix with other people."

"How long has it been?" She held his hand tightly, feeling his warm flesh beneath her skin. "How long since you had human-contact with another real flesh-and-blood person?"

He shrugged and flashed her a faint smile. "A long time," he admitted. "I don't have any family left; I abandoned friendship many moons ago. I've been alone longer than I can remember."

"I see," she said. Gravely she continued, "You've lived alone in this abandoned old shack out in the woods, so there's nobody that cares for you, nobody that loves you, nobody that would miss you..."

He shook his head. "Nobody."

She smiled and said, "I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, but you're wrong. It is just like it is in the movies."

He gave her a quizzical look and his eyebrow raised on one side of his forehead. "What?"

She moved so quickly he didn't have time to even react. She flung herself across the table, filled with a burning desire that drove her beyond human limits. Her long, rapier-sharp teeth sunk into his flesh, pressing down first into his warm skin, shredding it, and ripping a jagged hole into his neck. He cried out in shock, a sound that would be lost in the silence that surrounded his cabin.

Her free hand forced his head to smash down hard onto the tattered old floor and she savagely ripped at the hole, her snapping jaws tearing deeper into the exposed jugular. Crimson blood gushed from the opening and she lapped at it greedily.

"No!" he gasped, a thin, weak voice that melted into nothing as his eyes peered around in horror, wide as saucers as his mind

scrambled against what must have been confused panic. Each agonising snap of her sharp, viscous little teeth sent another spasm through his anguished body. His limbs flailing helplessly as his mind sunk further down into its base instincts for survival.

This wasn't a fight he had any chance of winning, and a part of him must have known that as his body went limp and he resignedly accepted his fate.

She stood gazing down at the mess. His body was pale and empty; his blood now filled her, and what she hadn't managed to swallow now stained the wooden floor. His neck was gone; his twisted, horrified white face was cranked over at an unnatural angle, supported by jagged lumps of bone that stuck out through the shredded meat.

His dark eyes gazed out into forever, piercing into the darkest layers of an unemotional universe where he had never dreamed that such things that had happened could possibly exist. He spluttered loudly. Bloody bubbles spat from his mouth and a crimson mist jetted from a torn lump of tissue at the base of where a man normally carries his spine.

"I'm sorry, Brad," she said with a sigh. "I really did like you, but I was hungry. It's getting harder to find food that nobody will miss. It's ironic that someone like me inspires someone like you to want be someone like me, which in turn inspires someone like me to eat someone like you.

"The world is a strange place.

"I like it though..."

A brilliant flash consumed her body and the black form of a bat flapped its leathery wings and vanished into the inky blackness of the night as Brad's home quietly burnt to the ground.

Intermission

“Ding dong!”

The door didn’t literally say the words, ‘Ding dong.’ The doorbell rang, so I knew I’d best go and see who it was.

I heaved my ageing body to the door on my tired old legs. With no fear for my own safety, I opened it up to see who was there.

Two young—though probably much older, and far less wiser, than they actually looked—gentlemen were stood there. Without hesitation or uncertainty, they walked straight in and stood bold as brass in my hallway, looking up and down the place with self-assured smiles on their faces.

The taller of the two looked me over and said, “This is a really terrible idea. How many books just stop in the middle like this? What are we doing with our lives?”

The shorter and less bald one gave his friend a little glare and he rolled his eyes. “So you’re the butler then, my good man?” he said.

“My years of butling are long behind me now, my son,” I replied earnestly. “For now, it is my time to be the lord of manor.”

“And what a manor it is!” added the shorter of the two. “This is a nice neighbourhood, and you have a very nice house.”

“Why thank you sonny,” I replied graciously. “So what can I do for the two of you on this most coldest of afternoons?”

“It’s four o’clock in the morning!” The taller one said, earning himself an elbow in the ribs.

“Well, it’s the strangest thing,” said the other, more cordial of the two. “We were driving through your delightful neighbourhood when our car broke down. It just stopped, dead.”

“We don’t even have a car!” the taller man grumbled with a shrug.

“Well that won’t do,” I said with furrowed brow. “I suppose you’ll be needing to use my phone then to call for assistance.”

“We wouldn’t dream of asking,” said the shorter. “We already contacted the AA—that is, the ‘Automobile Association,’ not the other one...”

We all had a hearty laugh at the possible confusion that could have arisen, had he not made a point of clarifying that specific detail.

“I,” began the taller, “have been diagnosed with mental health disorders on no less than three occasions—admittedly one was for legal reasons... but you two...”

The shorter ignored his friend. “They’re on their way, but it’s going to take a bit of time. It’s also very cold outside. Would you mind terribly if we waited for them here, in the warm?”

“Not at all!” I replied. “Mi casa tu casa, as they say!”

The two of them nodded to each other with light-hearted gratitude and mixed glares, and proceeded to hang their hats and coats on the convenient hat stand next to the front door.

“I don’t even wear hats!”

“My apologies,” said the shorter of the two, with sudden urgency. “My name’s Jeth. This is my associate, Sack—a name that invites all sorts of obvious questions.”

“Jeth, Sack,” I repeated, shaking their hands in time honoured tradition. “I’m Bosby—you can call me Cring. You’ve actually come at just the right time. I was watching the Saturday matinee on the wireless, and the intermission has just started. Why don’t you both come and sit down?”

They both nodded and made their way into the drawing room, more or less.

“I see you have a piano...” observed Jeth, the shorter of the two. “Do you play?”

“I dabble,” I said, showing some much-needed humility. “You know, I’m actually looking for a piano tuner. For some reason, every time I try to play it, the pitch just seems to get higher and higher without ever topping out. Do either of you tune pianos?”

“I could barely pick out a piano in a police line-up!” said Sack. “All I know about them is that they’re the most hilarious way that cartoon cats can possibly be mortally injured.”

“Actually, we’re authors,” added Jeth. “Kind of.”

The two exchanged a glance that indicated that, perhaps, they were not quite as successful at writing as their diligent efforts deserved. Still, to have two aspiring authors sitting in my own drawing room, on my own favourite sofa... Such a great honour. A great honour indeed!

The tall one laughed, for some reason.

“How fascinating!” I said with immense gusto. “This intermission doesn’t seem like it’s going to end any time soon, so perhaps you could regale me with one of your fancies in the meantime? What kind of things do you normally write about?”

“We write all sorts of things, but mostly science fiction,” said Sack. “We do a lot of really terrible stuff about breaking the 4th wall, like we’re doing now. Do you want to hear a story about a sentient brick that imagines worlds where people get paid to deliver towels? It’s full of really keenly-observed jokes about toilets.”

“What other kinds of things do you write?” I asked hopefully.

“Well, just this very morning we met with a literary agent about a book of short stories, somewhere vaguely in the horror genre,” said Jeth. “It did not go well, but perhaps one of those might be more up your street.”

"It went better than this weird nonsense," the taller one said with a sigh.

"How wonderfully macabre!" I enthused. "But perhaps, something a little more down to earth. Do you have any nice stories about real things that happen to real people?"

The two exchanged nervous glances.

"I don't think we know any real people, do we?" Sack said.

Suddenly, their eyes lit up, big smiles forming on their faces, some unspoken communication between them.

"You said you're 'interviewing' for a piano tuner," began Jeth. "Well, we wouldn't know anything about tuning pianos."

"Or cartoon cats," added Sack. "At a pinch we could probably tune the radio, but it would have to be something we really wanted to listen to. There would almost certainly be breakages involved."

"Nothing expensive, mind," added Jeth. "Nothing *that* expensive..."

"Do go on," I said eagerly. "You have a story for me?"

Sack nodded his head. "Well, if we had to fill in some space so this book had enough words to be considered technically a novel, then I do have something. It's actually set in space, in the future, but I think this is going to be exactly what nobody was looking for."

"That sounds utterly dreadful."

Jeth let out a sigh. "We can't just use any old shit that's lying around on your hard-drive. Maybe we could throw that one in as a bonus at the end, after the Afterword. For now though, let's tell the gentleman a story that actually means something."

"Whatever. I have completely lost track of what the point of this is, and have come to suspect there isn't one..."

“You mentioned your piano’s pitch is ‘constantly rising and never tops out,’ well we may have something for you along those lines.”

“Yes... Yes! That sounds like a wonderful story!” I enthused.

“Well then, are you sitting comfortably?” began Jeth.

The two made eye contact and nodded their heads

“Then we shall begin.”

“But why are you doing it?” she asked with a sigh.

It was a thin voice, one of someone whose soul had not been dragged out, smashed repeatedly against a sharp rock, violated until membership of a political party felt like a good idea, and then shoved back in with a hot poker. But at the same time, it was perhaps the thin voice of one who wished for such things.

“It will be interesting,” he replied boringly.

He was the kind of man that wasn’t bullied at school, because even the most brutal individual—one hardened by life’s rough edges, whose personal self-hatred had a desperate need to project itself onto someone else—would have felt a bit sorry for him. He had aspired to work in a library and failed, he had the same haircut his mother used to give him as a child, and his favourite food still needed to have milk poured onto it.

If he told anyone that anything was going to be interesting, it was a certainty that the opposite would more likely be true. This was largely why his wife’s soul would have preferred any moderate violence be visited upon it, rather than continue to endure still more of this continually torturous lack of actual torture.

“Interesting?” she said with a raised eyebrow.

He stuck his screwdriver into a hole in his car's dashboard and smiled to himself uninterestingly.

"Oh yes!" he began. "This will play the tone through the car's speakers. It will be interesting." He looked at her with a look in his eye that told her that he had massively misunderstood the world again. "When I play this tone, everything will change for the better."

A tiny flicker of a hopeful smile dared to flash across her lips. "Will we die?" she asked.

"Better!" he said, causing her to sigh hopelessly. "I've found this tone on the internet. It's all very clever: it constantly escalates; it tricks you into thinking it's always rising."

She looked around the garage where his tools were all neatly arranged, hung up on racks with labels made on a little machine he bought on the internet. She huffed to herself and said, "Like the medication I have to take so I don't do that thing again in the bath with the toaster?"

"We don't talk about that!" He frowned his bushy, unkempt eyebrows and continued working. "Some things are too interesting."

"Like a clever sound played through the car's speakers?"

"No, that's just interesting enough. No more, no less."

She rolled her eyes and stuck her fingernails into the skin of her forearm just to feel something. Anything. "Is it?" she quipped.

He grinned widely, and pointed to a small music player with a blue LED light that would flash on and off conservatively. "This will change our lives for the better."

"Like a divorce?" she suggested, daring to hope again.

"I told you I'd never sign the papers," he told her, smashing any misplaced optimism she had been foolhardy enough to dabble with.

Thick, wet blood began to ooze beneath her fingernails.

“This tone will make the car sound like it’s always going faster!” he said with unreasonable enthusiasm. “It said so on the internet, on a site that was truly fascinating.”

“So it won’t sound like someone playing an annoying sound through the speakers in a car that gets overtaken by supermarket trollies on a steep hill?”

He frowned thoughtfully. “No. Probably not.”

“So how will this change our lives?” she asked. “Will we not still be driving around in your mum’s old car—the one she gave you because it was too boring for her? Will we not spend every weekend driving it around the local DIY stores?”

“We will, but now we’ll be doing it with this tone playing in the background, instead of ‘Coldplay.’”

She nodded to herself, and a tiny flutter of a smile flashed across her careworn face. That did sound a little bit better, she had to admit.

Preparing to plumb the depths of an imagination that hadn’t extended to securing a job in a room full of old books that nobody wanted to read, he explained.

“Let me tell you a story,” he began. “Just imagine...”

Mr Shepard wasn’t an interesting man, but didn’t spend all of his weekends going to DIY shops with ‘Coldplay’ screeching painfully from his car-stereo, oh no! He was a man that wore a suit sometimes, and if he wanted a job in a library, you can be damned sure he would have got it. But he most definitely didn’t. He was a man who aspired to higher depths than that. Yes—he was an accountant!

“So you really don’t have any friends, and everyone hates you?” his wife asked casually as their base model Nissan Jarvis (with no added options: not even the polymer coating, aluminium wheels

with glossy black bits, or door handles painted the same colour as the body) rolled quietly along the roads of a Middle-English county that was moderately well known for a specific kind of cheese.

“According to the email, anyway,” he agreed. “I was moderately irritated by it, and would have complained to Human Resources, but that would have meant talking to Hilda...”

“But you do have a few friends,” his wife assured him with a supportive, but slightly insincere smile. “And some of them don’t hate you very much at all.”

“Quite,” he agreed. “I got a Christmas Card last year, and I’m expecting almost twice that next time.

“We’re bored,” a small childlike voice said from the back of the car.

Dorris, the wife of an accountant, turned to her two children who were safely strapped into the rear seats and said, “We’re all bored. Do I have to keep reminding you what Daddy does for a living?”

The children were respectively an older girl and a slightly younger boy who were both fussily dressed, although the girl’s light brown hair was tangled at the bottom where someone had clearly just given up halfway through the effort of combing it. The boy’s looked like the dog was in charge of maintenance, which was nonsense because they were clearly ‘goldfish’ people.

“Can Daddy press the ‘Fun’ button?” the boy asked.

Mr Shepard gazed out thoughtfully as they passed a signpost with a speed warning on it that they were in no danger of coming close to matching. “Fun is only fun if it’s carefully measured,” he said. “We pressed the button last week, remember?”

“I think it might be time for more fun again?” his wife suggested.

Never terribly good at judging these things he asked, “You’re sure it wouldn’t be too much for them? I wouldn’t want them over-excited in the DIY shop next week!”

“It won’t be too much!” the children cried out in joyless union.

He looked at his wife and flashed her a soulless accountant’s smile. “So be it,” he said, and reached out for the button on his dash. It was a round button with an exciting—but not too exciting—flashing blue light in the middle. Pressing it would turn their entire lives into something completely different—it would change everything! His finger hovered over it for a moment, and there was a gasp in the car as the passengers all waited with bated breath.

It snapped in with a click.

A tone began, a soft whine that escalated upwards, always and forever sounding just like the acceleration of an electric motor that never stopped running more quickly.

“Wow!” said the young girl with monotone enthusiasm. “This is so exciting! We’re going faster and faster!”

“You maniac!” the young boy added with dry, flavourless zeal. “It’s almost as exciting as Coldplay!”

Mr Shepard rolled his eyes at the ridiculous comment; as if anything could be as exciting as Coldplay!

“Truly we live in an age of wonder,” he said. “This was the idea of a great man who went on to work in a library, as legend would have it. It changed automotive design forever, making cars not just more fun, but safer and more interesting. Do you want to know why?”

The little girl shook her head.

“Let me tell you a story,” he began. “Just imagine...”

She was driving along the roads in her sporty little car while her slightly androgynous boyfriend, of questionable ethnicity—for the sake of diversity—sat next to her, marvelling at her driving skills. And not just because she was a woman: she was powerful; she could do kicks and stuff, and was the equal of any man.

Her boyfriend, who was—for the sake of diversity—the equal of any woman said, “Wow, this is so interesting. You’re a strong woman like the main character in everything on Netflix.”

She looked at him with a manly scowl and said, “And Amazon Prime.”

“Yes,” he apologised. “You have corrected me because I am just a man. You were right to do so.”

As the buildings on the mean streets of the urban sprawl whipped past the window of her red Porsche Vixen—the kind of sports car any accountant would secretly dream of owning—she said, “We’re driving fast so that you know I like to live life on the edge.”

He nodded in agreement. “I now know you like to live life on the edge,” he said. “But you don’t smoke or do drugs, because that would be bad, and you’re probably a cop, or something.”

“Yeah,” she asserted strongly. “I’m probably a cop.” She looked out of the window pensively, as if troubled by something deep within her: the hidden darkness, or possibly the authentic Indian dal jalfrezi she had eaten for lunch. “...or something.”

He gripped the chair nervously, since driving just slightly below the speed limit was almost too interesting for him.

“Scary enough for you?” she said with a charismatic grin that screamed empowerment. “I can make it more scary!”

His head snapped to the side and his eyes widened as he gazed in horror into her unusually wide pupils. “Not the ‘Fun’ button?” he gasped.

“We don’t call it that here,” she told him. “This is not some accountant driving his kids to the DIY shop. I’m probably a cop—or something!”

He looked out through the windscreen and shook his head in amazement. “I’m so impressed by you. I wish I was a strong woman!”

“You can’t just be a strong woman!” she chastised with a smug chuckle, putting him in his lane. “You have to identify as a woman first, and then be stunning and brave for a while. You’re better off as my boyfriend—you can just sit back and bask in my glory.”

He nodded. “I will do that,” he said. “Press the button, and I’ll sit here and continue basking.”

With the click of a dark grey button, the car began to rapidly speed up, perpetually increasing in speed until it couldn’t possibly go any faster. And then continuing to get faster and faster some more.

“Please slow down!” he eventually pleaded. “You’re going to break the speed limit!”

“Not on my watch!” she proclaimed lawfully. “We are actually still driving at the same speed, slightly below the speed limit.”

“But we are also getting increasingly faster and faster, are we not. How can this be?”

“It’s an old theatrical trick,” she exposted. “This car is fitted with an Infinity Drive—that’s infinite fluid gear ratios. When I push the ‘High Speed Pursuit’ button, the engine speed starts to rise, with the gear ratio lowering in tandem. When the engine reaches its fastest speed, it stops accelerating, drops down to a lower speed (as if manually changing to a higher gear), and then begins rising all over again while the gear ratio continues to adjust in tandem. The whole process repeats endlessly. It adds excitement to high speed pursuits,

by giving the impression the vehicle is getting faster and faster, when in fact its relatively low speed never actually changes.”

“Wow!” he said. “That exposition dump was so natural. Your dialogue is really well written!”

“I’m as good as any show on Netflix or Amazon Prime, baby,” she gloated interestingly. “Do you want to hear something interesting?”

“Sure,” he said enthusiastically. “If it’s as good as shows on Netflix and Amazon prime.”

“Let me tell you a story,” she began. “Just imagine...”

It was the distant future—you could tell because of all the CGI buildings that cast the wrong kind of shadows. The car hurtled down a completely straight road at three hundred miles per hour, completely safely because it was all controlled by computers then, or now, or will be—whatever the correct tense should be.

The world was quieter now (sic.), thanks to depopulation and climate change that everyone knew about from legendary media output sources such as Netflix and Amazon Prime—praise be to them. It was a brave new world where people stayed indoors, took their medication, followed the rules and obeyed their computer overlords completely, just like the old world leaders had always planned.

Women were in charge now, and there hadn’t been any negative consequences other than the total collapse of civilisation, but that had been replaced by a glorious new world with really long roads that were so well made that they looked like computer generated images—so that was all fine.

Matriarch B11 turned off some horrible, whining, screeching sound that was coming from the car's sound system. "What was, is, or will be that horrible noise?" she asked.

The little boy next to her said, with a very effeminate voice, "I identify as a girl."

Matriarch B11 frowned at him/her and said, "Well done, 'Petal,' but I asked what that dreadful screaming sound was."

The child cocked its head to one side thoughtfully and said, "Coldplay."

"Computer," she said. "Please delete Coldplay forever."

The computer replied in a raping male voice, "Your request is being considered. Obey all commands, citizen."

"Obey all commands," she grumbled. "I'm a woman. My kind didn't fight to overthrow the patriarchy just to end up obeying a male-sounding computer."

The car hurtled along beneath a very large glass ceiling.

"What was your part in the great gender war?" the child asked.

"I was a powerful warrior," she told/tells/will tell her/him. "I fought valiantly on the Twitter and Instagram fronts. Your grandmother even had an account on YouTube and TikTok. When she was a teenager, she made videos in her underwear to ensure your freedom to be told to identify as a woman."

"Wow!" the child said, sounding truly inspired. "You helped to make the computer our master."

"Well no..." she said with a frown. "We just wanted equal rights to men. Consideration of long-term consequences was never our strong suit—after all, we always assumed nothing would actually change to necessitate it. We certainly never imagined all this was going to happen."

“What’s a men?” the child asked, chewing on a soy-bar as his glassy eyes gazed away into oblivion.

“I hear they were terrible,” she said. “They used to control us like the computer does now, only not as bad.”

“Deviation from acceptance is not tolerated,” came the toxic drone.

Matriarch B11 glared out and dug her nails into her forearm. There was no steering wheel to hold onto since the computer took care of all that, and the roads were all straight besides. It would have been easier to just build train-tracks, but complexity was a much more efficient means of social control, and that was therefore better.

“The car is accelerating,” the child said, its voice rising in pitch, much like the sound of the motor.

“No, it’s just the noise the car makes,” she assured her child, or at the very least the child that had been assigned to her. “Many years ago, they started fitting this noise to cars that sounds like it raises in pitch forever. It was meant to be fun, but then they realised it made people drive more safely because it gave the impression of speed while actually having no effect on the speed.”

“What is fun?” the child asked.

The Matriarch rolled her eyes. “According to your grandmother, it was a bottle of pink wine, a Netflix account, a bucket of ice-cream, and a night spent on Twitter getting people cancelled. I sometimes dream of what those days must have been like.”

“Dreaming is not permitted!” commanded the oppressive rumble. “Situation resolution in progress.”

“What is dreaming?” the child asked.

“Shut up,” she told it. “You’re 15—you should know what it is by now.”

“Are we actually going faster?” the child asked, evidently confused.

“No,” she snapped. But, the world was blurring past much faster now and the car did seem to be accelerating. She was certainly starting to feel uncomfortable, and said to the benevolent machine that ran the world on her behalf, without asking if anyone wanted it to, “Computer, are we accelerating?”

“Situation resolution in progress,” it repeated. “Please stand by while you are resolved.”

She gulped hard as light streaked past the glass vehicle and she felt herself being pressed back into her seat. “Just close your eyes.”

“I’m scared,” said the child. “Is this fun?”

“Let me tell you a story,” she began. “Just imagine...”

The car streaked towards the gigantic, glowing maw of the sun. Damien Hardshaft slammed the lever forward, cranking the gears into place in his powerfully customised racing space-car.

“I think we should go faster,” he said with a grin. “Beyond what’s safe, mind.”

His beautiful passenger nodded, and tapped away on a computer pad. “I’ve given you 20% more power, but I’ve had to shut down the internal temperature management and switch off life-support. I’m also pretty sure the bulbs in the indicator aren’t going to glow as bright.”

“To hell with being alive!” Damien said. “You’re never truly alive unless you’re facing death.”

“We have around 3 minutes of being truly alive before our eyeballs melt.”

He nodded. “Can we go any faster yet than this? I want to be even more alive!”

“We could both lose some weight?” she suggested, checking the computer. “Or we could jettison the cargo pods. We’re carrying two crates of beer, a bucket of fried chicken, three litres of Polish vodka, a quart of Bulgarian Champagne and half a kilo of cocaine. Also that collection of exotic liqueur miniatures my uncle spent his life collecting as souvenirs of his many travels.”

He looked at her thoughtfully. “It is possible to be too alive then, I guess.”

“Agreed,” she said with a grin. “We can be differently alive later with beer, vodka, shampansko, chicken and cocaine. And miniatures. Just think—we could drink my uncle’s entire life in a single sitting! How alive would he be then?!”

“As I recall he’s dead—hence your acquiring the miniatures in the house clearance in the first place—and if we try to blow the whole cargo at once, we probably will be too!” He seemed to relish the prospect. “So let’s do that then!”

She sighed as the gigantic glow of the sun began to engulf them, burning through the plastic hull of the car. “Do you ever consider just how silly this world is?”

“No!” he said. “It’s awesome and exciting. I love my life!”

She shrugged and began nibbling on a possibly toxic candy bar called ‘Schrodinger’s Carbs.’ “But we flew into the sun yesterday. We raced through an asteroid field twice last weekend.”

“I see what you’re saying,” he said, rubbing his chin. “You want to race through fields of ice with our eyes shut, right?”

“Yeah,” she said with a nod. “Or maybe just stay home and talk?”

“Talk?” he said, frowning curiously. “Talk about fields of ice and closed eyes?”

“Our feelings? Sometimes I feel like I want to talk about my feelings. Do you ever feel like you want to talk about feelings?”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully as the sun brilliantly tried to both illuminate and set fire to his features. “No.”

The engines droned higher and higher as every parsec of power was thrown into them.

“It’s like we’re just always trying to go further,” she said. “I just wonder what the point is?”

“There’s no point,” he grinned manically. “There used to be a point when we had libraries, accountants, strong female rolemodels and gender parity, but we’ve forgotten about all that crap now. We just go faster and faster.”

“But what have we lost along the way?” she sighed.

“Not cocaine!” he told her, sniffing hard as a single drop of snot ran down from his nose onto his upper lip.

“Can you imagine a world where we didn’t try to terrify ourselves all the time?” she asked. “Can you imagine just living your life?”

“By our own philosophy, it wouldn’t technically be a life,” he said. “That’s terrifying.”

“Terrifying enough to try?”

“Wow!” he said. “You’re as smart as the Twitter-legends of old. You have the wisdom of a Netflix parable and the confidence of an Amazon Prime protagonist.”

“And nice breasts,” she added with a scowl.

“Sorry... Nice breasts too. It was wrong of me not to comment.”

“Shall we try it tomorrow?”

“No!” he cried out, yanking the controls to one side, causing the melting car to veer away from the sun violently. “Let’s try it now!”

“How?” she asked with a shrug.

“I don’t know — why don’t you tell me a story, and we’ll see where it leads us.”

She began to imagine...

“So, what did you think?”

“It was most moving,” I said, a moist tear forming in my eye. “Never before has a story resonated with me such as this one did. In my career, I have touched many, many people. Especially children. They would come to me, and they would beg for me to touch them, and I made it my mission to touch every single one of them. Repeatedly, and without reserve. Yet never in that time have I ever been touched so deeply and in such a private, personal place, as how the two of you have just touched me.”

The two glanced at each other, a suspicious look in their eyes. Slowly they began to shake their heads, some unspoken communication between them.

“This is a bad place,” said the taller of the pair.

With that, there was the sound of a key in the door.

“Hello?” came a voice. “Are you home?” A younger man strolled straight into the drawing room and observed my guests.

I stood up at once. “This is my son, Thrax. He always comes to see me at weekends. Sometimes we play the piano together after the matinee, just like old times!” I turned my attention to Thrax. “These two nice gentlemen have come to tune the piano!”

“I think we pretty firmly established that we know even less about pianos than constructing collections of macabre horror?” said the taller, peering around curiously.

“Piano tuner does sound like the sort of thing we would deny being, if ever asked directly,” replied the other, with a look of some confusion.

“Not this again...” said Thrax, shaking his head sadly. “I’m sorry to have wasted your time gentlemen, but the piano is just scrap.”

“Scrap?” I said, dismayed. “It has many a fine year left in it yet, I’ll wager! It just needs a good tuning.”

“It’s a dummy!” he asserted. “It doesn’t work; it doesn’t make any sound. I have to tell you this every time I come by. Your wife—God rest her soul—loved the idea of having a piano in the house, said it gave the drawing room presence, but neither of you could actually play. This is just an old stage prop from a 1970s TV Christmas Special.”

“Well, we’ll see what your mother has to say about that,” I said. What a way to behave in front of our guests. They would never agree to tune the piano at this rate.

“I can’t tell you how badly I need a drink!” the taller one said, sighing and rubbing his temple.

Thrax let out a deep sigh. “You’re getting worse you know, Mr Crapsnapple. Your wife has been dead for 15 years now, and your son, Ron, got so sick of putting up with your senility, and your constantly pissing yourself—and shitting yourself—he abandoned you a year back, and hasn’t been heard from since. The council sent me to see you when neighbours started complaining about the smell.”

“I’d been ignoring the smell,” said the bald one. “I just assumed he was a literary agent.”

“If it’s all the same,” said the shorter, less balder of the pair, both suddenly lifting themselves out of my favourite sofa with some immense urgency. “I think I hear our truck outside.”

“What truck?” the taller said. “What is meant to be going on here?”

“It’s been lovely!” said the shorter, fatter of the two. “Um... bye!”

The two of them rushed towards the entranceway, and before I could say anything, they were gone. Such a pity. I never got to ask them if they knew anything about tuning pianos.

As I glanced at the wireless, I saw that at long last, the intermission was over.

Back to the matinee! I wonder what’s showing today.

Advanced Training

He sat alone in his cold, dark office. The features were lit softly from the light of the moon as it hung with austere elegance in the sky behind a pane of armoured glass that showed a truly spectacular view of the city behind him.

He sat in silence as he waited for his guest, a guest he had known was coming for a very long time. This was a guest he was now finally ready to greet.

He listened to the sound of his ragged breath as he forced each lungful of air in and out of his chest, heaving softly from the effort. His tired bones ached beneath his weary flesh and he blinked several times, willing his vision to focus.

He stared at the door as it hung before him. It was carved from solid oak, as strong as steel and seemed as old as time itself. His luck in life, his success at playing the game had afforded him many luxuries and this was just one among them. Around him were the trappings of his good fortune. The office was adorned with trinkets that had come his way, things that should have been shared among men but were kept selfishly to himself instead.

The guest looked at him and flashed a slightly crooked smile.

This startled him. The door had been locked, and the office was at the very top of a secure fortified building. He had expected to hear a knock and invite this person to enter, to go through the pantomime of normality, at least to some degree.

This would not be the last unexpected occurrence, he knew.

“Welcome,” he said unevenly, trying to sound confident. With the sheer enormity of what he was facing, it wasn’t entirely successful. Few men might have done better.

She nodded graciously. She was dressed in a tight black dress that showed off her striking features. It was strapless and fell gracefully down past the soft bone-white skin of her shoulders. Her appearance was flawless, the darkly exposed sharp contours of her face framed by her long, black and perfectly straight hair. Her eyes were dark and seemed oddly hollow, like the black irises were drawing in the light from all around.

“You seem pleased to see me,” she said, her unusually low voice dripping with insincere surprise.

“You didn’t expect that?” He flashed her a grin that exposed a set of too-white teeth, artificial and over-polished. They were in stark contrast to his greying, dried-out flesh.

“Many people are pleased to see me,” she told him, sounding as if she was already growing bored with all this. “Probably more people than you would expect eagerly invite me to join them. I provide a service, one that’s not well understood. What I do isn’t a punishment, it’s a release. It’s a step from one thing to the other. I’m a station that allows you to step from the train, and to continue your journey towards your next destination.

“Not many people would chose to remain on the train, I would think. It’s puzzling to me how many people do.”

“I’m afraid I am among those that would rather remain where I am,” he told her but now his face took on a look of determination. Beneath the desk his hands balled into fists as he stole himself for what was to come.

“I’m afraid your ticket only allows you to travel this far!” Her voice was as cold as ice, sympathetic but firm. She must have heard it all before in her time and had that particular kind of confidence that simply cannot be faked.

“Madam, I am a rich man. I have learnt that anything can be bought for a price.” A smile flashed across his lips showing a confidence of his own, perhaps one that was misplaced.

She nodded and sighed. “According to your file you don’t own a dinosaur, your car can’t fly through the night sky, and the most beautiful women in the world never shared your bed. Anything can be bought, but the price is often not what we believe it to be. Sometimes the price cannot be met.

“I feel sure you don’t know what it is that you’re trying to buy.”

“Madam,” he said firmly. “I’ll happily take my chances. I intend to stay on the train, for the time being.”

She shook her head firmly and flashed him a wry little smile. “I’m sorry. It doesn’t work that way. It’s your time and I’m here to take you.”

“Where there’s life, there’s hope!” he said, sounding like a man with a smug little secret. He had an ace left to play.

“Sir, in your case, there is no more life,” she told him, sounding like her patience was wearing a little thin. “You are dead. I am the face of death that you’ve imagined for me to wear while I usher you to the other side. Your time has run out, and your money is no good here. I can’t be bribed, I can’t be bought, I can’t be coerced. I am here to do a service for you, and neither of us has a choice about it.”

“I can’t bribe you?” he asked, but his voice sounded like this was less of a question and more a statement.

She shook her head.

“But,” he continued. “Everyone gets a ticket to ride the train you call life. Everyone has a journey that’s their own.”

“Everyone has their time and is free to do with it what they will,” she agreed. “That is the nature of things.”

“I’ve done my research,” he told her, looking away. It seemed the temptation to smile at his cleverness was too much. His lips fluttered into a grin that he couldn’t quite hide. “I know that I can buy someone else’s ticket. I know I can take someone else’s time if it’s willingly given. I know I can send you away and swap my time for theirs. I’ve found the key, I bought the information and learned the trick. It wasn’t cheap, I can tell you.”

It was true and she nodded in agreement. “You want to cheat.”

“Call it what you will!”

She smiled and looked away from his smug glare. She looked back, their eyes meeting for a moment. His were filled with his pride, hers were balanced but her face slowly turned to disgust. “The rules were written a long time ago. Yes, there are ways around things, back-doors, loops. Every system needs levels of security. No rules can ever be immutable.”

He grinned more widely now and puffed his chest in pride. He had won, it seemed to him.

“I wasn’t here to take you,” she told him sadly. “I was here to offer you a chance to come with me. I was offering you one last chance to step off onto your station. You don’t have to cheat; you can follow the track that was laid down for you. It’s not my place to decide for you, but I can certainly recommend that you consider my proposal.”

He shook his head and sipped at a glass of fine cognac. The sickly sweet liquid smoothly ran down the back of his throat and brought a smile to his decaying old lips.

“I offer that chance to you now,” she said, the tone of her voice adding weight to the offer. “Come with me and your arrangement can

be absolved. It's not too late to give back your ticket and step off this train. You don't have to live."

"But I want to live!" he told her.

She peered out from under an angry frown but looked more saddened than enraged. "Last chance," she told him impatiently.

He smiled widely, a man convinced he had won. "Thank you, but my mind is made up."

"Then I make no further attempt to change it!" she said finally with a sigh.

His smile widened.

"The deal is made," she said solemnly. "You have managed to swap your time for his. Sadly, it's not as simple as you think. There are rules, after all."

For the first time, he looked nervous. He listened intently.

"Life is a ride, just like taking a trip on a train," she began. "Your ticket allowed you to get off at this station. Instead you've found a way to break the rules, to swap your ticket with that of another. It means that his ride stops in place of yours. He's just dropped dead from the heart attack that was meant for you, the one that was coming for you imminently."

He smirked to himself, there was no regret in him that another had paid his price.

"It means you're stuck on the train. You didn't get his life, you gave him your death," she said.

He frowned, not quite sure what she meant. "Then what..." he began to stammer.

"You ride forever." She shook her head sadly.

A very wide grin spread across his lips and his face lit up as if his every wish had been fulfilled. "I'm immortal?"

“In a manner of speaking,” she told him, nodding. “Imagine if you will that you’re riding on a train. You miss your station and just keep going and going and going...”

He was imagining exactly that and hadn’t seen a downside just yet. For now he was imagining all the things that this endless time on Earth was going to bring him.

“On your train there is no food, no water. There is no peace, there is no end to the journey. You’ll not sleep, you’ll see no doctor if you become sick, you just ride the train, forever without end,” she told him, her tone darkening.

“But...” he whispered.

“You will live, as you wished, and your consciousness will continue here forever, but it isn’t a benefit of any kind since you have only managed to trap your soul here. Your body is on the verge of a heart attack. You’ll have one soon enough and you’ll endure it, the pain and the agony will be yours to experience as nothing will kill you now. You’ll continue to age in your tired old body. Your skin will wither on your ancient bones, and you’ll experience everything as your flesh rots away around you.

“Eventually your eyes will roll back in your empty skull sockets as your organs and your blood turns to powder. With no muscles to move you, your body will be a tomb and you’ll feel everything as it holds your essence in it like an angry hornet in a glass jar.”

He stared, open-mouthed, his eyes wide in panic.

“I’m sorry,” she told him. “As I said, I offer you a service and you took away my ability to help you. Now you’ll rot away to dust right here and you’ll suffer every moment of eternity as you do.”

“But... you could have told me this before.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “But I didn’t.”

And with that, she was gone, the chair was empty.
A burning pain began to grow deep inside his chest.

The Future

Stirk sat down in the waiting room. It was finished in a dull grey colour that forced any pleasant thoughts scurrying to hide at the back of his innocent young mind, where they were reported to belong. Reports of such things were quite adamant and were made surprisingly frequently. Thoughts reputedly had no place in the human brain, even less so in the young on his colony, this place out at the 'Edge,' the fringe of known space.

The attendant had told him he was next, and that he wouldn't have much longer to wait. He was alone with his thoughts, thoughts about how those very same thoughts were wrong, and thoughts about how such thoughts should be banished. He considered considering it briefly, but the true irony was lost on him, of course.

He would be eighteen in just two more days, and by the laws of his home-world, that made him an adult, a fully mature citizen ready to take his place in their society. He would be allowed to operate a vehicle, get a job, or even procreate, if his DNA was considered desirable, and if he was sent official Ministry of Reproduction instructions to do so, in triplicate, of course.

He would even be allowed to say publicly that he was eighteen, once such things were proven to government satisfaction and the paperwork to do so had been formally accepted. He would be allowed to consume alcohol, and a small variety of other recreational depressants, although few people partook of recreation at all; the paperwork required to do so was prohibitively complicated.

He was happy — well, perhaps not happy exactly, but he was content to find a place for himself in this little corner of the galaxy. Perhaps he might achieve his own dream of one day working for the Ministry of Bureaucracy, the highest honour of the entire colony, the

place of filing and accountancy and endless rules; it would truly be excitement beyond his imagination.

That's not to imply that his imagination extended very far. He had always felt that it was unwise to think too much about such trivial things, especially since the government warned them frequently that thinking could give you brain-cancer and was quite anti-social. Nothing good came from thinking about things, and it was just common sense not to take such foolhardy chances.

He tried not to think about it.

"Master Stirk Grolllybard—we're ready for you now," the attendant called out from behind her square, grey clipboard in a voice that was executed in a dull monotone with all the charisma of a brick, and not the fun kind of brick in a playful orange colour with an interesting shaped well on the surface, playfully known as a 'frog.'

He looked around to the sign that pointed to the grey doorway that led to a room. It was a room that he would step into as a child and leave a man, albeit not a very exciting one. He stood and experienced a small, fleeting moment of unnumbness that might have been pride, as he stepped up to his destiny, straightening his grey tie and smiling a happy-looking, but carefully measured smile—not too happy, and not really too much of a smile.

The door shut behind him, closing him into a grey, and slightly different shade of grey, operation room with impressive banks of equipment that made high pitched ping sounds and filled him with an abundant sense of confidence.

"Hello Mr. Grolllybard," a voice called out from behind a shuttered-off section. A short, slightly overweight, man waddled out to greet him with a very serious face that suggested that he didn't much enjoy... anything.

“You must be Dr 209.5!” Stirk said, very formally, while reaching out to shake his hand, a gesture performed on this world by grasping the wrist firmly and giving it a vigorous flopping-about.

“Indeed.” The Doctor largely ignored him and turned abruptly away. “Will you follow me please?”

The request was more of an instruction, which Stirk followed without question; he was happy to put his life in the hands of the Ministry of Protection, and the men who they saw fit to overwatch the safety of the planet.

Who wouldn’t?

“Lay down,” the Doctor ordered, gesturing to a square, flat bed with a dull metal handrail surrounding it. It was grey but quite a light shade of it, almost exciting, in the most boring way imaginable.

The Doctor rolled up the young man’s shirtsleeve and inserted a small needle into his vein painlessly—pain was considered a luxury since it inspired a reaction. Such things were to be avoided, of course.

“You need not concern yourself with the proceedings,” the Doctor assured him. “You will feel very relaxed, and will then wake up and it will all be over. I will watch your mental process on the monitor and it will reveal your likely destiny. Your thoughts will be read digitally, converted into pure information, and turned into a video. I will be able to use this technology to monitor your most probable future.

“We can predict, quite accurately, what you will become, what actions you might take in the years ahead of you. Your far future is more difficult to predict, but the closer ones we can be quite certain of. With this information we can know who might pose a threat to our society and can rid ourselves of such unwanted elements.

“We will know your future.”

“That's amazing,” Stirk said as he felt a warmth spread through his numbed body as the first wave of the psycho-temporal drug entered his blood, letting his thoughts travel through time while the machines read them and displayed them for the world to see.

“Yes, I know,” he heard the voice echo distantly through his mind, as if from a great distance, but from somewhere inside at the same time. He was in darkness with an accompanying sensation of floating in a warm sea of security, drifting from reality to a place deep within his thoughts.

From the light, there was only blackness.

The Doctor looked up from the monitor with a look of terror frozen onto his wizened features.

The young man was sitting up on the edge of the bed smiling in a friendly, unassuming way. He suddenly noticed his young body, his strong arms and quick muscles, as if seeing all this for the first time.

He saw the innocent and repulsively ironic expression on his face as something passed from his lips, some comment that the Doctor missed as he descended further into his fear, shaking openly, sweat running down his forehead.

The automatic alarm system suddenly activated. The Doctor was wrenched from his panicked thoughts by the awfully imaginative noise of a siren.

“What's going on?” Stirk asked as piercing red warning lights flashed from the corners of the horribly dull room, stirring some long-buried emotion, deep down in the depths of his being. He sounded like a flicker of emotion was beginning to awaken inside him.

The Doctor stood motionless except for the shaking of his head as he nervously, breathlessly looked around.

“Please explain!” Stirk said, standing up and looking around, staring wildly. A life on the colony prepared nobody for the sudden shock of actually experiencing things. These flashing lights were red; it wasn’t a banned colour, but it was closely regulated.

“No...” the Doctor whispered, his voice cracking, his head shaking. “No, please no.”

Stirk ran behind the screen past the motionless Doctor who pressed himself back against the wall in terror away from him. The monitor was empty except for a blaze of static interference and the instruments were all flashing with emergency lights. This probably wasn’t good.

“What’s happening?” he pleaded. The Doctor was backed up to the wall. He began shaking his head while he sobbed quietly to himself.

“What’s going on?” he screamed again but in fearful rage as his face contorted into a snarl. He swiped up the long needle that had been stuck in him earlier and began brandishing it as a weapon.

He stepped back, shaking angrily. His face flushed with anger and fear.

“Tell me what you saw,” he said. His voice was low and menacing. This no longer seemed like the placid, rather empty young man who had stepped in mere moments earlier.

“Oh Non-Denominational being,” whimpered the doctor, backing away nervously, edging along the grey wall, wincing and turning his face away from his ferocious glare.

“What did you see?” Stirk growled menacingly, his face twisting into a snarl.

“Don't kill me,” he said as fat salty tears traced a path down his ashen, white cheeks.

Stirk roared as he finally gave way to long buried emotions. Fury appeared to take hold of him, a feeling that was illegal without the proper certification. He lunged at the Doctor, plunging the long, pointed needle into the Doctor's throat.

It slid in easily, tearing through to the other side with the force of his thrust. He seemed barely aware of his actions as he stabbed down again and again sending blood gushing from his neck, splatting on the wall behind as the Doctor croaked his last lifeless breath.

He looked at what he'd done, seeming dimly aware of the weight of the lifeless, bloody corpse that he held with his right hand just before it slumped noisily to the ground. He stared in disbelief at the heap of lifeless flesh as the seconds dragged silently by.

With a sudden ear-splitting explosion the door dissolved as two men shattered it with a small explosive charge.

Stirk was momentarily blinded and confused. Two figures emerged from the smoke. They were dressed in very dull grey, loose fitting clothes with shiny, reflective glass protecting their faces. His eyes widened in fear as their weapons both opened fire on him.

Tiny metal shards began tearing through his flesh, shattering his bones and ripping his life from him. He fell to the ground in a swirling mass of darkness.

He probably felt the distance growing as he slipped from the men, the grey room, from the pain of being ripped apart by a pair of fully automatic weapons. He might have, and quite probably did, feel himself sliding into an endless darkness that engulfed him.

From the darkness, there was only light.

Stirk sat up and yawned. He had indeed felt very relaxed, and then suddenly awake. The Doctor had been right. There really had been nothing to worry about, not that he had been worried, not in the slightest. He smiled as he thought of how his life would begin when he left this room. He tried not to think about that thought, and thought about not thinking of anything instead. The future was in front of him now.

The Doctor slowly stepped from behind his monitor where he had watched the path of his life, electronically rendered on his equipment.

“So,” Stirk said with carefully metered cheerfulness. “What did you see in my future?”

Ravenous

It was a day like any other: no more less, and no less more than any midweek day you might imagine, if your imagination is accordingly lacking. The sun shone in the blue-grey sky high above the grey-brown buildings of the half-asleep city. It was not quite grim, but not quite not grim.

London is this way, you see.

Mr and Mrs Caldwell sat waiting patiently, as people from London do. Their assigned specialist, Doctor Brownson looked over their case-file, and made the odd accompanying thoughtful murmur. He rubbed his chin, and several times he pushed the middle of his glasses up as they slowly slipped very slightly down his long and inelegant nose.

He looked up at their expectant faces.

Mrs Caldwell said, "What is it, Doctor?" She glanced over to her husband and gave a moderately accusing frown. He was an older gentleman, although not in any way significantly older than her. He was dressed in his finest, whitest shirt, while she was attired in a purple and pink blouse that she saved only for the most special of occasions.

The Doctor looked over the chart one more time and looked dreadfully important while doing so.

"Yes," he said finally, putting the notes down to his rather worn, but still quite adequately-functional teak desk. "It appears to be your heart, I'm afraid."

"Oh no!" Mrs Caldwell said and turned to her husband. "Do you hear that, Graham? It appears to be your heart."

“Quite so,” Malcolm agreed. “Whatever shortcomings I have suffered do not appear to have impaired the functionality of my ears.”

“There’s no need for all your nonsense, Malcolm Caldwell,” she grumbled at him.

Malcolm rolled his eyes and retreated back to silence.

She returned her attention to the Doctor. “What appears to be the problem with his heart?”

The Doctor knitted his fingers together and propped his chin up on the tips of them. He frowned thoughtfully for a moment. “It seems to have—well—there’s no easy way to say this... It’s stopped.”

“Did you hear that Malcolm?” she said with a weary sigh, turning to her increasingly beleaguered husband.

“Ears are still perfectly functional, Mildred,” he assured her.

Mildred scowled at him and tutted several times. She turned to the medical professional and said, “We thought it was something like that.”

“Quite so,” Doctor Brownson replied.

Malcolm seized the opportunity to talk and said, “What are we to do, Doctor?” He looked just a trifle concerned.

“There are several medical options,” he began, making quite sure he looked dreadfully intelligent. “Ultimately, we can let the condition run its course. If you like, I have a pamphlet on the subject titled, ‘So you’ve joined the ranks of the undead? A guide to feasting on the flesh of the innocent.’ It’s rather popular, especially with your own particular demographic.”

Mildred frowned and began tutting still more loudly. “I’m not sure that him feasting on the flesh of the innocent is really his cup of tea, Doctor.”

The Doctor glanced over Malcolm's somewhat rotund midriff. "Quite so," he agreed with a sympathetic smile. "That is merely a passing phase, of course. It rather quickly gives way to the brain decomposing in the skull until the loved-one is a drooling vegetable incapable of anything beyond the most rudimentary actions."

Mildred nodded to herself, looking somewhat more impressed. "Is there a pamphlet available on that one?"

Malcolm coughed several times and said, "We were discussing medical interventions and what it has to offer?"

The Doctor looked him over once again and shook his head condescendingly. He tutted and tapped his face with his left index-finger. "There is an experimental medical process that has yielded rather promising results."

"Oh," said Mildred. "Did you hear that, Malcolm?"

Malcolm looked at the Doctor and sighed.

"There is a treatment where a particularly large, sharpened axe is used to cleave the skull clean down the middle," the Doctor explained. "Results vary, but the undead beast is usually left quite thoroughly extinguished by the end."

"I see..." Malcolm frowned and rubbed the back of his head. "And what happens to the rest of me?"

The Doctor looked away and muttered, "Results vary."

Mildred cast a worried look at her husband. She turned back and said, "Is there anything else you can recommend?"

The Doctor took a deep breath. He said, "Well I was hoping not to bring this up." He looked around as if checking for anyone listening in. "There is an entirely experimental process which came to my attention last week."

Malcolm leaned forward expectantly. "And?" he said with the optimism of a desperate virgin in a brothel.

The Doctor continued with a respectfully lowered voice, “Truly, we live in a time of miracles. There is a process whereby the top of the skull is cleaved in two with a very large hammer. The genius of this new method is that the hammer has been sharpened, you see?”

Malcolm and Mildred looked at one another in concern. It was Mildred who finally spoke and she said, “And will my Malcolm be able to work afterwards? He’s only a science-fiction author so he doesn’t need most of his brain anyway!”

The Doctor nodded and then said, “Oh, most definitely not.”

“I see,” said Malcolm sadly. “I was rather hoping to continue living in some limited capacity.”

“Well you are already technically dead,” the Doctor told him. “You will now gradually decline into a savage affront to human-decency that will be driven to feast on human flesh. We don’t really approve of that kind of thing around here, you know?”

“Quite so,” Malcolm said, nodding sadly. He took a deep breath into his increasingly non-functional lungs. “And how long do I have?”

“Well... your brain will decrease in function quite rapidly,” he replied thoughtfully. He sat back and sighed a heavy exhalation out through his lips. “Have you noticed an increased urge to buy lottery tickets, or find yourself believing what politicians tell you?”

“Oh!” said Mildred, gently slapping her husband’s upper arm. “You bought three scratch-cards on the way over, didn’t you?”

Malcolm sighed loudly.

“Isn’t there a vaccine I can take? Some wild mix of chemicals that will cease this dreadfully un-British nonsense once and for all?” Malcolm grumbled weakly.

“The medical consensus is that that’s exactly what got us into this mess in the first place!” the Doctor said.

“Oh dear,” Mildred groaned. “They said it was all in the public interest, too.”

“Believing what the politicians tell you is an early sign of your brain decomposing, Mrs Caldwell,” the Doctor warned. “We should probably have you tested.”

“It’s quite alright, Doctor,” Malcolm told him with the weariest of sighs. “She’s always been like this. Her father was Irish.”

The Doctor frowned darkly. “I’m so very sorry, Mr Caldwell.”

“Doctor,” Malcolm said finally, sounding wearily resolved to his fate. “What do most people choose to do under such dreadful circumstances?”

The Doctor shrugged to himself. “We have a tethered-bolt-gun that fires a steel projectile forwards about 4 inches. Most people pop it into the back of their loved-ones skulls and pull the trigger. The tip is sharpened, you see. It’s really quite clever.”

“What about if we didn’t want to cleave Malcolm’s skull in two with any kind of sharpened anything?” Mildred suggested.

The Doctor shook his head and guffawed at the suggestion. “I mean, there’s always left wing politics, but I don’t see how that’s any better...”

“We don’t want to go that far, Doctor,” Malcolm assured him. “We’re British, after all.”

Mildred nodded. “Quite so.”

“What a shame there’s no way to simply restart my heart to prevent my brain from decomposing, so that I might continue writing my science-fiction novels,” Malcolm sighed.

“How ridiculous,” the Doctor chuckled. “That’s really not how medicine works, Mr Caldwell.”

“Of course,” Malcolm said. “How silly of me. I must sound quite the madman.”

“Understandable,” he replied. “In your position I’m sure I’d be thinking of quite ridiculous fictions to save myself from my fate too. I do sympathise, my good man.”

“I quite like the idea of the hammer,” Mildred said. “I mean, it’s an experimental procedure, who knows what could happen?”

Malcolm agreed with a nod. “The hammer it is, I suppose.”

“Excellent choice,” The Doctor agreed. He checked his schedule and said. “I can fit you in at the clinic a week next Tuesday, assuming your brain hasn’t rotted away by then and you’ve not tried devouring the brains of your good wife, here.”

Malcolm looked at her sarcastically. He said, “I’m sure her brain is quite safe from all the ravenous undead beasts out there.”

Mildred looked at him, squeezed his arm and said, “Thank you, darling.”

Malcolm rolled his eyes.

“Good luck, to the pair of you,” the Doctor said, standing up and gesturing to the door. “I’m afraid I’m really dreadfully busy. I’m seeing a gentleman who sprouts hair from his face under the light of the silvery moon in five minutes, and then a young lady who claims to be half a fish after that. It never stops here.”

“Quite so,” Malcolm said, reaching out to shake the hand of the good Doctor. “That explains the long wait for the medical hammer.”

He looked down at the outstretched palm, winced and said, “I’d rather not, under the circumstances.”

Malcolm withdrew it immediately and said, “Silly of me, please forgive me.”

“Thanks for all your help, Doctor,” said Mildred. “You’re a lifesaver.”

Doctor Brownson smiled and said, “Well... actually I’m not technically a Doctor.”

Portent

He cracked open a brown-flecked shell and poured the egg into a blackened pan that sat on an open stove. It hissed at first and then settled into a sizzle, the clear albumen turning translucent before slowly growing white. The smell of eggs joined the smell of bacon and sausages he had procured from a local butcher who really knew what he was doing.

He gazed out through his window at the rolling hills that stretched out over the horizon, the soft greens melting into the clear blue skies above. It was all so idyllic, all so nearly perfect.

“I had a dream,” a voice said softly.

Jed reflexively closed his eyes and breathed a heavy sigh. His heart fluttered in his chest, for now he knew he could only wait for her to continue, as he always did. He opened his eyes and noticed he had jabbed a spatula into the egg, smashing it against the pan.

There were so many dreams.

“You had another dream, did you?” he said, doing his best to mask his rising fear.

His daughter—Diana—a tiny slip of a thing barely seven years of age, was stood behind him. Without turning, he knew she was standing up straight, a doll hanging limply by her left side. She had once drilled a hole in the top of its head and stuffed it full of paper notes—notes which nobody had ever managed to decipher. He had questioned her for hours about what was written on them, and all she would say was that they were ‘true things.’ When they pressed her as to why she had written them, she would only say that she hadn’t—not really.

She would be gazing up at him fixedly, her empty blue eyes the colour of the heavens above, yet ever more eternal.

“A man in black, I saw. He worked near here. He lived in a stone building and had a beard of purest fire. He listened to the sins of better men, and did shameful things himself when he thought nobody saw. But they saw.”

“Sam...” Jed sighed, and poked at the broken egg as it slowly burnt a dull brown. Old Sam was the town priest. He turned to drink after his son drowned in the lake, the day before he joined the order.

“I once dreamed his son,” she added.

Jed turned and nodded at her empty face, her expression open and innocent but somehow twisted and vile in his mind’s eye.

“Dream his son you did,” he agreed. “You told old Sam all about it, the self-same day he snapped open the first of many a bottle.”

She shrugged her bony shoulders beneath her white bedclothes. “I see simply what is there to be seen, Daddy. I see the truth of what shall come to pass.”

Jed shook his head sadly.

“Writing, he had, on his left arm,” she continued, her voice a hollow echo of something deep beyond her. “His wife’s name. And his son’s.”

Jed closed his eyes. “His tattoo...” he said sadly. “I’ll make some calls after breakfast, see if his body’s been found. He lived alone.”

“He is not alone now,” Diana told him. “There are so many voices now. He is drowning in voices now.”

The Bishop sipped at a cup of tea and shook his head sadly. “Sam had nobody, you know? Just the church.”

“I know...” Jed sipped at his own mug and nodded. “This is a small town, everyone knows everyone else’s affairs. I’m sure if you

went to the local store, they'd be able to tell you what I had for dinner last night." He flashed a wry smile.

The Bishop smiled back and sighed. "Sam lived here ever since his wife died, did he not?"

Jed nodded. "Cancer, he told me. He raised his son here until the day he drowned. A terrible business, that was."

"I heard," he agreed. "It must have hit him hard."

Jed nodded and sat back in his dining room chair in the kitchen of his old stone cottage. A cold chill hung on the air. "It hit us all, the death of a boy of that age. He was one of our own."

"Of course," The Bishop said, gazing awkwardly into the tea as it swirled in his slightly off-white mug. "Of course."

"I had a dream," came a voice from the doorway.

Jed clenched his eyes firmly shut and muttered, "No..." under his breath. "Not now..."

The Bishop forced a smile on his careworn old face and said, "Hello there, young lady."

"Not in front of the Bishop," Jed told her firmly.

"But it's about the Bishop," she said.

Jed's blood seemed to turn to ice in his veins. He shot a glance at the late middle-aged man and then back to his daughter. "No," he said. "He doesn't want to know."

The Bishop, clearly confused, looked awkwardly to the face of the man and said, "What?"

Diana continued, her voice hollow and distant, "A woman was cleaning. She had long, grey hair tied back in a knot that sits at the base of her skull. Wiry she was, but strong, and wore only black since her husband passed some two years earlier."

Jed glared at her, but fear had stolen his resolve. He could do nothing to stem this tide.

“Alice?” The Bishop gazed at the little girl, and then back to Jed in concerned confusion. “My housemaid?”

Diana continued, “Her husband didn’t pass by the fickle hand of fate. Her guilt drove her to polish your toilet in the hope your God might forgive her actions. She knew he wouldn’t, for she could never forgive them herself.”

“Holy mother of God!” The Bishop uttered, gazing raptly at the frail little girl. “How can you possibly...”

“It’s so hot now. So hot that she can hear her own eyes hissing inside her bones. And it grows hotter every moment; it will always grow hotter, and it will never run out of moments.”

The Bishop’s face was drained of colour. He turned to the man, and gasped, “Jed?”

Jed shook his head as he gazed into his mug. All he could manage to say was, “Alice has gone, Sir. She’s gone.”

The Bishop stood in Jed’s kitchen and leaned heavily against an old oak table where they had once shared a pot of tea. The circumstances had been little better then.

Sergeant Pike looked around sadly with the eyes of a detective, missing nothing of the details. “Did you know old Jed well?”

The Bishop shrugged. “Well enough. I would drop in for a mug of tea from time to time. He once did some woodwork for us; we shared an interest in carvings and would often speak at length on the subject.”

“I see,” the officer said. “Speaking as a man of these parts, I knew him well enough too. He hung all the doors on our station-house last summer. Good man, I always thought. There was a darkness in his eyes though, a sadness.”

“His wife died in childbirth,” he told the policeman. “He was never the same after. Who would be?”

“Quite so...” he agreed. “A dreadful matter. Doesn’t bear thinking about.”

There was a moment of silent contemplation.

“And the girl?” said the Bishop. “What is to become of her?”

“We’re working on that,” he said with a sigh. “She seems oddly oblivious to all this right now. She’s just a slip of a thing. She doesn’t understand her father tore out his own wrists. No sense explaining that to her.”

The Bishop shuddered openly. “She understands...” he muttered.

“I dreamed this,” said Diana, shocking them both to silence. “I dreamed my father would pass with no blood left in his veins, his brain fading to oblivion as he drifted into the icy depths. I knew this would pass. I always know.”

The Bishop bit hard into his bottom lip, and turned away. The policeman just frowned. Perhaps he too had heard the stories?

“I had another dream...”

The two men’s eyes widened, meeting one another in horror. Neither was bold enough to bid the little girl to silence.

“I dreamed of a place far far away from our little town. A room there is, and in it a person: a person that thinks they are safe; a person who thinks that nothing can happen to them.”

The Bishop opened his mouth, but only a breath uttered forth.

“This person reads a tale of terrible happenings, and assures themselves it’s just a story. But it’s never just a story. This person is reading a tale from beyond the cloud, a story that could never come to pass—a story about a person, in a room, who will die while they read it.

“They’re telling themselves now it couldn’t be true, but they are afraid. Deep down, they know the end is coming. They know this is going to hurt...”

Midnight

I was stabbed in the leg again. A sharp prick shot up my calf and then the dull itchiness started in my soft, exposed skin. Grumbling to myself, I scratched at it and cursed my miserable luck as quietly as I could. He was some way ahead of me now and this wasn't going as I had expected. My relationships never do, of course!

I have never had the greatest luck with men, but I finally met one I really liked and I decided to go all-in. For once, I just gave my whole self to the relationship and I didn't hold back. It was amazing at first and I really fell for him. I fell hard!

Within three short weeks I was reduced to trudging through a forest at night getting pricked at by thorns, while dragging my feet, my heart, and my self-respect through the mud as I followed the man of my dreams like a low-rent spy.

I watched in silence, peering out from behind a bush. He turned and looked behind him, craning his neck to look in my direction and sniffing at the air. I held my breath and felt my heart racing as the fear gripped me. If he caught me now it would be over. His eyes darted around piercingly and I was afraid they'd see through my cover, afraid he might hear the anxious drumming of my heart.

We had met at school. He was new to the area and had been in my chemistry class. He was the coolest guy I had ever met: handsome, rugged and a little bit dangerous. His eyes were like bright blue beacons, beaming out from the darkness. He seemed to shine, glowing so brightly that it was impossible not to notice him.

I was shocked when he first spoke to me. I giggled and looked away as his head turned and his eyes met mine. It was the most romantic day of my life when he said, in his low, serious and grave voice, "Hey, do you understand this shit?"

Of course I didn't, but I told him I did and asked if he needed any help with it. He needed all the help he could get and he let me do his homework for him. I loved every minute of the time we spent together, even though he liked to tease me constantly.

We would sit in a coffee shop while I worked, him playing on his phone and checking out the girls as they walked by. Occasionally he would look at me and smile and ask what I thought of them. I knew he was just goading me, and I knew we were getting closer. I could feel the attraction as our hearts slowly pulled us together.

We had our differences. I'm a vegan, of course, and he likes meat, as raw and bloody as possible. But then, one day he opened up to me. Something had happened at home and he wouldn't talk about it. He told me he needed me to get on his motorcycle and we rode off. The world flashed past in a blur, colours streaking by as we headed out from the small, claustrophobic town and into the woods beyond.

We stopped for me to buy beers, since he never had any money, and we ended up in a clearing together, drinking and talking.

After a while he began to tell me about himself as his smouldering eyes gazed forwards into eternity. He said that it had begun many moons ago. His family were dark, twisted people and had treated him badly as he had grown up. When he was young, they had beaten him, locked him under the stairs and left him to fight the family dog for food scraps.

This pain was what drove him, but he said it had changed who he was. He looked up to the moon and flashed me a wry smile. He told me he was something else now, something powerful.

After that, we hung out more often. Despite the problems, I knew I was beginning to fall in love with him; I couldn't help it. I knew he was dangerous, but I was drawn to him. I just couldn't

resist. Sometimes he growled; sometimes he made howling noises when he was excited, and he refused to shave the thick, black stubble that lined his perfect face.

But then it happened.

I asked him if we could hang out on a Friday night, and he said we couldn't. He looked away and a darkness came over him then. He said he was busy that weekend and had to go away. I knew he was lying, and it hurt me deeply.

All this destroyed my confidence, and I slunk around school feeling broken and alone. I didn't talk to the few friends I have. Marcy and Ella asked what was wrong but I just couldn't say without tears running down my cheeks. The thought of him off with some girl, of him pushing me to one side and going out with some pretty, empty-headed thing was just too much.

I thought we had something real, a connection that mattered to him as much as he mattered to me!

I'm not proud of what I did, but I decided to follow him. He rode his loud, black motorcycle out along the same dark roads that we had once gone on together. I had borrowed my Dad's car and drove along behind him, keeping as far back as I could without losing him.

The further we went, the more I started to think that something was horribly, terribly wrong.

He pulled over and got off his bike, just around the same clearing we had gone to before. I drove past and found some quiet lay-by to park in.

There was no girl, no cheerleader on the back of his bike. He was alone, just him in this wild forest, lit under the white, mysterious light of the brightly glowing moon.

Was he meeting someone there, I wondered? I crept along into the woods, gently picking my way through the thick bushes, and I followed him to the clearing where we had first drunk beer together.

He looked away and carried on forwards, edging further into the gloom, growling and snarling to himself. I followed behind growing even more confused and increasingly concerned. What exactly was going on?

Finally we came to a hut, some horrible, dark log cabin deep in the woods, the brilliant, silvery light of the full-moon casting haunting shadows all around it. It looked abandoned.

My heart quickened at the sight of the ugly, awful thing. It was like some wretched, low-budget horror movie had come to life right in front of me. But he carried on and went straight in through the front door.

He had a key!

I found an old crate and positioned it under the dirty side window. Climbing on top of it and standing on tiptoes, I was just about able to peer inside. He had thrown off his beaten leather jacket and was sat down on the cold, stone floor, but he didn't appear to have noticed me watching.

I wasn't jealous now, I was afraid. I didn't know what was going on and could only wait as this awful nightmare played itself out. As I sat myself down on the crate, I became even more terrified. I heard a scream, a blood-curdling cry that tore apart my very soul.

I waited until morning, just sat there, shaking in fear. I was too afraid to go in, too afraid to turn back. Panic had gripped me and had melted away to emptiness. I felt numb by the time that moon gave way to the first light of morning. Eventually, with the first rays of dawn on my face, I found the courage to open the door and go inside.

The place was run down, debris strewn around the floor, and he was right in the middle, shackled to the wall with a metal chain.

"My god!" I heard myself say. He was curled up asleep like a dog, and he roused at the sound of my voice. He began to wake, blearily rubbing at his eyes. He was vulnerable and alone; he had never looked more beautiful to me.

He asked, confused and helpless, "What are you doing here?"

I rushed forwards and began pulling at the chains. "What's going on?" I urged, my voice shrill and panicked. I reached out to offer the comfort he needed while he was at his lowest. As my hand gently rested on his shoulder, his expression hardened and he brushed my offer of warmth and comfort aside as though it were nothing.

I stopped in my tracks and my heart skipped a beat. I looked straight into his bright, beautiful eyes and waited for him to explain.

"Stop... touching me, Gregg!" he said with a growl. "Are you gay or something?"

He sat up and looked around, blinking blearily. "Wait... Have you been here all night? I could have killed you!"

"What?" I said with a smirk, shrugging at his half-garbled gibberish.

"I guess you know now!" he said solemnly, looking down to his feet and pulling his knees up like a naughty child. "I'm a werewolf. At midnight, under the light of the full moon, I change into a half-beast creature and I hunt for flesh to feed on."

"What?!" I said incredulously. I covered my mouth and looked away; it was the best I could do to stop myself laughing.

He looked broken. His hair was a mess, his shaggy, threadbare beard half-arsedly covering his weak chin.

“My parents had to lock me away to stop me from hurting others. They had no choice. Now, I lock myself in here every full moon so I don’t hurt anyone else.”

“Um... No!” I said, shaking my head as an awkward, almost embarrassed smile flashed over my lips. I almost felt bad for him.

“It’s for the best!” he said dolefully.

“No!” I repeated more forcefully, hoping to snap his feeble fragile mind back to reality. “I’ve been here all night. Nothing happened. You just slept on the floor.”

“I’m serious!” he insisted and frowned at me in pathetic confusion. “I turned into a wolf.”

“No you didn’t!” I repeated again and rolled my eyes. “I watched you the whole time. Nothing happened at all. You just laid there!”

“But...” he stammered. “But...”

Honestly, he looked like he wanted to cry. I actually felt a little embarrassed for us both.

As I watched him sit there gibbering and blubbing, I felt I had finally seen the real him for the first time, and frankly I was not impressed. He was just a mess, a sorry loser lost in some ridiculous delusion; a scared little boy clinging tightly to a fantasy that he was something other than himself, something that only existed inside his head. This was all some manifestation of a past trauma, no doubt. The abuse he grew up with must have damaged him badly if this was the comforting fiction he escaped to, one where he was the monster and his family were right to lock him away.

He slowly got to his feet. The chains just fell away and clattered to the floor; they had never even been locked!

What must it be like to be so empty and shallow? I felt some mild pity for this horribly damaged, weak and pathetic creature, but I

knew I couldn't let it be my problem anymore. It was his burden to carry, and a real man would own it, not mope around in the shadows crying to anyone that would listen.

No, there was nothing left there for me now. It was time to move on, I could do better than this!

Reality isn't laid out by the numbers, and sometimes strays beyond what we can see, and hear, and think, or what we think we hear and see. Where reality stops, stories begin, our pathways beyond the realms of the straight and the narrow, the black and the white of things.

Among the vast and varied tomes of substandard fiction, none have quite captured audiences' enthusiasm like the two act setup. In the first act, the scene is set: our characters and situations are introduced. We learn about their motivations, their dreams, their fears...

Today we might step off the path most-trodden as we visit a man whose reality is sandwiched between the realm of the real and the realm of the maybe, between the black and the white. What will we find as we unpick the pieces of the lives he touches along the way?

And with all the pieces in their proper places, what then?
That's for us to find out in...

The Second Act

Meet Tony Fibglotis, a street peddler of fresh deli sandwiches enjoying a typical Thursday lunchtime's trade.

"Hey Tony, gimme a turkey and cranberry on rye, hold the pickles!"

"Hold the pickles? When do I ever put pickles on turkey and cranberry?"

"Today you do! I want you in the mindset that today of all days, you're going to break routine and put pickles on your turkey and cranberry, and then don't."

“Sounds like a lot of trouble to me.”

“You want to lose a valued customer?”

“Thought you’d never ask!”

“Just breakin’ your balls, Tony! You know me!”

“Hey Tony, you got any werewolf meat in?”

“Fresh out, Brad!”

“That’s good, can’t stand werewolf meat. Gives me gas!

Chronic gas! Tell you what, gimme some of that chicken roll in sesame with lettuce and colby jack.”

“Hey, Tony! I got one for you. What’s black and white and red all over?”

“A penguin in a wood chipper?”

“It’s a newspaper! Get it? ‘Read’ all over?”

“Newspapers have been colour for decades!”

“Whatever, I’ll have a Cubanos.”

“Hey Tony, gimme a plain sub filled to the brim with sausage meat.”

“You got it!”

“Now, I mean •really• filled to the brim. I want you to stuff that thing full of sausage meat until it can’t hold any more, then I want about 50 to 60% more on top of that.”

“You kidding? Half of it’ll end up on the floor and I’ll have health and safety all over my ass about the rats and racoons again. You want me to lose my license?”

“Guess not. Tell you what, just gimme a veggie. Extra tomato!”

“Hey Tony, what would you recommend for a girl that appreciates the finer things in life?”

“I dunno, a night at the opera?”

“Opera? Hello?! I’m talking sandwiches here Tony! Come on, I got a girl to impress”

“How about sauteed foie gras with mango ketchup in a licorice bread roll, served on a silver tray by a guy in a tuxedo? Sound good?”

“Perfect. Could you gimme one of them?”

“No. What you see is what we got!”

“Excuse me good sir,” came a high pitched voice. It was a short man in a black suit, glasses and a bowler hat, a white handkerchief protruding from his breast pocket. This customer was new, and as he spoke, it was as if the hustle and bustle around him suddenly lowered in volume, as if time itself had stopped. “Did I hear you say you were fresh out of werewolf meat?”

Tony eyed him suspiciously. “You did hear me say that, yes.”

The man looked distracted. For a moment, he sniffed the air, his eyes darting hither and thither. “Yes,” he said finally. “There is no werewolf meat here. Thank you for your time.”

Before Tony could make sense of the conversation, the man had vanished into the crowd, only to be replaced by the usual hullabaloo of customer requests for his humble wares.

Something about the man felt out of place, though he knew all too well that things were rarely black and white. For there was also more to this street trader than met the eye. But we shall touch upon this once more at a later stage.

By two o'clock, he had finished work and was enjoying a coffee with a neighbouring trader.

"How was business today, Tony?"

"Same old, same old. You?"

"I dunno, I'm thinking I might be in the wrong line. There just isn't the demand anymore for inflatable rubber horses. I'm thinking I should branch out into other equines."

"You have to create demand, Richie! My sandwiches don't exactly sell themselves."

"From where I'm sitting, that's exactly what they do!"

"Well the customers don't exactly make it easy. You know, I had a guy in earlier asking about werewolf meat! I don't even think he was joking."

"Strange times my friend. Did you hear the sirens earlier?"

"This morning? Yeah, strangest sound ever. Where do you think they were coming from?"

"Sounded like North Street, where the kindergarten is. Never heard anything like it."

"Perhaps one of the toddlers escaped."

The two of them laughed at the absurdity of the suggestion.

"Well, it's not like they'd get very far since they painted over all the crossings on that block to match the red brickwork. It's practically an island now. Say, Tony. You want something to liven up your coffee?"

"I'm good, Richie. The caffeine is lively enough for me. You know I can't hold my liquor, and people say I'm a mean drunk!"

"I hear ya! You don't mind if I do though?"

Later that afternoon, Tony arrived home where, free of prying eyes, he was safe to resume his secret second identity. Unbeknown to even his closest friends, Tony was an amateur mad scientist, and today would be the night he finally got to try out his invention.

“At last,” he cackled. “At long, long last! My elixir is ready for trial stage Alpha Zero Charlie.

“Long have I sought out its secret, and long has it eluded me, but today all that will change. Today, its secrets will be revealed!

“Throughout the long history of mankind, the goodness of man has always been mired by the filthy taint of evil. The white corrupted by the black. No more, I say! This elixir—if successfully clinically tested at a range of dosage levels, with proper accounting for age and medical history, and a suitably sized control group—will purge the evil from the very souls of men!”

His cat rarely spoke, and when it did it was normally unintelligible, but it did make for a good listener. Tony liked to monologue, but without an audience, that would just be a bit weird.

“Before all that though, I must first evaluate the potion’s potency. I hereby nominate myself the very first test subject.”

He raised the small vial to the light and watched a spectrum of colour project onto his hand.

“To the future!” he proclaimed, and brought the bottle to his lips.

I awoke with a ferocious headache, a dryness in my throat, a waxy veil of translucent mucus partially impairing my vision.

What had I done?

I surveyed my room. All was as it should be, with some minor differences. The curtains, which I would normally find in their rightful place hanging over the windows, were now torn and dirty

and spread across the floor, a floor which, while normally clean and tidy, was now strewn with broken glass, cigarette ends, topsoil, the remains of a table, and pieces of cuckoo clock, which would normally be assembled in a working fashion and hanging over a television set, which now had a giant hole where an unbroken screen had once been. Also the walls which were usually white and clean were now covered with faeces, and adorned the message, “You did this!!” in what appeared to be human blood, perhaps my own judging by the bruising on my hands. There was also a rotting bloodstained zebra over in the corner with a box of Chinese takeaway perched on top.

What had I unwittingly unleashed?

Hurriedly, I switched on the radio, in the hopes I might familiarise myself with a grander understanding of events.

“If you’re just switching the radio on now,” came the voice, “then we have breaking news!

“The price of bananas is set to rise for the second time this month due to the mechanics of a democratically organised society working in accordance with its stated intent. If you like cheap bananas, you only have yourselves to blame for voting incorrectly all those years ago.

“A black and white fluffy cat was found stuck up a tree with no way of getting down. But thanks to our brave boys and girls—and those that identify as neither—in yellow hats and trousers, the cat was reunited with its owner, a 5 or 6 year old boy named Andreagal. I bet we’re all glad that turned out OK!”

Things outside at least appeared to be normal... for the time being. With relief and some minor hesitancy, I reached over to turn the radio off. But at that very moment...

“And on a lighter note, this just in! A string of grizzly murders took place up and down the city last night. Police are baffled as to how anybody could be so insanely violent, and are currently crying like little girls having lost all faith in humanity. Though it hasn’t yet been confirmed, it’s suspected by this journalistic body that a certain former US president was involved. I think we all know which one.”

Curses. It appears my elixir which was intended to eliminate evil from a man’s soul instead merely focussed it. While I may have no memory of the events of last night, the memories nonetheless exist in a more tangible form. I have committed a grave offence against humanity, and while a lesser man may hope to cover his tracks, hide his transgressions, and escape the consequences of his poorly conceived ambition, I knew I had to take responsibility.

Hastily, I gathered some personal effects and headed for the nearest police station to offer my confession.

“Let me get this straight, sir. You are claiming responsibility for the most heinous series of crimes ever to be witnessed on a single night, despite having no recollection whatsoever of having committing them?”

“It is how you say it is, officer,” I confirmed. “The whys and the wheres I cannot attest to, but the hows are self-evident. For you see, in my hubris, I invented a secret elixir capable of purging the evil from the souls of men. But as implied by my reference to ‘hubris’ just now, it all went a bit wrong.”

“So you took a potion, blacked out, and went running around the city vigorously murdering everybody? Is that what you’re saying?”

I nodded my head. It seemed a fair summation. “These things happen.”

“Let me ask you a pertinent follow up question then, sir. Are you a horse?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You know, a stallion, a colt, a mare, a filly, a bronco, a gelding, a pony even. Shadowfax! Would you describe yourself in any of those terms.”

“I fail to follow your line of questioning, officer.”

“It’s just that all of the victims had their throats ripped out by equine teeth. I must say that yours look remarkably human, though I don’t claim to be an expert in such matters.”

Something was amiss. I found myself momentarily at a loss for words.

“Gentlemen,” squeaked a sudden voice from the doorway.

“Perhaps I can help clear up this confusion!”

I turned to see a familiar face. It was the bespeckled man in black I’d met the day before. I had suspected his part in my sordid tale had not yet concluded.

“I…” he began as he took off his glasses and began wiping them with his handkerchief, “am a freelance hunter!”

“A hunter?!” scoffed the officer. “What of? Rats? Racoons? Penguins?”

“The details of my specialty are way above your pay grade, good officer, but I shall make an exception on this one occasion, as it would be most unfitting should an innocent man sit rotting in jail for a crime he didn’t commit.

“Yesterday morning, a creature escaped from a top secret government facility up in North Street, just next to the kindergarten. It is a creature so atrocious, so barbarous, so cruel, so dangerous, so depraved, so diabolical, so ferocious, so heinous, that it exclusively preys on that most feared terror of the night, the werewolf!

“On hearing of its escape, I made many attempts to procure werewolf flesh as a means of baiting it into one of my many clumsy Ruth-Goldberg style traps I had set up around the city. Alas it was to no avail. Instead, the creature spent the night rampaging through town, ripping the necks out of every werewolf it could find.

“In hindsight, perhaps it did us all a favour...

“Tracking it was a simple matter of following the screams and the trail of blood. But the trail went dry along a high street over on West Side, right outside a Chinese takeaway.”

Something about this was starting to sound familiar.

Cautiously, I ventured a query. “By any chance, this creature you seek, is it a zebra?”

“A zebra it is. More specifically, a zebra-wolf hybrid, a were-zebra if you like, though more accurately a ‘perisswolf.’ Know something of it do you?”

“I think you’d better come with me...”

“Unbelievable!” said the bespeckled man. “This majestic beast, this apex predator of apex predators has been knocked out stone cold dead with a single punch! I think you have some explaining to do, sir.”

I was committed to confessing my sins, and though the nature of the sin had evolved somewhat over the course of the day, my resolve remained steadfast.

“Though by day I am a simple purveyor of fresh deli sandwiches, by night I am an amateur mad scientist. The potion in that bottle over there is my life’s work, a mystical elixir that can purge the evils of man. Or at least that was its intent. Instead, it appears to have merely focussed the evil, turning me—albeit temporarily—into who knows what manner of creature.”

The officer examined the bottle and had a quick smell. Cautiously, he poured a little onto his hand and touched his tongue to it. "This is rocket fuel!"

"Rocket fuel?" repeated the bespeckled man in some confusion.

"You know, moonshine, hooch, firewater, bootleg. It's basically homemade vodka. It's pretty good too!"

"Vodka eh?" said the man, adjusting his glasses. "It seems to me that somebody can't hold his liquor.

"Judging by the evidence in this room, an approximate timeline of events would be that you drank a mouthful of vodka, lost consciousness, wrecked your room, got the munchies, popped out for Chinese and this were-zebra made the terrible mistake of getting in your way. In your anger, you punched it out, and then continued on to buy chicken chow mein in oyster sauce.

"You then carried the poor creature back to your room to use as a table, because your existing one was already trashed. Does any of that ring true?"

"It's a fair cop," I conceded. "People do say I'm a mean drunk."

The Diary

They sat across one from one another, each trying to get the measure of the other, each trying to sum up exactly who the person sat opposite really was.

She sipped at a frothing pink liquid, and smiled an enigmatic little smile that held almost exactly the amount of warmth a splinter of ice would have, one that seemed like it might be jutting directly out from her soul.

The French café was almost empty; only a few people were dotted around the place, chatting quietly or sipping cups of something that was almost, but not entirely, unlike tea.

“The law was changed two years ago, as I’m sure you know,” she said with cold indifference. “The 2230 Information Act prohibits the free transportation of data-archives. Since then, these kinds of relics are getting harder to find, especially those as sensitive as this particular specimen.”

Paul Davis narrowed his eyes angrily, but his expression remained almost entirely neutral as he did his very best to remain emotionally detached for the time being. He was a seasoned negotiator, and this was all just a part of the game. He’d heard it all before from every dealer he’d ever had the misfortune to meet. Mrs Green was apparently no different in that respect, and he briefly wondered if any of them really were?

“Do I take it then that the price just went up?” he said knowingly, a tiny flutter of a smile flashing over his lips.

She nodded in agreement that indeed it had, her smile softening into a vague pretence of sympathy.

It didn’t matter, not really. This was important to him, and he had more than enough money to accommodate her greed. If it was

everything it promised to be, then the diary belonged in his collection. Its cost was largely an irrelevance.

“Price is less important to me than the quality of the item,” he said gruffly. His voice was deep and low and resonated with authority and power. He was moving to take control of the situation now, setting the rules for later on.

“I’m sure you’ll be pleased,” she said, and smoothed down the collars of her pink and black dress, glancing around to see if anyone was looking at them. She deftly passed a tiny item across the table, a sample of what she had to sell. The item seemed to have a power that defied its understated presence. “I hear you’re quite the collector of war information,” she said conversationally, keeping her voice low and measured.

He smiled knowingly to himself and told her, “I am indeed.” He took the tiny metal tube and slipped it into a device that would prove it was authentic, and not some cheap imitation, as they too often were.

The handheld unit, a larger tube that the smaller one slotted into, began to flash as it processed the data within.

His interest in his work overcame his caution. He explained, “I’ve got information archives from before World War III. I have letters written by American Generals during the invasion of Iraq. I have draft notices from the invasion of Syria, documents from General Eisenhower himself. I have details from throughout human history. Each of them is original, each of them verified to be true.”

“But you have nothing like this?” she said and the question sounded much more like a statement. “You’ve never had a diary about a real alien invasion before. This is from a colony, an outpost that was attacked.” She grinned at him like a hungry cat. It was clear she understood that, for now, she was the one in control.

He glared at her for a moment and then glanced down to his device, where his interest was really more focused. He knew the price was going up with every passing moment. His pretence at disinterest had faltered and now she knew just how badly he wanted this item. He tried to control his anticipation, calming himself to mask the cues that she, a seasoned sales expert, was already picking up on.

“A diary from a conflict out there in space is very valuable. If it’s real, I will buy it.” He tried to focus on the content; questioning the quality and authenticity might give him back an advantage.

“Oh it’s real.” She adopted a more professional tone and stared fixedly with a cold expression of absolute confidence. “Would you like to read an extract?”

Mr Davis tensed at the suggestion. He tried to appear as though he wouldn’t like to at all, but he did a poor job of it and his enthusiasm was quite apparent. She grinned to herself and took a little sip of her drink.

His expression betrayed him, giving away all the passionate need to get to the content of the diary that was chewing away inside him.

She held out an electronic tablet with an extract embedded on it. He reached out, snatching it up excitedly.

He began to read.

Day 67. The occupation is continuing. These beings have beaten us already, but what hope was there for a soldier like me? Their weapons were horrible, so advanced that we could scarcely comprehend them. I watched as one of them caught my brother. Our eyes locked together at the very moment a glowing red beam lashed

out fiercely, catching him in the chest, He screamed in fearful horror, and then went silent. He was just gone; nothing was left except a crackling noise and a terrible stench of scorched flesh.

Even though we have no defences left, they keep on moving forwards, burning our homes and annihilating our crumbling cities. We are broken now, and we know it's only a question of time before we're all destroyed. And for what? They strip our resources bare, they pull the oxygen from our air and the life from our lands. They will leave nothing on our world but the rocks when they leave.

Paul Davis had to have this diary, a story of a distant drama in a part of the galaxy far, far from his home. It was like nothing else in his collection. He swallowed hard, trying with all the effort he could muster to control himself.

He said softly, looking up from the tablet. "Do we know the name of these aliens?"

She nodded darkly and said, "We most certainly do. Read on."

Day 68. There's nowhere left for us to retreat to. These monsters have driven us to the very edge in their inexorable march forwards. The few of us who are left have not eaten in days, we know our families are gone, and we know there's nothing left to fight for. Our world is over, we're lost. Only our instinct for survival remains, and it's no longer strong.

I turned to my friend, Marsius. He looked at me with sad eyes, and walked back towards the aliens, his weapon trained forwards in some worthless gesture, knowing that to do so would mean his end. I cursed them. These evil creatures from another world. They cared nothing for the lives of us or our children when they attacked our

peaceful little colony. What kind of crude animals would kill so freely, I wondered in my last few moments alive?

Creatures on our planet kill, but none take pleasure in it. I cursed these monsters as they marched towards us, knowing our end would be with us soon. I cursed these aliens who call themselves ‘Humans.’

He looked up and said simply, “I’ll take it. Name your price.”

The Slashening

Troy McGrath was a popular kid at his local small-town American high-school.

He was ruggedly handsome in a non-threatening and vaguely androgynous way. He was also very good at whatever sports that proper research would have shown were most popular at the time. His hair was fussy, yet still looked immaculately styled, even after a rigorous bout of sportsing, and he had an odd maturity about him, like he was a teenager living in the body of a very immature actor in his early-thirties who had a severe cocaine addiction.

Dating him was something of a badge of honour to the ridiculously attractive young girls at his school, each one looking like a Hollywood actress—and not the character actresses who got by on such trivial things as their own talent and hard work, oh no. These young ladies looked like supermodels, but did so with the hardened looks that accompany significant personality malformations, severe chemical-abuse, and the willingness to do anything to succeed—or anyone.

In a blaze of fairly predictable irony, the geeky, unloved and partly bullied girls were even more ridiculously attractive than the existing ridiculously attractive ones, as if they had sat on the bloated, repulsive knee of some cosmic casting-agent who had selected them personally for their willingness to—ahem—perform.

He was parked at the edge of ‘Hanging-Corpse Wood,’ a well-known local forest where clearly nothing worthy of any note had ever happened. It was a place where a gentle breeze ruffled the leaves of tall, sweepingly elegant trees as dusk slowly took hold of the small town stretching out below, tiny pinpricks of light flickering in the darkness.

Next to him was his latest ‘girlfriend,’ Cindy-Lou, although for simplicity he just referred to her as ‘Fireball.’

“Fireball,” he said, trying to sound romantic and alluring—or at the very least as romantic and alluring as a teenage boy living in the body of an ageing actor who got caught dating underaged girls and now struggles to find work, could sound. “I have to say, I’ve really enjoyed tonight.”

What was not to enjoy? They had driven around town in his brand new Ford Orgasmatron that most full-time employed adults with no financial commitments would struggle to afford, its brand logo gleaming proudly in the moonlight in perfect focus. They had thrown emptied cans of beer at homeless people in the town square, and then headed to the pastures to tip over a few cows. Exactly the kind of wholesome, if slightly clichéd, hijinx you would expect from any red-blooded average American teenager.

Although there were a lot of Fords in his town, his friends and schoolmates all drove beaten-up vehicles of other, lesser brands.

Cindy-Lou, who had worked really hard to earn herself the nickname ‘Fireball’ had worked even harder to rid herself of it. But she was stuck with it for now, and a few visits to a clinic had cleared the worst of it up. In any case, she couldn’t have been more popular with the local boys if gassy domestic beer dribbled out of her bodily orifices.

“I had a nice time too,” she said coquettishly with a girlish little giggle that only very slightly sounded like the voice of a smoker with a minor heroin addiction. “I really care about you, Brad.”

He turned to her and grinned. He was going to get some! “I care about you too, Fireball.”

For a moment their eyes met and they both just stared into each other, gazing raptly into a soul churning with adolescent hormones.

“Is something going to happen?” she said, a little more shyly than you would imagine for a girl who could correct several misunderstandings the school sex-ed teacher had about human physical relations. She ran her hand down her thigh while her other slowly traced its way up her stomach and onwards towards her breasts.

“Sure!” he said.

He was definitely going to get some.

What he was planning to happen was largely what she was planning to happen, only on a much faster, and smaller scale.

She looked away and chewed her bottom lip. “But how do I know you’ll respect me in the morning?” she said looking out through the side window of the car.

“Oh, you have nothing to worry about there,” he said. “I don’t respect you now!”

She frowned curiously and snapped back to peer at him through narrowed eyes. “What?” she said.

“I don’t respect you at all,” he told her. “I just want to have sex with you. Even talking to you now is kind of an annoying inconvenience, if I’m absolutely honest.”

“I see,” she said and flashed him a thoughtful look. “It’s not a deal-breaker, I guess. You do have a nice car, after all.”

“I have a very nice car, and I’m good at sportsting. I’m almost certain that’s a word, though it does have a squiggly red line under it for some reason.”

“Grant,” she said. “Why do you not respect women?”

“Oh, I respect women as an abstract, make no mistake there,” he told her. “It’s you specifically I don’t respect. I’m handsome and my dad is wealthy, so I’ve never had to care about anyone else’s feelings. I really don’t think it’s fair I should be expected to apologise for something I’m not in the least bit sorry about. I could pretend to be sorry but I feel it would just demean us both and this evening was really more about demeaning you.”

“I apologise for my imposition,” she said, nodding to herself. “But do you respect any women?”

“Sure,” he agreed with a shrug.

“You mum doesn’t count.”

“Oh, in that case no.”

“How about men?”

He shrugged.

She nodded to herself for a moment in silent contemplation.

“So I’ll just take my bra off then?”

“Yes,” he said. “I was actually wondering how long that was going to take. I had been told you had the sexual morality of a bitch—that is, a female dog—on heat, but was starting to wonder. I was afraid I’d wasted the price of a hotdog on you—with extra mustard.”

“No, Mark!” she told him with a smile. “Extra mustard always gets me in the mood for hotdogs.”

“That’s the spirit!” he told her.

Her hand reached up under her cheap caerulean blouse, a garment where not one single button matched one other one. Suddenly she stopped and her eyes widened. She said with a partially-hushed voice, “What about the ‘Slash?’”

“I went earlier.”

“No, idiot. I mean the killer!”

He waved his hand dismissively. “Oh that?” he said with a smirk. “We’re not worried about that. What kind of serial killer goes around murdering good-looking teenagers just because they’re sexually promiscuous? This isn’t the movies you know.” He turned towards a nondescript window and winked at nobody in particular who wasn’t even there.

“I heard terrible things!” she told him. Her fearful eyes peered out into the darkness as the giant circle of the moon lit the front of his black or possibly red car.

“I heard terrible things too,” he sighed. “That was why I asked you out, but I’m beginning to think I was misinformed.”

“I hear the Slash taps three times,” she told him fearfully.

“I don’t care.”

“I hear he—or she—wears a big metal mask with eye-slots cut in it. It’s rusty and home-made, like a prop built on a budget. The bottom jaw is hinged, and it has teeth welded on like little razors he—or she—uses to bite into you, shredding your flesh.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard,” he said, evidently not having paid attention in his political-science class.

“I hear he—or she—wears the skin of his—or her—last victim on his—or her—face, because his—or her—real face was cut off by his—or her—own mother. I hear he—or she—springs out when you least expect it.”

He sighed wearily. “Well, I’m expecting it now so I guess we’re safe. Did you have any other interesting ways to spoil the mood?”

She nodded unironically. “I hear the person in question of unspecified gender leaves the good kids alone and just picks on the ones that are popular, that everyone secretly hates.”

“Oooo,” he said excitedly. “I’m a popular kid that everyone secretly hates.”

“So am I,” she said nervously.

“I know. I’m beginning to wonder why you’re popular, though.”

She smiled and asked, “Do you think we’re safe? Will you protect me?”

“Yes,” he told her, placing a supportive hand on her slender shoulder. “At least to the first question. I think we both know the answer to the second one. I think even asking it demeans us both.”

She reached up and tapped on his dashboard three times. “You’re not scared of the Slash?”

“Not scared exactly,” he told her. “It burns a little sometimes, but I was told to expect that.”

“Great,” she said with a broad smile. She reached behind her, fumbling at the rear of her bra. “I’ve got something I want to show you that I think you’re going to like.”

“And I’ve got something to show you that I think you’re going to wearily put up with for the night.”

“Sounds great,” she said enthusiastically, turning away and struggling with her clothes.

“At long last!” he sighed.

Suddenly she snapped back around, her face vanished behind a hideous metal mask with gnashing, shredding jaws. Her crazy, furious eyes peered out from inside a pair of roughly-cut slots.

“Fine,” he said resignedly. “I can work with this.”

Then she lunged forward, the jagged steel of the jaws shredding into his neck and sending jets of blood cascading all over the inside of his implausibly nice car.

He gurgled weakly and slumped down into the seat, blood oozing from his wounds like spilled ketchup. “What?” he gasped, gazing at her fixedly as the light slowly went out of eyes.

“You should have respected certain specific women as individuals in their own right, unrelated to their gender, but strictly because of it, Kurt!” she told him with a low, grave voice from behind her metal facade. “According to precisely one, most likely heavily biased take on prior events, somebody’s mother or sister was abused by boys like you, for some reason, or like, whatever.”

“Whatever...?” he gasped, clutching at the savagely torn, rubber-like remains of his neck. “I hate whatever.”

“Mostly I just like killing people, if I’m honest,” she said with a shrug. “I shroud myself in the cloak of righteous vengeance for vaguely articulated crimes against an unnamed hypothetical third party, but at the end of the day, I just get off on having warm bodily fluids splashing all over my face and hair. And tits. If there was a child-friendly way to achieve this without all the bloodshed, I would love to hear it.”

He coughed his last and managed to just spit out one last thought. “Good for you!”

“And now, the finishing flourish—I have to cut off your face,” she said, popping a penknife out from somewhere.

He snapped open his cold dead eyes and said, croaking and spluttering, “I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Sorry,” she said. “These things have rules, I’m afraid...”

He closed his eyes one final time and mumbled, “Fair enough.”

The moon watched as she sliced his face free from his bones and wore it upon her own. Inexplicably, it closely resembled glorified TV extra, George Takei.

“What a terrible waste. It was such a nice car...”

The Reef

“I need this,” he said softly, the words barely mumbled loud enough for him to hear them inside his own head. He shut his eyes, squeezing the lids down tightly as a small surge of emotions bubbled away within him. “Please...”

The person sat opposite nodded solemnly. He was dressed sharply, had a well-maintained physique and a haircut that looked expensive. He moved with measured calm and exuded confidence. It wouldn't have been possible not to respect him, even if he tried to push such emotions out with a surge of jealous arrogance. Whatever he thought, he kept it to himself, buried so far down that it barely registered, even to him.

“John,” the man said with a sigh. “I agree that our product would be beneficial to you, but there's more to it than that. I have to ensure that it's safe for you to be allowed to use it. I mean, you're not exactly gifted, are you?”

John looked up and gave him a doleful gaze. Why was he making this so hard?

“I need to go to the REEF!” he said simply.

The man he knew only as ‘The Doctor’ nodded back and made a note on his paper pad. He nodded to himself once more, and gave a thoughtful look before gazing away at nowhere in particular. “The REEF is designed to be the ultimate therapeutic experience,” he said. “It's not intended to be a permanent abode. One of the problems we have is that some people never come back. Some people like it so much that they actually want to stay.”

John snorted sharply as he blew air out through his nose, like the first motion of a laugh that wasn't funny enough to take hold.

“Why would anyone want to come back?” he said with the tiniest hint of sarcasm.

The Doctor pointed a very nicely-made stainless steel pen at him and said, with a wry smile, “Exactly!”

“What happens to people who don’t?” John said with a frown. “Do they just stay?”

“They die, Mr Dour,” he said evenly, with a slight hint of a European accent. He smirked to himself. “It’s a nice place to visit, but you can’t live there. You get one week.”

John nodded to himself. Would dying somewhere like that be any worse than living where he was now? He wondered if he was so far gone that he would be rejected. Would they even allow him to travel there, if he was seriously considering the ramifications of not returning? He found that he was most certainly considering those very ramifications.

Suddenly he spoke, almost to his surprise. “I don’t want to die.”

“People who commit suicide don’t want to die either,” The Doctor said conversationally. “The problem is that they no longer want to live—that’s why they choose an alternative. It’s not that death has an allure, it’s that life has become too painful to endure. I don’t expect you to understand.”

John huffed to himself and smiled a pitifully empty smile. “Life isn’t too painful,” he said. His eyebrows raised as he huffed a humourless laugh. He ran his hand slowly over his face, lightly pulling down on his cheeks. “That’s rather my problem, isn’t it?”

“Why don’t you tell me what you know about the REEF?” said the Doctor, masterfully changing the topic.

“Not much,” he said. “Just what I heard on the advertisements really.”

The Doctor nodded and waited for him to continue.

There was a crushing silence, and John felt the eyes of this offensively perfect man very politely boring through him. He noticed his foot was tapping involuntarily, and sweat was prickling at his brow. John added, to fill the emptiness, “I know it stands for Reactive Environmental Engagement Facility.”

“Very good,” The Doctor smiled happily, with a certain measured satisfaction that John felt even more intimidated by. “Most people don’t remember that. It’s a good sign that you’ve paid so much attention. That’s part of why we used the long words. It’s a very good way of checking who is serious about our product.”

John felt a small, but not insignificant wave of relief wash over him. Was this a good sign, he wondered?

“I wonder if you know what those words mean?” he said, tapping his chin with the end of his pen. “You don’t look like the kind of man who would!”

John nodded at what was a fairly insulting statement, not that it wasn’t spot-on. “I had to look it up. Reactive means it knows what’s happening and it responds, like poking a dog with a pointy stick.”

The Doctor’s eyes widened and he stared accusingly. “Mr Dove, I do hope you have never considered poking a dog with a pointy stick.” He frowned a thoughtful frown. “I hope you’ve never poked any kind of animal with any kind of sticks, pointy or otherwise.”

“I haven’t,” John said sharply, his voice rising in tone alarmingly. “I’d never do such a thing.”

“Good...” The Doctor smiled and settled back comfortably in his much nicer chair. “Just checking.”

John sighed and tried to remember what they had been talking about, so he could fill yet another awkward silence. “Environment is what’s around us,” he said. “Engagement means when we deal with things. So it means that it’s an area that deals with us and adapts to our needs.”

“Yes,” The Doctor nodded and gave him a slightly condescending glare. “I know what it means. I work here. I’m literally paid to know what the words mean.”

John shuffled awkwardly in his seat. Had he offended the Doctor, the man who stood between him and access to the REEF? He felt the sweat beginning to run down his forehead and his chest tighten.

“I’m sorry...” he said softly, his voice fading to a whimper. “I didn’t mean to say anything that might dis-equalibrium you.”

“It’s no problem,” The Doctor told him with a shrug. “Nobody expects too much from people like you. You’re just a worker—you’re not educated or compensated to think. I don’t take offence at what comes out of your mouth any more than a tree is offended by the birds that nest in it.”

John stared blankly for a moment with his mouth lolling open in surprise. His mind was as empty as his tongue. He finally, after a brief pause, managed to say, “Good.”

“Can I tell you something, Mr Dove?” The Doctor said with a smirk.

“It’s Dove,” John said with a haphazard, awkward smile.

“Nobody cares,” he said. “As I was saying, I have a hypothesis that the real reason we filter people is to keep out... you.” The Doctor kept smiling as if oblivious to any offence he might be causing. “Well, not you specifically, but people like you. You understand, I’m sure. The useless-eaters who do nothing but work to

keep the tiny wheels of the machine turning, those who can be replaced with a simple algorithm on a computer.”

“I see...” John said, not really seeing at all. Was he really hearing this? “I think...” he added with a frown.

“Frankly, you sicken me,” he said with a smile, lounging back into his plump, black leather chair. “But it doesn’t mean I can’t get very well paid to work with you, right?”

John’s confusion deepened. Was he really hearing this? “I sicken you?” he asked. His brain was buzzing with confusion as he tried to convince himself he hadn’t heard what he thought he had.

The Doctor nodded. “Oh yes,” he said. “No offence, but you’re quite repulsive.”

“No offence?” John mumbled. He felt his face reddening and his palms had begun to sweat. “No offence?”

For the first time in his life, his voice had begun to rise in volume. He leant inwards, just a tiny bit. He felt an instant rush of guilt for such an aggressive gesture but it was too late, something deeper and more primal was taking hold. “How dare you?” he said, almost angrily, but not quite. “I didn’t get the education you got, I’m not as handsome, as confident or as successful.”

“Clearly!” The Doctor grinned.

John huffed and his face flushed red. “That doesn’t mean I’m worthless.”

“Well...” The Doctor sighed and looked away thoughtfully. He flashed an apologetic smile. “Not worthless, perhaps but certainly worth less!”

“How can you talk to me like this?” John felt his muscles tighten and realised he’d said that much louder than he’d ever spoken before. Was he angry?

“Because you let me!” he said.

“Well I’m not letting you now,” John told him firmly. “You need to treat me with respect.”

The Doctor looked confused. “Why?”

“Because...” John stammered. He hadn’t really thought that far ahead. “Because I’m a human being, and I’m entitled to a little dignity.”

“Are you though?” he said curiously.

“Yes!” John snapped firmly.

“Congratulations, then,” The Doctor said with a sigh. “You passed.”

“What?” John snapped angrily. Just then a tiny crack split through the confusion in his mind. “What? This was a test?”

“More of an initiation,” he told him as the atmosphere in the room lightened.

“I don’t understand.”

“The REEF is a simulated environment that reacts to you,” The Doctor explained. “It’s designed to stimulate you, to make you angry. It’s been built to give you stress. You need stress to live.”

“Right,” John said with a nod, a look of confusion on his face, as if he had just seen a perfectly well-dressed English gentleman check his time with a dead fish.

“You see,” he continued. “Our society was made perfect, by imperfect people. We eradicated offence, we removed all possible ways that emotions could be negatively stimulated. In doing so, we created the most toxic, oppressive place for humans to exist in all of history.”

“I know,” John agreed. “I live there.”

“The REEF is a simulated zone where you can get what we call ‘headrest.’ It’s a place where you can speak freely, where a person can express themselves the way humans need to without those

toxic, oppressive tyrants constantly complaining about it. The REEF is a haven of normality in a world where normality has become abhorrent.”

“And I can go?” John smiled broadly. He was approved, he felt sure.

“No,” The Doctor said, sending a wave of crushing emotion crashing down on the hapless man. “You see, I’m not the gate-keeper, I’m the gate.”

“I don’t understand,” he mumbled as a little grain of hope dared to linger.

“You’re already in there. My job is just to help you acclimatise. I’m a simulation, designed to provoke emotions in you. Now you’ve finally given in to your own human nature, you can leave through the door and experience everything this simulated world has to offer.”

It was really happening. John sighed loudly as a huge relief washed all the tension, the anguish of his life away. He felt as though a huge weight had been removed from him at last.

“I can go?” he said.

“Or you can stay here to be insulted by me,” The Doctor suggested. “I don’t care either way.”

“I’ll go,” John said with a chuckle.

“Enjoy your stay, Mr Dowe,” he said. “Welcome back to being human.”

The Circle of Life

I always hated funerals too when I was your age. Not all that keen on them now, if I'm being perfectly honest.

I was 2 when my dad died—too young to even remember the funeral, just the feeling of profound emptiness when it was all over. How's a 2 year old supposed to process that, to understand what any of it all means?

My mum was a different story. I was 5 or 6 when she left my gran and me to our own devices. My gran grew up in the late 1800s, and was a spiritualist of some kind, though she kept it mostly to herself. Mostly... I remember after the funeral she was putting me to bed and she told me that, if I wake up in the night and see my mum standing over me, that it's nothing to be scared of.

Nothing to be scared of?! I don't think I slept for over a month! The thought of it still terrifies me now. I couldn't imagine a worse thing to tell a child of that age, especially the night of their own mum's funeral!

But I guess things were different then. Death was just an everyday thing and we had to accept it. I had friends in those days who had 5 or 6 brothers and sisters, some with more on the way. I'd ask their parents, why do you have so many children?

"There used to be a lot more," they'd answer.

I never really understood that at the time, but as a baby—an only child—my own parents probably worried about me too, about whether or not I'd survive.

I guess the joke was on them!

But it's not like I got away completely unscathed. I lost a perfectly good eye to polio as a kid, and I got off lucky! Aunt Ellen at

number 5 lost both. She got to grow up never really understanding what people meant when they talked about the sky.

She did alright for herself though: when Hannah and Gerald were kids, she used to tie bells to their clothes so she could hear where they were. We could hear them coming all the way down the road, so we'd all hide in somebody's front garden and jump out at them when they came past. They never really seemed to find it that funny, which is probably why we kept doing it.

The people next door—I can't remember their names now. They had two kids, both died in their 20s within 5 or 6 months of each other. One was a heart attack, the other... I'm not sure. She'd already moved out by then.

They moved away too soon after. Can't say I blame them. Death is just a part of life we have to accept.

Now look, I know the past few months have been tough—on you, especially. Your mum said a lot of very spiteful, hurtful things to you. I know that sometimes you went and hid in your room and cried your eyes out. Other times you'd get so angry you'd wish she'd just die already, and then hate yourself afterwards—really, don't beat yourself up over it; don't do that to yourself.

You need to understand that wasn't really your mum. Her sickness had gotten into her head and kind of taken over. It was like an evil spirit was talking through her.

That's all gone now though. Your real mum, the one that passed over to the other side... she's the loving, caring mum you always knew from before. That's the one you need to hold on to.

I still remember her as a child, around 5 or 6, she was the sweetest little girl you could imagine. I was very proud of the smart, resourceful and thoughtful woman she grew up to be too.

Until she met your father, that is.

I always had him pegged as a deadbeat — thought he'd lead her astray. Turns out she was stronger than I gave her credit, and she quickly knocked him into shape.

It wasn't until you came along that things really started to change though.

Cometh the hour, cometh the man...

It wasn't overnight, but little by little he started to turn things around, so he could become the dad you need him to be. He quit smoking, cut down on drinking... I don't think he went out to meet any of his friends until after your 2nd birthday, and even then he was home by half past 9!

Looking back on how he was before, I don't think you'd recognise him. I don't think he would either...

You know, I think the two of you are going to be alright. Your mum has nothing to worry about there, but it doesn't mean we won't all miss her.

She'll miss you too, more than anything!

When you were a baby, every time you learned a new skill, to do something you couldn't do before, her joy was always tinted by sadness. She'd tell me she didn't want to watch you grow up because day by day, little by little, the baby she brought into the world was disappearing right before her eyes.

I guess now the joke's on her.

But you know she'll never stop caring for you. Every night when you go to sleep, you know she's going to be in there, standing over you, making sure you're alright.

Who knows, maybe you'll wake up in the night and see her.

Well, it's getting late now. Goodnight little one, sweet dreams!

Corporate Hell

“So tell me Fred, what is it you do for a living then?”

Here goes, my favourite question again...

“I work in product administration at Neotek Solutions. I’ve been there about 5 years now.”

That is, 5 long years of taking a series of numbers from one part of a computer screen and moving them to a different part of the screen. It’s a little more involved than that, but that’s basically what it amounts to. It pays well and I’m good at it; I’ve trained new staff, and I’m always the person people turn to when they get stuck. It hasn’t escaped management’s notice either, as I just had my third pay rise earlier this year.

Despite this, I find it incredibly stressful and frustrating, because every day I live with the same fear: that this will be the day I get found out, that my lie will be exposed.

Truth be told, I’m a complete fraud.

I probably should have paid closer attention at orientation, but I actually have no idea what my job is. Apparently it’s something to do with tracking inventory as it’s moved between our North West and North East regional facilities. I have no idea what the inventory is though, who makes it, or who we provide it to, or for what possible reason. I don’t even know where the regional facilities are located.

“Neotek Solutions...” is the company name, but solutions to what? I looked at their corporate website once, and it didn’t offer much in the way of answers. Lots of waxing lyrical about their deep commitment to customer satisfaction, other corporate platitudes, and motivational stock photos of people in suits with clipboards looking thoughtfully at things we can’t see and somebody sat at a desk with backwards numbers projected onto their face.

“I’d love to get a job at Neotek! I hear they’ve got great perks! Is that true?”

“Well, the coffee’s free.”

Is it free? I’ve been drinking it all these years without paying for it, and so far nobody’s stopped me, but I was never actually told it was free, and there aren’t any signs up.

It’s my own fault really. I should have paid closer attention, and asked these important questions when they came up. The longer I left it, the more awkward it became.

Even the mountain goat I occasionally see climbing up past the windows seems to have a better idea what’s going on than I do.

So what do I do? I keep my head down and just get on with it. It normally feels like I’m doing something important.

Just this morning, I noticed one of my colleagues was about to move some numbers into the wrong column. It was lucky I caught it in time, because that could have caused a major headache for the entire operation. Or maybe it wouldn’t have made any difference at all. I simply have no point of reference from which to make an evaluation.

“Hey Fred, good work catching Ian’s error earlier. If you hadn’t picked up on it, it could have caused a major headache for the entire operation!”

“Glad to be of help, Mike.”

“Or maybe it wouldn’t have made any difference at all. Thanks to your diligence, we’ve been lucky enough so far never to have needed to find out!”

Today, I had decided, was going to be the day that everything changed. Today would be the day where I started asking questions. Real questions. This was something I had decided every day for the

past four and a half years, but this time felt different—just like it did every other time.

“Mike,” I began. I was committed now. At worst I could lose my job, but it wouldn’t be the end of the world. Still, I had to tread cautiously. “Could I ask you a quick question?”

“Sure, Fred. What’s on your mind?”

“While I was fixing Ian’s slip-up earlier, I noticed that he was dealing with a consignment of fibral-octicyn. I’ve seen that name come up a few times recently and just wondered what it is.”

“Fibral-octicyn... Fibral-octicyn...” Mike looked up at the ceiling as if trying to pull a dust-worn file from a dark corner of an abandoned archive. “Hmmmm. It’s a component used in logistics. It’s essential for our various clients’ needs.”

“So, it is a component then.”

“I think so. It might be a chemical, or possibly something medical. Why? You looking to change jobs?”

“No, nothing like that. Just wondering, trying to get a better understanding of the whole synergy of the operational structure.”

“Good thinking, Fred. Initiative, I like it! Yeah, if you want to know about fibral-octicyn, you’d need to pop over to manufacturing and ask them. Pete’s the guy to talk to, if he’s still there.”

Manufacturing? We have a manufacturing department?!

The only corporate structural information I could find on the intranet related to switchboard numbers. The rest was the latest set of gruelling rule changes brought about by presumably very bored Human Resource staff, such as the need to submit private mission statements and a five year plan for personal development with concrete goals on which we must self-evaluate at six monthly intervals. As per the sample, I’d filled the last one in by cramming in buzzwords and word salad, and nobody seemed to notice. Every six

months I get to move the apparent goalposts, so as to never actually achieve any actual self-actualisation.

I'm not even sure which department I work for half the time. It was announced at last week's morning meeting that the Product Administration team would no longer be working directly under the Supply Logistics Division, but would be shifted to North East Regional Consultancy, which itself reports to the Supply Logistics Division. The net result of this would be that I do the same job with the same people in the same place as I always have, but my boss would have to CC two additional people when he submits his weekly report upstairs.

The previous department restructuring was just two weeks earlier. The Division name had been changed from 'Supply and Service Logistics,' but the Service section had broken off to form its own Division for some reason. We're still waiting for the updated business cards and stationery from that change, and it's already changed again since.

As Mike once told me, "Never try to make sense of how a corporation makes any money."

And that was when it hit me.

All these years, I assumed I was the only one that didn't understand anything at all about my job. It occurred to me that perhaps, nobody else in my team knew anything either. Mike clearly didn't, and he was my boss.

I chatted with a few other colleagues around the coffee machine of unknown supply, and tried fishing for answers from them. Straight away, I noticed how uncomfortable it made them. They were just as worried about being found out as I was!

But then again, our work is fairly abstract and doesn't really relate to anything specific or concrete we can put a finger on. Perhaps one of the other departments could shed some light on things.

"Good afternoon sir, can I help you with something?"

"Good afternoon. I'm Fred Filburten from the Product Administration team. Is this the Quality Assurance team?"

"We have a Product Administration team?" said the lady with a curious smirk. "Who knew?! Yes... Yes! This is QA. What can I do for you?"

"Well," I began. "It's probably a really silly question but it's one that's become like an itch that I can't quite scratch, if you know what I mean. I noticed down the corridor that there's a Quality Control team, and this is the Quality Assurance team... I was wondering if you could tell me the difference in what your two teams do?"

"Not a silly question at all, young man. The QC team controls the quality of our products and services, and the QA team assures it. They really couldn't be more different."

"Could you give me an example of how such a thing might differ, in concrete terms?"

"Hmmm," she said, as if pondering something of great importance. "It's tricky to find a really good 'typical' example because it all depends on the product or service in question. It's all a bit above my pay grade, if I'm honest, talking to other departments about these things. You'd need to ask somebody higher up, perhaps somebody from the Supply and Service Division. Or you could just ask somebody from the Quality Control team."

"I did. They told me exactly the same thing."

“Well young man,” she said with a light-hearted chuckle. “I don’t know what else to say then.”

It was worse than I thought. Nobody I spoke to had any idea what they did or why, and were clearly just as worried about being found out as I was.

Enough was enough, I decided. I was going to take this to the top.

“Floor 42,” announced the elevator without any flair or enthusiasm. “Enjoy your day.”

It was my first time to visit the 42nd floor. This was where the Managing Director spent his days, controlling everything from above. If anybody had answers, it would be him.

I stepped out into a vast open office space with an enormous conference table in the middle. There was no buzz of activity, nobody milling about, just lightly annoying muzak playing through tinny speakers and a small desk at the opposite end with a girl sitting behind it, in front of a closed door.

I walked across the room to her desk, and she looked up at me, startled by my sudden apparent presence.

“Managing Director’s Office. How can I help you sir?”

“I’m Fred Filburten from the Product Administration team. I was hoping to speak to the Managing Director.”

“We have a Product Administration team?!” said the girl with a curious smirk. “Who knew?! No... No! I’m afraid he’s very busy sir. He doesn’t have time to talk to anybody today.”

“I see,” I said. “How would I go about seeing him then?”

“Well,” she said awkwardly. “If you can leave with me your business card, I will call you at a later date when I’m able to set up an appointment.”

“That might be a problem,” I remembered. “My current business card still has my division name as ‘Supply and Service Logistics.’ It was changed a few weeks back to ‘Supply Logistics.’ Will that be a problem?”

“Oh yes, sir. A big problem. I can’t make an appointment for somebody working in a department that doesn’t exist.”

“It does exist, it just changed its name. My contact details are still valid.”

“No sir, sorry. I can’t help you then. When you have a new business card with up to date information on it, then come back and I’ll see what I can do, then.”

She was clearly afraid too, using the same evasive tactics as everybody else!

“Let me ask you a question,” I ventured. “You said the Managing Director is very busy.”

“Oh yes. He’s always the first one in and the last to leave. I have to take all his calls, and answer most of his mails. He doesn’t have any time to spare, he’s that busy.”

“Busy doing what, exactly?”

She floundered for a moment, and then I noticed tears forming along the bottom of her eyes. Could it be I’d pushed her too hard?

“You really have no idea do you?” I offered.

“Please don’t tell anybody!” she whimpered with sudden enthusiastic urgency, tears now flowing freely down her cheeks. “I’m a complete fraud! I don’t want to get fired.”

“Don’t worry...” I said, cautiously backing away. “They won’t hear it from me. I think I’m going to have to ask your boss directly though.”

“No, don’t go in there!” she pleaded.

As she struggled to stop me opening the door, it suddenly flew open with a bang and we both collapsed through it onto the floor beyond.

As we tried to compose ourselves, and looked around the office, we both noticed something was clearly amiss.

“Where’s the Managing Director?” I asked.

“I guess he must have popped out for a bit?” she said. “He is very busy!”

“No, he hasn’t popped out. Look at the place! Nobody works here. There’s just these two rickety chairs and... a mountain goat?!”

“Oh!” said the girl, perking up a little. “Hello!” she said to the goat with a comfortingly soft tone. “How did you get all the way in here?”

“I’ve been here longer than time itself!” boomed the deep voice of the goat, much to our combined surprise. As it cackled to itself, it stood up on its hind legs and quickly took the form of a not entirely unattractive man, if you’re into that sort of thing.

I’m not.

“Ronald Satan, Prince of Darkness?!” we both shouted together.

“One and the same,” he boasted, with an elaborate curtsy. “We can do autographs later, but first, we have some business to attend to. There are two seats over there, but I would invite you to remain standing.”

“We’d rather sit,” I told him defiantly.

With that, we both walked over to the chairs and sat ourselves down, entirely of our own free will.

“You have questions for me then?” said Satan, a cruel smirk forming on his ruggedly handsome face.

“Yes I do,” I said. “You seem to be in charge around here, so I... we... want to know what on earth this company actually does, and how it ties into anything at all we do here.”

“Oh,” said Satan, a look of some well-humoured disappointment forming. “You seem to have misunderstood the situation entirely Mr Filburten. I’m not in charge of anything.”

“Well who is?”

“You are. All of you. For 175 years this company has run like a perfectly oiled machine, producing nothing, providing no service, adding no value to society, and every single one of its employees is blissfully unaware of this. Every single person thinks that they’re the only one that is clueless, and spends each day terrified that they’ll be exposed.”

“But...” I flustered. “How does it make any money? How does it pay its employees’ salaries every month? How does it even stay afloat?”

“Exactly!” said Satan with a cruel, but somehow dashing laugh, accompanied by a flourish of his immaculately maintained eyebrows. “That is the great question, the one that has been pondered by the greatest minds since the dawn of humanity. To know the answer is to look beyond the abyss into the very realm of creation itself!”

“So what does it all mean?” I asked. “Is this hell? Are we being tortured? Are we all dead?”

“Oh no, you’re not dead.” Satan glanced momentarily at his watch. “Not yet anyway. Though in a way, you did make your own

torturous hell just fine without me. I just thought it would be funny to toy with everyone's emotions. I had a bit of a wager with my father that I could trick generations of employees into a self-perpetuating work cycle that produces nothing, and not have it be discovered for at least a century. It rather seems that I won."

"Well the game's up now, Satan!" I said angrily. "I'm going to tell everyone what you've been up to. We're not going to be puppets for your amusement anymore."

"It's a bit late for that Mr Filburten," said Satan, with a humourlessly woeful look on his amazingly striking face. "This company has only succeeded in running as the well oiled machine it is, for as long as it has, on condition of absolute ignorance. Now that you know the truth, you don't have to tell anyone anything. The damage is done. It's only a matter of hours before the whole operation goes belly up, and everyone you work with is not only going to be quite cross about losing their jobs, but will also know that it was all your fault. If I were you, I'd start running now, try to get a head start.

"A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, you see."

He was right. I had walked straight into his trap, and apparently did so willingly and eagerly, with my eyes wide open.

"Or," began Satan scratching his hairy, chiseled, goat-like chin, a chin that was to die for. "You could come and work for me. After 175 years, you're the first person to figure out something was wrong. You can't buy that kind of talent!"

"I'll never work for you, Satan!" I shouted defiantly.

"Oh, will you never learn..." he said, shaking his head sorrowfully.

"Learn... what, exactly?" I asked.

What's a little more knowledge after all...

“Mr Filburten... You already do!”

Gary Trotter

Little Gary Trotter had always felt like he didn't belong in the real world—and perhaps he didn't. He was a little smaller than the other children, and was noticeably weaker. He couldn't climb rope, do push-ups, or tie his own shoe-laces. He wore thick, black-rimmed glasses and had a mark on his head that always went a deep ugly purple when it got cold.

He was often asked where the mark came from. Was it a magic brand of some kind, a sigil of power from another, better life? Did he have a secret identity that was waiting to be uncovered?

No.

His dad would always sigh, put down his can of White Lightning, and tell him it was where he was dropped on his head as a baby. Gary was sure he was joking, although the hurtful comment was always followed by a much more hurtful—and much less metaphorical—slap to the back of the head. His mother would always refer to such slaps as 'another failed attempt to get those gears working.'

He wasn't academically gifted. Reading was a bit too challenging, but he gave it a bit of a go. He had to limit himself to childish, immature stories written by terrible, dreadful people who spent many years in court, defending themselves from charges of plagiarism after perhaps stealing whole chunks of their work.

His favourite story was the one about the little wizard boy, whose name he couldn't remember for legal reasons. He sometimes wondered if he could be a little wizard boy, if only he could run into a wall hard enough.

“Eat your breakfast,” his dad growled at him, forcing some slightly burnt toast into his mouth and cradling a big mug of hot, thick coffee with his free hand.

“I am eating my breakfast,” he said while not eating his breakfast. He also had some burnt toast and some hot, thick coffee, even though he had specifically asked for anything but burnt toast and hot, thick coffee. In fact he was always served hot, thick coffee and burnt toast, although the amount of charring did vary to an exciting degree. It was plenty boring as a breakfast, but was just excruciating when served for lunch and dinner as well. The other kids would often laugh at his packed-lunch for this very reason, especially as he didn’t own a flask.

His mother sat down at the table and gazed emptily out of the window. “What are you going to do today, Barry?” she said to her husband with a hollow, joyless voice.

“I thought I might go down the pub again,” he told her. “You?”

“Nah,” she said. “There’s a box of wine in the fridge. I’ll probably just drink that, take an electric heater into the bathroom, and try to build up the courage to toss it in.”

He nodded, “Good for you. I’m rooting for you.”

“I thought you were going to watch Harry!” she said. “It’s your turn.”

“Garry,” he said, looking worried. “We don’t want them sending round those lawyers. Anyway, Harry... Garry can manage to spend the day licking his bedroom windows without supervision, can’t he?”

“Probably not,” shrugged his mother. “And I think his name only has one ‘r’ in it.”

“I want to be a wizard,” said Gary, gazing mostly forwards, although his eyes didn’t completely point in the same direction.

“Shut up, Gary,” his father told him gruffly.

His mother sighed. “He wanted to be a fire-truck yesterday.”

“You mean a fireman?”

“No.”

He sighed and munched on some toast.

“I could be a very good wizard,” Gary said.

“Shut up, Harry!” his father told him.

“Garry,” she corrected.

“Gary!” corrected Garry.

Gary had already finished licking all of his windows, and was beginning to get rather bored. He laid on the bed, gazing up at the ceiling and he said to himself, “Why can’t I be a wizard like my hero? All I need to do is go to the station and go through the wall into a whole ‘nother world.”

He looked around his sparse and rather bland bedroom. His only toys were a stuffed owl and a small pile of lego—not the real stuff, but that knock-off Chinese rubbish you get in small bags from Poundland. He had a poster on the wall of a fire-truck that had been found in a dustbin somewhere, and a small stick.

The stick was his favourite toy. Sometimes it was a sword, other times it was a gun, but it could be other things too—not food though. That lesson had finally been learned. He gazed at his stick for a moment. Why couldn’t it be a magic wand, he thought?

He got up and snatched up his ‘magic wand.’ If the stick could be a wand, why couldn’t his wall be the gateway to a magical world?

The reasons are obvious to us, of course.

“I’m doing it,” he said to Mr Owl. “I’m going to ‘Ringworm,’ a magical place where I will learn to use my power!”

And with that, he ran head first into the wall.

There was a blinding flash, and then he opened his eyes and peered out. Instead of a small, off-white painted wall with the odd red fleck of blood, there was now a majestic castle in front of him, a wondrous stone building set in an idyllic valley with a softly burbling stream running through a gently arcing hill covered with a tapestry of green.

It took his breath away.

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

Gary turned to where the voice had come from, his eyes widening in surprise. It was a completely ordinary man, but he had a single horn sticking out from the top of his head and an unusually red beard that sprouted from his pointed chin. Otherwise he was quite boringly normal, other than the fact that his eyes were glowing red and small flames were licking out from within them. Also his fingertips were sharpened blades.

“Who are you?” Gary said, somewhat taken back.

“I’m here to invite you to join us at the school,” the creature told him with a grin. “You’re one of us, Gary.”

“I’m going to be a wizard?” he said, a wide grin on his happy face.

He shrugged and sucked in air noisily through his completely normal—other than being pointed and made from the heads of snakes—teeth. “It’s technically just a ‘magic’ school for legal reasons,” he said. “Also, we don’t say wizards here because we’d probably have to settle out of court for any plagiarism complaints. This is a warlock school!”

“A school for warlocks?” Gary said. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

“It’s exactly the same thing—that’s the problem with it. If anything original happened in one of these stories, it would probably end the universe. But, if people are buying this crap, there will always be people writing it.”

“Stories?” Gary frowned.

The creature pointed to the building. “It has many stories—each more clichéd than the last.”

“I don’t know what a cliché is!” Gary said with a vacant smile.

“You’ll find out in these kinds of stories!” the monster said with a perfectly normal smile, except that his mouth was at the bottom of his left foot—and had eyes in it—and bees came out of it every time he spoke—and... well... you get the idea.

As school began, Gary was dressed in the long flowing black robes befitting the garb of a trainee-warlock. He proudly held his stick in his hand as he sat in class, waiting for the first teacher to arrive. Next to him sat a very attractive young lady whose race I shall briefly mention as one thing but will later deny ever saying, and then change for the extremely specious purposes of seeming to signal some kind of virtue. I might also later say she’s gay, not that it matters in any way. In fact—Gary is gay. Why the hell not?!

She turned to him and said, “I’m your best friend now and we’ll have lots of adventures together because this school has absolutely no interest in assuring the safety of the young people in its care.”

Gary nodded enthusiastically. “I like it when schools have absolutely no interest in assuring the safety of the young people in

their care. That's why I was expelled from my last three schools, for drinking paint, eating glue and for pooping brightly-coloured and very sticky stuff into my chair. Seven times. They told me the limit was six. Two of them had sparkles."

"Oh," she said sadly and began looking around. "I guess there's that ginger kid? Maybe I can talk to him?"

With that, the teacher walked in, smashing the door open heavily and causing a crushing silence to descend over the children.

"Good morning!" he said. He was a fierce-looking um... lion, I guess. He walked on two legs and wore silver-framed spectacles and was called um... Alan. Yeah, Alan. That will work.

"Ha ha," Gary said out loud. "He's a lion. That's not very original."

Alan frowned and sighed to himself. "Quite. In this magical place some of the animals talk, but there is a sinister villain hiding out somewhere that will probably try to kill you all at some point. We tried putting up signs that said 'No Villains' but they didn't seem to work.

"Also, on a completely unrelated note, the head-master is a mountain goat and there is nothing suspicious about that whatsoever."

Gary looked at the young lady and said, "Our teacher is a lion."

She smiled sympathetically, raised her hand and said, "Teacher, can I swap seats?"

The lion shook his head, ruffling his mighty mane.

"And one more thing," he said. "Nobody must ever go to the lake, even though I will ask you to go there frequently. It is a bad place."

Gary raised his hand and said, "Will we be playing a game where we hold our sticks and chase around flying balls?"

The girl next to him smiled and said shyly, "I know that game!"

"No," the teacher cried out. He looked around and frowned his mighty brow. "Who is this kid? Are we just letting anyone in here now?"

"Will there be any glue?" Gary said with a smile.

"Dear god!" the teacher said, sighing and rubbing his temples. "I just don't need the money this badly. Why do I keep doing this to myself?"

A week or so had gone by, more or less. Gary stood by the water with the girl and the ginger-haired boy. Neither had a name for magical reasons. They had probably lost them in a spell, or somesuch.

Gary flung in a stone and watched as it plopped into the water. The stone gave a frightened little squeak before plunging into the lake to its watery death.

"I did well in spell-school today," he said. The others smiled at him and then looked at one another and sighed. "I made 69 new genders, but it was only a very soft spell and only worked on the weak-minded. But, if I shout about it loudly enough, it will seem like it works really well."

"I made gold from thin-air," she said. "I used the gold to pay the clever kid from 'House-Bubbles' to do my homework for me."

"What was the homework?" Gary asked with a frown.

"Making gold from thin air!" she said.

The ginger boy said with a scowl, "This is a silly place."

“I love it here,” Gary said. He stepped closer to the edge of the lake, the surface of which glittered with the reflection of the glowing green sun. “I hope I never leave.”

Just then, and rather predictably, he slipped and crashed into the water. He heard what he thought sounded like a girl laughing and a boy saying, “My spell worked.”

In any case, it went dark and then a piercing white light filled his mind. He snapped his eyes open and sat up, his face and clothes ringing wet with lake water—that smelled suspiciously like White Lightning.

“Welcome back!” Gary’s father said, gazing down at him.

“Dad?” he said confused. “I’m back?”

“You ran into the wall again, didn’t you?” he growled. He shook his head sadly. “I told your mother to stop drinking when she was pregnant. And to stop smoking. And that sniffing the gas from tins of butane wasn’t a good idea.”

“I was in a magical school,” Gary said, blinking in confusion.

“You’ve got to stop all this crap, Gary,” he said with a sigh. “It’s hard to get the blood-stains off the wall. We have to keep hiding them with posters of fire-trucks.”

“No!” Gary cried out in protest. “I went to a good place. It was real.”

I forgot to mention that his mother was also there. She said, “Why can’t you just read books like a normal person?”

“I don’t need books!” Gary stood up and wiped the river cider from his face. “I have my magic wall. It can take me to any place I can imagine if I just run into it hard enough.”

She grunted to herself. “What nonsense was it this time? Were you trapped in a maze? Stuck in a future where children had to kill each other before saving the world? Divergent?”

“It was a school where the teachers were all animals,” Gary told them angrily.

Barry shrugged, “That’s normal for this part of London.”

His mother said, “Sounds like a bad place to me.”

“No,” Gary said with a severe, angry tone. “This is the bad place.”

His father shook his head. “This is why I drink,” he told his wife, sipping from his can. “He gets this from your side of the family, you know?”

“Running into walls didn’t do me any harm,” she said with a shrug.

Barry hung his head. He said, after a lengthy pause, “I’m off to the pub.”

Epilogue

The retirement-home had the constant smell of sulphur and blood, giving the impression to the unwary that, on occasion, people ate fireworks until their stomachs exploded—although this actually very rarely happened.

Light from outside the windows cast a sickening yellow-orange pall and the sound of countless billions of anguished screams wafted in on the breeze, giving a note of reassuring serenity to the inhabitants. It all seemed quite idyllic, apart from the occasional popping sound, followed by a pressurised explosion of blood.

Lucirex was old now, old enough to not care about a tiny trickle of foul-smelling internal fluid as it slowly weaved its way across the tiled floor, accompanied by the whiff of cheap gunpowder. He picked up a glass of red liquid and smiled to himself, shifting around in his solid wooden chair that had nails sticking out through the base. He reached into the glass and grabbed the floating object between his thumb and forefinger and gently squeezed a little more bile out of a child's liver.

Delicious.

“Hell just isn't the same anymore, is it?” said Frooty, his voice a croaking, laboured thing. He was an old-school type of demon, the kind who went all-in on his appearance. His skin was mottled red, and if a human were to touch it, their skin would burn off their bones in a moment. His eyes were black and cold, so cold that little whiffs of smoke curled off them as he spoke, and they weren't that normal kind of reflective black that people like, these were just empty, satin pools of darkness. He preferred them that way.

Lucirex had been a more progressive demon, in his day, and had adopted the appearance of a moderately handsome man in the middle of his life. The only way you could tell that not everything was entirely right about him was his longer than usual, pointed teeth and a slight fork in his tongue. Also, once in a while, flames would lash out of his eyes.

“Nothing is ever the same,” he said with a cruel smile. “It is the nature of the universe.”

Frootsy grumbled and a whiff of white puffed from his hollow-looking sockets. “I don’t like it,” he said. “I mean, we’re demons. We’re not meant to retire, we’re meant to be immortal.”

“This is a gift,” Lucirex said with a toothy grin. “We spent too long in the mortal realm in the service of our duty. Soon we will pass and a new, refreshed version of us will emerge so we can begin again. We won’t even lose our memories.

“It’s best not to question it.”

Frootsy moaned under his flaming breath. He reached down and petted a beautiful, blue cat that snuggled up to him trustingly. Rather betraying that trust, he snapped off its head and ate it. It squealed in horrified surprise while the remaining body spasmed uncontrollably for a few long moments. He smiled in satisfaction. “I know. I saw what happened to Clinton. That poor monster tried to deny mortality and they sent him back to the living realm and forced him to marry a monster they created from the ‘experimental-punishments’ lab. I saw what happened to him, poor creature.”

“Exactly,” Lucirex said with a nod. “If we just go along with the process, we get to enjoy a short period of suffering the pangs of human mortality and then it’s straight back to work. It’s not like we suffer the horrible ignominy of actual death.”

“Clinton begged for death,” Frootsy said.

“Understandable,” Lucirex agreed.

Frootsy forced the rest of the cat into his throat, blood gushed from the neck-stump and oozed down the corners of his mouth. He coughed slightly as the tail made its way down.

Lucirex gazed out to a mountain of naked instagram-models far off in the distance where they were being fed nothing but carbs while an audience watched with eager anticipation, their faces pressed against screens and every one of them, the models were able to see as they ogled and grinned excitedly. It warmed his heart—which was steam-powered.

“You don’t get here without doing something good,” he said. “What did you do, old friend, to earn your retirement?”

Frootsy grinned, which would have been an unsettling sight to a human, and even a fully-grown lion might have backed away a few paces. “I invented god!” he said.

Lucirex frowned. “How can you invent god?” he said incredulously.

“Well not the real one, obviously, whatever the heck that thing really is,” he said with a shrug. “I invented the concept of a superior deity that created the universe. Humans, tragically comical beings that they are, loved the idea of being created by some flawless and perfect entity, so they fashioned their own conception of this perfect and flawless thing in the most flawed and imperfect way you can imagine. It was brilliant. I knew it would keep them busy, but never imagined they’d repeatedly go to war over the idea of it.”

“I see,” he said with a wry grin. “To be fair though, and not trying to diminish your achievements, humans will pretty much go to war over anything.”

“True!” Frooty agreed, looking around for a dog. “I also made a female vampire, which I was pretty proud of. I got a special commendation for that, and a retirement. What are you in here for?”

“Me?” Lucirex said with a grin so wry that a game-show host would have turned to a pillar of salt if he may have gazed upon it. “I destroyed the world.”

Frooty grabbed a small Labrador by the neck as it walked past. It gave a yelp, and his bottom jaw snapped down unnaturally and he bit off the head in a swift blur of motion. Chewing on the skull, with a satisfying crunch, he said, spitting little bloody lumps of bone, “Nice. I wanted to do that.”

Lucirex sipped at his child-juice and said with a swell of satisfaction, “It took a slice of pure genius.”

“How did you do it?” Frooty mumbled, swallowing the dog’s cranium and then snapping his weird jaws around its middle.

“I invented the ‘wishing-stone,’” he said with a flush of pride.

“You invented a stone?” Frooty quipped, pulling out a little leather collar with a metal tag that said something more or less along the lines of ‘If found, please return.’ “And all I did is subvert the concept of creation? What was I thinking?” He laughed until a small femur fell out of his mouth and clattered to the floor.

“It wasn’t as easy as it sounds,” he said, holding up an index finger that was topped off with a blackened and hooked finger-nail. “There were rules!”

Frooty laughed again. “The hell-spawn do love to obey rules. I’m amazed you weren’t forced to marry an experimental punishment yourself.”

Lucirex cast him an admonishing gaze. It had little impact on a part-reptilian thing with seven horns that could rip the guts out of an adult elephant.

“You see,” he began, “the rules established why this stone was able to destroy the world. It created a perfect situation, a maelstrom of possibility where eventually the worst must come to pass. I simply put the ultimate power of creation in the hands of the least able creature to wield it. It was like giving a child a nuclear-powered lawn-mower and then just sitting back to watch the fun.”

Frootsy chuckled again, but with less sarcasm and more envy. “So what were these rules then?” he said gruffly. A small zebra walked by, but he barely seemed to notice.

“The wishing stone could only be used once,” Lucirex began. “If you held it, it would grant you one wish, just one and it would be whatever you wished for at that moment. It would bring to pass the fickle whim of man, not the deeply-rooted desires. That neatly avoided all that filthy philosophical nonsense.”

“Smart!” Frootsy admitted.

Lucirex nodded. “Once used, it would vanish; it would disappear in an instant as soon as you looked away from it. It would then manifest randomly somewhere else on Earth, in any space and at any time. It would also change shape into anything else appropriate to the surroundings. It would always have the rules and instructions written on it, and they would always be in a language the holder wouldn’t be able to read. If they wished to look them up, they could, but they never did.”

“I like it,” he said with a wide grin.

“So any idiot might get the stone, which could look like anything,” Lucirex continued with a smirk. “Their wish would be granted and then the stone would be gone, never to be seen again. Eventually, someone would wish for something dreadful enough to end the world. It was beautiful.”

“Beautiful,” Frootsy agreed.

“We had lonely men spending a single night with a girl they once met in high-school right through to idiots given power over countries. We had inventors creating free energy so that the wealthy could simply steal it away and turn it into weapons, and we had women wishing their breasts were a tiny bit larger. It was chaos, all manner of stupid manifested in all manner of ways.”

“But,” Frooty began, “larger breasts don’t destroy the world.”

Lucirex grinned and frowned curiously. “You’d be surprised how many times they actually came close,” he said. “But no, it was one last wish that pushed humanity over the edge. It wasn’t something I saw coming. It was a shock to me, in fact.”

“Really?” Frooty said. In a very human gesture, he leant forward expectantly. “What happened?”

Lucirex emptied his glass with one final sip. He looked at his old friend and said, sounding a little troubled by it, “It was very strange. The stone manifested as a gun. It had the instructions written on the slide in German and was held by a man from England. He gazed at the weapon for a long time, I assumed he meant to die by his own hand. He just stared into the writing and had a strange look on his face.

“Then I saw his wish,” Lucirex said. He began to shake his head.

“And?” he said. His voice lowered to a hissing whisper. “What was it?”

Lucirex paused for a moment in silence. He shook his head. “He wished that all mankind would share a dream. In that dream, they would know the thoughts and memories of all other men. There would be no secrets, no lies, and they would all share the truth, just one time. There would be no more barriers, no more division. They

could no longer hide the good that men have done in locked vaults, and they could no more cover the vile acts of darkness done in the name of justice.

“Humans would finally be free to know everything and to begin to heal, coming together as one race, one group united by a common goal of living their lives together.”

Frootsy gazed forwards. “My hell,” he said. “That’s brilliant.”

Lucirex shook his head. “And the very next day, the world drew to a close.”

Afterword

“I’ve got a great idea!”

Whenever I hear Jack tell me these words, I know my workload is about to go through the roof.

“Seven stories to lead up to Halloween,” was inevitably going to be our “Fifteen days to flatten the curve.” As of me writing these words on the screen, we’re up to 24 short stories, and we still have a couple of weeks left, so I have no idea where this will end.

With that said though, it has been a lot of fun to write, and I thought that now, right here at the end of the book, where I can no longer spoil any of the stories for you, it might be fun to talk about the process of how some of these stories came together. I’ll focus on some of the ones that I was the primary driving force behind, because I can’t (thankfully) see into Jack’s brain.

The Circle of Life

This was very closely based on a variety of anecdotes my dad used to tell me about his own childhood, which got me thinking that it would have been a very different time then. I remembered specifically the most terrifying thing he told me that he had ever been told as a child, when I heard my wife telling our daughter almost the exact same thing about her own father who died long before our daughter was even conceived.

As it’s quite a profound subject matter, I wanted to keep the tone fairly sober, so as to add more emphasis to the face-palm at the end.

Ultimately, it took about an hour to get the entire thing to play out in my head, and then about another hour to get it right in writing.

The Second Act

This one came with a couple of misstarts. I'd always noted in the past that like Little Red Riding Hood, the older 'Twilight Zone' stories tended to adhere strictly to a two act structure, where nothing interesting happens in the first, and nothing new of consequence is introduced in the second. It's ideally suited to short stories, so I wanted to try something like that myself with a mock introduction reminiscent of the show (which Jack helped out with considerably).

My plan was to introduce a character, show him living his life, introduce lots of random elements, and then let my brain figure out how to weave them together into a compelling second act.

Blank.

My brain knew what I was up to and wouldn't play ball.

So, I abandoned that for the time being to try a different story; I spun the wheel of horror-genre, and came up with Jeckle and Hyde. I began writing, just to see where it would take me (and in the full knowledge that I could and most likely would completely rewrite it later), and felt the best place to start would be him waking up with his room trashed and no recollection of why. As a throwaway reference to a blog entry I'd already published on the site, I added a certain monochromatic quadruped amongst the carnage.

I then popped off to make a cup of coffee, and suddenly it hit me! Not only did I have the entire story with a suitable twist, but it was also the perfect second act for the first act I'd started drafting the night before. The brain moves in mysterious ways when it's up against a corner.

After that, it mostly wrote itself. I completed the rest of the second act in one sitting, and then went back to finish the first. Finally, I had a pretty solid story on my hands.

Well, nearly. It occurred to me that our monochromatic quadruped carnage, which had come to play a more important role than first intended, wasn't introduced until the second act, and there was no way to move that part to the first. So instead, I 'cheated' by making a total of 9 distinct references to the creature within the first act, and that would have to do. I tied up a few more loose ends in the process, and the result is what you see.

Corporate Hell

This was probably my favourite in this series, and it originated with an advert on the telly (part of a very long running series, normally using a kind of dog theatre—which is a thing). All they say is the company name, and allude to the fact that nobody has the first clue what the company does.

As a corporate employee, I sometimes feel that I'm the only one there that's similarly clueless about many aspects of the company I've worked at for nearly two decades. What if there were a company where none of the employees knew anything, and were all terrified they'd be exposed? It would be like a torturous hell loop, that Satan himself might be behind.

The first act I planned out in my head quite quickly. The protagonist admits to us his awful truth, and then elaborates with plenty of examples, each slightly more ludicrous than the last.

From there onward, it was tricky to decide how to proceed. I needed to show that nobody had a clue, so I toyed with having multiple protagonists, each higher up the chain of command. It occurred to me though that the big reveal, that nobody is in charge, would be less satisfying if it hadn't been the culmination of one character's journey.

So I went for a walk for an hour and let the ideas swim around in my brain until they all came together. This they duly did after about ten minutes, and I decided on having the second act have him fishing for information from his coworkers and boss, but rather than having them admit to him that they're clueless, he instead reads it from the evasive way they answer his questions.

For the third act I originally planned for the MD's office to be empty, but as with 'The Second Act,' I threw a random animal in there for cheap laughs. The mountain goat from an earlier story made perfect sense, but no sooner did I think it did my brain yell at me "The goat is Satan!" and the rest wrote itself.

I was actually quite surprised how all the plot points resolved themselves with no effort whatsoever—I wish I knew how to do that on demand. My brain can be quite stubborn when it comes to cooperation.

The Other Foot

The idea didn't come from anything specific, but I thought it might be fun to have a society where woke ideas are taken seriously and presented sincerely, and then to gradually escalate from fairly defensible ideas to the utterly ludicrous. The joke is in seeing how long the reader can continue to believe that we weren't mocking it.

I suggested this to Jack, to a profound lack of enthusiasm, but he suggested it could be an induction into a coven to keep the Halloween theme and drafted together his interpretation of what he thought I wanted. He admitted it had gone fairly astray of the original intent at the time, so left me to my own devices in how I knocked it into shape.

It wasn't bad. It just lacked something. It was missing the escalation element, and there didn't seem to be any way to work it in.

Then I remembered that after his suggestion about an induction into a coven, I started planning my own version, which was a more formal interview process. I had most of the conversion planned out, so it started off small and gradually escalated, but didn't have anywhere for it to go after.

That was when I decided to write it down properly, use what I had in mind as the first act, and what Jack wrote as the second. With some tweaks, it actually worked out quite well. Although neither of us planned it that way, her talk about her work as a diversity-officer and what she put people through was exactly what she got so uppity about being subjected to at the coven. Hence the title was based on the idea of the 'shoe being on the other foot.'

With a bit more tweaking to make sure both acts really formed a solid story, I was quite surprised at how well the whole thing read. Much like with 'The Second Act,' we'd somehow managed to make one really good story out of two substandard, unfinished, and mostly unrelated ones. Nice work brain!

Have You Seen My Mountain Goat

In order to produce the vast quantity of material we do in as short a time as we do, we're not above using random idea generators. The principle is that a series of random words, or a phrase that could act as the opening of a first chapter are generated, and that acts as a springboard. It doesn't have to be adhered to strictly, or even at all. Its only purpose is to give the imagination a shake in a random direction and see what fruits of brilliance drop from the branches of a metaphor I really didn't think through.

So one day, while out for a thinking time jaunt, I thought to myself, What's the most random string of text I can think of, and just

like that, ‘Have you seen my mountain goat?’ popped into my head. I liked it straight away, as it was clearly very rich with possibility.

If you were to ask the question, I think the first answer would be, ‘I don’t know. What does it look like?’ The second answer might be, ‘Why do you have a mountain goat... as a pet... in a city apartment?’ Both answers were too obvious to go with directly (and in fact I made a specific point of not even attempting to answer the second one), but the second did show me the direction I should be heading.

My thinking was that the mountain goat always escapes the apartment and heads upwards, and each time in a little less plausible manner than the last, so the humour of its predicament gradually escalates.

This was a good delivery method, but I didn’t really have anywhere for the story to lead to. I ran it by Jack, and straight off the bat he said that the mountain goat’s inner struggles should be a reflection of the protagonist himself. After that, as often happens, the story elements came together effortlessly and the rest practically wrote itself.

The only real question remaining is, is it the same mountain goat from Corporate Hell? Officially, they’re two unrelated stories. But at the same time, of course it’s the same mountain goat. It has to be. It can only be. How do the two stories connect though? Well, I guess that’s for you to figure out by yourself!

Writing is a creative process, and looking back it’s easy to imagine the ideas just came out fully formed and fully realised, but more often than not it starts with a single idea, we start writing, and we see where it takes us. Because of my day job, organising the presentation of significant amounts of information into concise and logically

arranged packages is one of my strong suits, and with this recent batch that were written over a very short period of time I could see my thinking was following the same patterns. It hadn't occurred to me before that this was a transferable skill, so it's nice to see there are still some surprises for me.

—*Seth Godwynn*

The Bad Place

He opened his eyes. Everything that used to be black was now white, a glowing bright white, in fact. He looked around the featureless white walls, which might not have been walls at all, in a room that might not have been a room.

“I was asleep, wasn’t I?”

“Terrible things happen while people are sleeping,” the man told him.

He looked up and realised someone was sitting directly opposite him, someone that hadn’t been there before, or at the very least someone he hadn’t noticed.

On top of his slightly chubby, rounded head was a mop of untidy and unattractive ginger hair. The unattractive, slightly chubby man with the rounded hair looked up from a small computer terminal that laid flat on his otherwise perfectly uncluttered white desk.

“You’re Rob!”.

The man who hadn’t been there before, but now absolutely was, absolutely said, “Yes I am. Full marks for you.”

“That’s a slight problem,” he said, scratching his head curiously.

“Not for me!” Rob, the man opposite him, said.

“Well, it sort of is, because I’m pretty sure I’m Rob,” Rob said to Rob.

Rob sighed and leant back in his white chair. “There is extremely limited comedy value in this, so I’m going to just go right out and explain it. There is nobody more qualified to judge you than yourself. For that reason, and for the purposes of this interview, I have manifested as you, endowed with all your memories and personality.”

“You have my personality?” Rob said, looking himself up and down quite carefully. He was beginning to see what Dave had been trying to tell him all along.

Rob, the other one, rolled his eyes. “Personality. Yes, I have it. And your memories. I know all about the crush you had on the Grade 3 teacher, the lunch-lady who always gave you extra chips because she thought you had learning-difficulties, and little Jessica who only spoke to you because of all the chips.”

Rob smiled awkwardly. “You don’t remember everything?” he said nervously.

“Yes!” Rob, the other one, winced. “I remember everything in horrifically vivid detail. Every... single... vivid... ginger... detail.”

“So...” Rob flushed bright orange. He desperately flustered about, trying to think of some way to change the subject for the better. “... I’m... dead then? Is that’s what’s happening here?”

Rob, the other one, sighed. “It’s just a preliminary interview for afterlife access. I have to judge you, and then decide where you belong. It will either be the glittering heavenly realm of the ultimate kingdom, or the flaming bowels of the darkest recess of the burning fires of damnation. Or somewhere in between.”

Rob gulped since that didn’t sound great. He smiled, really quite nervously, and said, “Well it can’t be all that bad...”

Rob, the other one, said simply, “Dave.”

“Dave?” Rob cried out. “How was that my fault? I couldn’t control Dave—nobody could!”

Rob, the other one, shrugged and said, “But you didn’t really try, did you?”

Rob opened his mouth to argue, but realised there was very little point, considering this was essentially himself he was arguing with. Suddenly remembering he was British, he became dreadfully

offended and said, “So what’s all this about anyway? What right do you have to judge me?”

“This?” the other one said, looking around. “I don’t really know. I just work here. I imagine there was quite a lot of space to fill up, or something along those lines. Maybe someone is reading about a sentient brick? Who knows? It’s probably just an allegory of some kind? A metaphor, perhaps?”

“I can’t go to damnation just because I knew Dave!” Rob pleaded. “It’s not fair.”

He just shrugged. “I don’t think the universe is meant to be fair. If it makes you feel any better, Dave’s interview went really rather well. He didn’t quite get into the upper levels of the ultimate kingdom, but he’s going somewhere where the macaroni cheese tastes really amazing.”

“This can’t be happening...” Rob spluttered, hanging his head into his palms.

The other Rob smirked to himself. “You do have one chance!” he told himself, the himself who looked set to burn forever in agonising anguish because he lacked the foresight to not meet Dave.

“A chance?” Rob sat up suddenly.

“A chance!” said Rob—the other one. “That’s what this interview is really all about. Simply tell me a story that explains why you should be allowed to swap places with Dave.”

Rob felt a flutter of excitement. “I know just the story,” he said.

“So do I,” said the other Rob with a sigh. “This is the one based on that website where a bunch of executives all listed their favourite interview questions, and anyone living in the beginning of the twenty-first century can just Google it and see for themselves, isn’t it?”

“But why don’t you tell me anyway?”

Dave Brown glared at Gregory Grayson. It was the glare of a rat in a trap, the gaze of someone who would sooner be somewhere else, even somewhere eating toenail clippings out of a filthy dustbin—something which occurred to him for some reason.

Opposite him sat 26 executives from the passenger-services primary management level, an illustrious group of elite operatives who were known to manage at a level so illustrious that it barely qualified as management at all. It was widely suspected that people at this level of management barely qualified as people at all. Still, life was occasionally unpleasant, and Dave had come to accept this. He had also come to realise that life was occasionally a little less unpleasant if you could force other people to accept the occasional unpleasantness on your behalf. This was largely why he was here, at least in the impenetrable depths of his own mind.

It was a huge meeting-room with a gigantic sweeping semi-circular table behind which the executives languished. He was sat in a single chair in the middle of the room, lit with spotlights, where all eyes could bear down on him. To describe the setup as friendly was not entirely accurate, but such trivialities could, would and should neither faze him nor distract him from his goals and ambitions in life, which currently didn’t extend beyond getting very drunk later on that evening. They rarely ever did.

The first executive smiled at him with a smugness that made his skin crawl. He was an odd-looking man with grey hair cascading from his leathery scalp and down his even more leathery neck. Dave presumed that he was fairly high up the executive ladder, from a

position so elevated that he couldn't hear anyone shouting at him to get a better haircut—or indeed any haircut, or anything at all that resulted in less of that kind of hair.

“My question is this,” he paused for effect before breaking into a wide grin that showed off teeth that could only have come from a factory production-line specialised in polishing. “What didn't you get a chance to include on your resume?” he asked, scoffing at his own brilliance. He sat back as if he had dropped a bombshell that was about to explode in an effervescent blossom of absolute genius.

Dave just stared at him and began very slowly shaking his head.

“My resume?” he said finally. He turned to scowl at Grayson, the officer in charge of this ridiculous charade, who was sitting tapping his chin with an amused smirk forming across his lips.

“Well I was obviously very keen to discuss my thoughts on the political structure of the galaxy: I'm particularly amused by the interconnectedness of finances and political power, and how both flow in equal and opposite directions; I'm interested in the inter-dynamics of the political infrastructure, and how it correlates to the complexities of socially conventional behavioural normality,” he said, stringing together just about every long word he knew in a way that may or may not have made any sense. Good sense didn't appear to be of primary concern. “I also have a theory that the meaning of life, the universe and everything is actually ‘cheese.’”

The executive tapped his pen on the desk, nodding slowly, “Cheese, you say?”

Dave narrowed his eyes suspiciously, “Cheese, yes. You see, I like cheese.”

“And so how is cheese the meaning of life, the universe and everything?”

“I haven’t quite worked all this out yet, obviously,” he told him quite seriously—cheese was, after all, a most serious business. “I was at a bar one night, pondering the deeper questions of philosophy, after a rare dating failure which had left a deeper and more meaningful pain in the place a man least likes to experience anything other than a gentle cupping sensation.”

“Yes, yes!” he said, scribbling notes for some unfathomable reason.

“It was this very cupping sensation, and a suggestion that it should happen sooner rather than later, that led to the aforementioned pain. You see, suggestions of this kind have to be measured quite carefully against your intake of free beer. There was also a certain amount of offence taken at the fact that certain names weren’t entirely remembered. For reference, my own was among them.”

“And the cheese?” the executive beamed.

“I ate some cheese!” Dave shrugged as if such a question was quite ridiculous. “I was thinking about the universe, and I ate some cheese. Do you not see the elegant simplicity of how all this works?”

The executive smirked, looked to Grayson with just a minor flicker of doubt, and glanced back.

“Of course your question is a loaded one,” Dave continued for reasons even he couldn’t quite fathom at this point. “What I didn’t put on my resume was largely the reasons why I shouldn’t ever be considered for any job ever by any sane and rational human being. Fortunately you don’t appear to be one. I carefully selected the best—or least worst—things to say about myself to give a certain impression. Anything I didn’t get a chance to add would be things I didn’t want you to know, even though most of those things are

available in picture and video format clipped to the crew-lounge toilet wall.”

The executive stopped smiling and started looking a little worried. His face wasn’t ideally suited to human expression, and Dave got the sudden vivid impression of Tarzan. He was raised by apes and then moved to the big city. He later went to business school, one that exclusively employed apes as educators but, rather oddly, had a cleaning staff that was made up of two humans and a dog with three legs. He later became an executive, presumably of a company selling bananas. He married a woman that looked very much like an ape and had incredibly hairy children that everyone presumed were Turkish. At a later point in his life, he sat back in his wooden tree-top house and pondered his life as the sun set. He realised that it had all been a horrible, awful mistake, and all he ever craved was the freedom to eat bananas and fling his faeces at passing women without fear of judgement.

Dave shared this insight with the interviewer to a largely horrified series of gasps and then a silence that filled the room.

“You could have asked me pretty much any other question, and gotten more and better information. Instead, you asked the one you did. The outcome of all of this is that I understand much better now that you’re an idiot, and you now know I like cheese, drink too much beer and don’t enjoy interviews.”

“I see,” he said. He tapped his pen worriedly on the desk and frowned. He glanced around at the confused, worried, irritated, and even stunned expressions on the faces of those around the room.

Dave looked to the 25 other expectant faces on the interview board who shifted their eyes and tried to look busy, in some cases for the first time in their entire lives.

“I’m going to go out on a limb here and suggest, rather optimistically, that this is the stupidest question I’ll hear today. I actually doubt it will be, but I’m the kind of guy who believes the glass is always half full unless I have to pay for it.”

Gregory Grayson wrote some notes on his terminal and pointed to the next executive. A man in an inappropriately terrible shirt smiled at him with a poor attempt to seem likeable.

“Welcome,” he said, nodding to himself and pressing his fingers together before him as he stared away into his own thoughts, a place in which he was a legend. It was not a particularly well-inhabited place. “I’d like to ask, on a scale of 1 to 10, how weird are you?”

Dave glanced to Grayson who was trying to suppress the urge to laugh. He failed quite spectacularly. Dave grunted, “Well that is a tough question. I presume you’re hoping I stay well clear of the numbers 1 and 10, or else you’ll draw some specious conclusion from the first page of a psychology magazine where people advertise home-lobotomy kits.”

The executive nodded vacuously.

“I’m going to thoroughly excite you on this one and answer that on a scale on 1 to 10, I’m zero. I’m actually not weird at all.”

The head sticking out of the horrible shirt made an impressed noise, and began scribbling notes with a sense of rampant urgency.

Because Dave never knew when to stop, he continued, “You see, I’m not even close to weird. I’m sane. I see just how crazy the rest of the universe is. I see people who are utterly dense put in positions of authority and respect, and everyone blundering about thinking that the best way to cope with a world run by hopelessly inept morons, who blur the line between very stupid people and very clever animals, is to drink too much free beer. I’m not weird at all,

I'm just trying not to take you all too seriously — certainly far less seriously than you all take yourselves.”

“Good answer,” he said and finished scribbling his notes. He beamed an overly confident smile.

Dave nodded in satisfaction of a job well done. “Can I go now?”

“Number three, please?” Grayson said.

Dave looked over to a relatively attractive older woman with an unusually thick layer of makeup that was inexpertly applied. Her smugness was even thicker than the makeup.

“What would the closest person in your life say, if I asked them, ‘What is the one characteristic that they totally dig about you, and the one that drives them insane?’” she asked, diving straight into her question, the grin smeared across her leathery features.

“I’m Dave!” he said simply.

“Hi, my name is Katrina.”

“I don’t care,” he told her, and really, really meant it.

“I’m sorry, you don’t care about what?”

“I don’t care what your name is. I didn’t care what the names of the last three girls I dated were. I sometimes forget my own surname. The only thing I want from you is for this humiliating travesty to stop. On careful consideration, I don’t even care if that means that you drop dead after turning completely inside-out, surviving for several minutes as a puddle of red goo stuck to the outside of a very smug skeleton.”

“But...” she flustered.

“I’m Dave!” he said again.

“Hi, my name is...” she began reflexively with her smugness slightly tarnished, but the grin hanging on for all it was worth. “I don’t understand...”

Dave grumbled under his breath.

“I think he’s saying that the characteristic that people dig is that he is who he is,” Grayson intervened helpfully. “I think that’s his answer. I think that’s also what drives them insane.”

She stared back in wide-eyed wonder. “Well yes,” she flustered helplessly. “That’s obvious, isn’t it? I mean, it’s an acceptable answer. I just feel that it was too simplistic to really be an answer.”

Dave looked angrily back at Grayson who smiled knowingly. He looked at the next flustered executive. “Next.”

Next was a man in a jumper, flouting tradition completely to really show the world he was different. He was doing it by wearing the same thing as a very large slice of the population, but being somehow different by being the same.

None of this really worked in practice and he just looked like a complete idiot.

“My question is this...” he said, and then paused dramatically, his hands chopping about in random gestures that added up to less than the sum of their parts. “You are standing on the surface of the Earth. You walk one mile South, one mile Due West of there, and then one mile North. You end up exactly where you started. Where are you?” He nodded to himself, grinning widely.

Dave just stared.

“It’s a riddle, you see. I like to test your intelligence, I like to throw curve-balls at my prospective employees to see how they cope. I like to see if they can think on their feet.” He seemed totally satisfied with Dave’s lack of an answer, as if perhaps he had

outsmarted him completely. “Not everyone can answer this question, you see?”

“Can I ask you a question?” Dave said without a hint of apparent emotion.

He nodded, as he oozed with confidence.

“Did you know that they teach very small children that if you stood at the Magnetic North Pole then you can only go South in any direction?”

The executive shrugged. He carried on oozing confidence, nodded, smirked, and then he did something else. He stopped. He stopped dead in his tracks and just stared. “Oh, I see,” he grumbled.

“Oh, I see!” Dave repeated sarcastically. “I think that anyone educated to a basic level, up to and including gifted monkeys are aware of this. Presumably you were away with indigestion from eating too many bananas when they were doing that lesson in your school?”

“You’re quite rude!” he quite rightly pointed out.

“Any question like this is going to come down to the fact that there are two points on Earth which have a similar geographical significance. However there isn’t a single point anywhere on any planet where that isn’t a silly and very condescending question.”

“Also,” added Grayson. “You would end up around two fifths of a mile from the same place. You were probably off sick that day too.”

The executive’s mouth flopped open.

“Due West is -90° of Magnetic North, not parallel to the equator,” added Dave with a roll of his eyes. “Your path would be an incomplete right triangle with two equal sides.”

Grayson wrote something on his pad as the executive glanced around mortified. “Next!”

Dave turned to a woman who actually didn't look like a complete idiot. Her hair was normal, her makeup hadn't been applied with a shovel or unloaded from a cargo shuttle. She was dressed fairly formally, and there wasn't so much smugness to her that she looked to be in danger of literally drowning in it.

"Hello, Dave," she said evenly, making a business-like facial expression of authoritative formality. "I'd like to ask you a question if I may?"

Dave shrugged apathetically. "I've lost the use of 84% of my will to live. I don't see how you could make it any worse, even if your question was about the mating practices of mountain goats."

"Thanks, Dave," she said. "It isn't, coincidentally."

"No problem, 'overly informal executive who insists on using my personal name without asking permission to do so, and who, even though she is considerably older than me, I would consider having intercourse with so long as I had more than half a dozen beers, and she was paying for them.'"

She blinked incredulously, staring at him in sudden surprise.

"Erm..." she said, her brain appearing to reel in horror and disconnecting momentarily from her mouth.

"Can I call you, Mum?" he asked uncharacteristically thoughtfully.

"Do I remind you of your mother?" she gasped, even more taken aback than she probably incorrectly assumed was humanly possible.

"No, I mean later, after half a dozen beers and during the intercourse, providing you pay for them of course. I recommend your room: mine has a ginger person in it, and he's made several requests in writing asking me to refrain from bringing dates back while he's trying to sleep. What can I say? His bed is more comfortable than

mine. Also I think he might be videoing them. I certainly know for a fact that one of us is, and it's easier all round if I assume it's someone other than me."

She looked to Grayson, her face fixed in a horrified frozen expression of screaming, but silently wordless.

"I thought you said you'd told the candidate to be on his best behaviour," she said, somehow recovering the ability to speak, to a limited degree. She would never fully recover the ability to speak directly to Dave ever again.

"I did," Grayson told her. He pointed to Dave with his plastic stylus. "This is it."

Dave smiled to her and gave her a tiny but suggestive wink.

"On your very best day at work—the day you come home and think you have the best job in the world—what did you do that day?" she looked down to her pad, avoiding all eye contact and spoke haltingly, almost seeming afraid of the answer.

Dave pondered this for a few moments, while also contemplating the mating practices of mountain goats. "If I had the best job in the world, why would I be at an interview trying to get a better one?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing much came out.

"I had one day once. I was delivering a towel. I deliver a lot of towels, you see. This was a blue one. It was warm and fluffy." As he spoke, he stared away wistfully, as if recalling a fond moment.

"...and?"

"That's it," he said with a shrug. "I deliver towels. It's hardly a deep emotional journey of self-discovery. Sometimes I get to see passengers naked, but that's actually a minus since it's mostly men and people who have worked hard to own their natural, and occasional unnatural, unattractiveness."

She looked to Grayson, and then looked down, writing some cursory notes.

“Would you like my number, Mum?” he told her, trying his very best to be seductive. “It’s 84!”

“That doesn’t sound like a phone number!” she frowned, looking anywhere but straight ahead.

“It’s my personal number. It’s the thing I live by—cheese and the number 84. I may have to remind you we’re on a spaceship, in the future, and I don’t think we even have phones anymore.”

For some reason, all this reminded him of something that had happened earlier that week.

“Why are you eating toenail clippings out of the dustbin?” Rob asked in what would once have been abject horror, back when Dave was still a novel affront to his humanity, but had now been reduced to just idle curiosity, since it wasn’t even the most unpleasant, odd or inexplicable thing Dave had done that day.

“They’re not toenail clippings!” Dave told him grumpily. “Well not all of them. What do you think I am, some kind of animal?”

“Well can we at least agree that it’s a dustbin?”

Dave looked up from where he was sat on the floor with the small cylindrical object in his hands. The facts were undeniable but he was going to give it his best shot anyway. “It’s a receptacle, Rob,” he said grumpily. “It’s a thing designed to be a holder of things. What we chose to use it for is rather up to us. I think you should think very carefully in future before you pass judgement on inanimate objects. Some of my best friends are inanimate, Rob, and I count you among them.”

“But it is a dustbin. You are eating out of a dustbin.” Rob just sat on his bunk and followed along, curious to see where this was all going.

“Just because it’s a dustbin, that doesn’t mean it has to be full of rubbish,” he said as if revealing a pearl of great wisdom.

“But it is full of rubbish!” Rob pointed out the painfully obvious. “For one thing it’s got toenail clippings in it and you appear to be eating them.”

“Not just toenail clippings!” Dave told him, quite proudly. “But I do confess that they are a taste that grows on you, which did surprise me at first.”

“Are they yours?” Rob cringed inwardly. Dave just shrugged, to which Rob cringed quite a great deal more.

“The finer points of life are mostly your department,” Dave told him with serious contemplation as he crunched down on something particularly hard.

“What has all this got to do with phones?” Rob said, watching him chewing vigorously, his own churning stomach showing him what vigorous really meant.

“Phones? What are you talking about?” he said. “What the hell is a phone?”

“You called me earlier on the ship’s intercom system!” Rob frowned. “You said to come straight here as it was important!”

“I might have said that I want to moan about the bone I ate alone on the throne—it was next to my own stone but had grown towards the zone,” he explained as if his mouth, brain and the universe were in some kind of sync.

“No, I’m pretty sure you said, ‘What’s a phone, and do we still have them on space-ships?’” Rob huffed in annoyance. “And something about a stupid interview question.”

“Oh that?” He slapped his head as if remembering this all perfectly. “I just wanted to know if these toenails were yours or mine. It’s not important anymore; I’ve eaten them all now.”

“Dave...” he began but there was really nowhere the sentence could go and consequently that’s exactly where it went.

Dave was slightly surprised. The executive had two almost identical heads. He briefly considered the time-honoured concept that two heads were better than one, but the maths didn’t seem to bear this one out.

The two headed/not quite two brained creature spoke in stereo, and not quite perfectly in sync which was off-putting and left Dave wishing that it was an accountant, and dividing that the law governing their treatment wasn’t as strict as it was.

“What was the last costume you wore?” the two heads spoke at once, each grinning inanely.

Dave looked around the room at the expectant faces that were, for some inexplicable reason, pointing at him. “Can we address the larger issue here?” he said uneasily. “You appear to have two heads.”

“Yessss,” they hissed at him in unison.

Dave waited, but it appeared that no explanation was going to be forthcoming, “Most people get by with one.”

“We have two.”

Dave cringed, and it briefly occurred to him how uncomfortable it must be for normal people to encounter the kind of strangeness he enjoyed deliberately forcing upon them. He quietly resolved to be far stranger to people and apply a good deal more force.

“Well I’m wearing a tie. It’s effectively pointless. It serves no useful purpose, but mass delusion holds that it looks smarter.

Moreover, it looks ridiculous if you stop to think about it and therefore it qualifies as a costume.”

The two heads nodded at him. “Ties are delicious,” they/it said.

Grayson shook his head in agreement, “Next,” he said.

Dave turned away, shuddering inwardly and then outwardly.

The next executive didn’t seem at all interested in being next. In fact he seemed largely the opposite, fidgeting quite awkwardly, he looked around to the others on the panel as if wondering if there was any way to pass his turn on. The spotlight was on him and there was no escape.

Dave just smiled, as he looked him over, sizing him up. He wore a grey and boring suit, a blue and boring shirt, and had what amounted to the worst, and most boring comb-over he’d ever seen.

“I’d like to ask you a question if I may?” he asked quite shyly before breaking into a massively artificial smile that his face seemed to be trying to rebel against.

“You just did!” Dave told him.

He started guffawing politely while Dave stared incredulously back at him. It was a cringe-worthy and embarrassing display in every sense.

“Give me an example of a time when you solved an analytically difficult problem,” he said, almost wincing at the prospect of speaking.

“That’s actually a pretty good question!” Dave nodded in appreciation. The executive breathed an audible sigh of relief.

“It’s nice to see someone isn’t trying to collect ‘metadata,’ or whatever the latest meaningless business language buzzword is,”

Dave added rhetorically while the executive shifted in his seat awkwardly.

“I had a problem once. “

Rob woke to find a note. Dave was nowhere to be found, which was odd as this was morning and Dave rarely ventured very far from his bed until forced to do so by means stronger than legal requirement, which had failed more times than anyone could count. He found the note fairly quickly as it was stuck very firmly to his forehead, which was far from ideal.

He swung himself from his bed and over to the dispenser which was fixed to the bulkhead wall. “Superglue remover,” he ordered blearily and it duly complied, pouring him a small cup. He dabbed it on and after several minutes was able to remove the note together with a few patches of skin, and read it.

He growled angrily at the contents which weren’t really any worse than what Dave usually included on notes, at least not the ones he deemed important enough to stick to his friend’s head. This was one of many reasons why Dave had so few friends. This was also one of many reasons why Dave got so many death threats, although the number had declined since they had replaced the captain.

“Dear Rob,” it began. “I hope this note finds you well and didn’t leave such a bad scar this time. You’ll be pleased to know that I require a favour from you. I know how much you love to do favours for me, and consequently I’ve paid Bernard from security to lock your personal identity out of every computer terminal on the ship. Until you complete your mission, it is not possible for you to get food or drink, to sign in to your work shift, have toilets work for you, or buy bottles of perfume from the gift-shop.”

“Every damn week,” Rob grumbled.

In the place normally occupied by Dave, there was an additional note with a crudely drawn cartoon man putting plans into what was either a wall or the back of an elephant. Rob angrily, but not angrily enough, snatched up the sheet and prepared to head out.

The bar was oddly quiet, in as much as Dave wasn't in it. Rob sat at the bar, briefly pausing to watch other people eating, and inwardly cursed Dave for being Dave.

He looked up the details on the Wikiweb. They were design plans for some kind of ancient technology. Dave had instructed that such a thing be constructed and left on his bed and, of course, this wouldn't be possible with modern technology. It would be like constructing a brick wall out of computers. This was obviously ridiculous since everyone knew that computers were made from brick walls. There was simply nothing compatible in existence, nothing so crude still remained—except Dave, or course.

“No Dave today?” the barman asked, making polite conversation as he wiped down the bar surface. Rob grumbled and muttered under his breath. The barman craned forward and saw the red discolouration on Rob's forehead. “Oh, he needed a favour again, did he?”

Rob simply shook his head in reply. “I get a bit fed up waking up with his notes glued to my head. I did try reprogramming the computer to not let the dispenser give him superglue, but I found him with a piece of paper, two nails and a claw hammer as he climbed into bed. I like to think he wouldn't have actually done it.”

The barman stared at him, blinking occasionally as his brain appeared preoccupied with the complexities of certain details. “Best not to take chances,” he said finally.

It was difficult for Rob to argue with that.

“So what’s he got you doing this time?”

Rob sighed. “I don’t know, he wants me to make something. It’s ancient technology, I can’t possibly get this thing printed on this ship.”

“What is it?” he looked at the plans which clearly made no sense to him either.

“I don’t know, he’s just given me the diagrams, there’s no words attached. He said he thinks that challenge helps me to grow as a person. I think I can find bits on board that will fit, but I don’t even really know what this thing is meant to do.”

“Does it really matter?” the barman shrugged.

“This is Dave. Nothing about him really matters.”

There were blank and silent stares. Even Grayson seemed slightly confused by that particular story. The executive fondled his pen nervously, smiling at nothing in particular while sweat beaded his brow.

“But...” he stammered. “That story wasn’t even about you. It was about someone called ‘Rob.’ It wasn’t even told from your perspective.”

“It was about how I solved a problem,” Dave explained as only Dave could.

“But you didn’t.”

Dave grumbled in annoyance, wondering why this was so poorly understood. “That’s how I solve problems,” he explained. “I get someone else to do it for me. Usually someone ginger.”

“Um, next, I think.”

A woman sat scowling at him, then with a deliberate force of pure will, she pulled a beaming smile.

Dave eyed her up suspiciously, reminding himself that she was the enemy and the thing that stood between him and killing both his brain and liver with free beer. She was dressed over-fussily in a blue business suit with the collar popped up for some inexplicable reason.

“You have a boyfriend, but you’re not proud of him,” Dave guessed. “He’s attractive, but unsuccessful. He reminds you of where you’re from, and that in the terms you actually care about, you’re largely unsuccessful yourself.”

She frowned and glanced around awkwardly. Then she smiled broadly enough to dazzle him with a set of highly polished robotic teeth that were mounted on micro-servo motivation units. They tapped into the owner’s optic nerve and scanned in the direction that they were looking so as to make minor adjustments to optimise the reflection of light directly back to the person you were talking to for maximum effect. All this had the added benefit of removing trace quantities of spinach.

“What makes you think that?” She looked away and giggled nervously.

“Your collar is up to hide a love-bite. I once dated a girl who wore a suit to work and she did the same. She wasn’t always proud of me and used to describe me as her ‘dirty little secret.’

“Of course, I have many dirty little secrets of my own, and it often occurred to me that I should put up a camera in my room and film myself to find out what they were, because I actually think I might have forgotten them.”

She stared, wide eyed, somewhere between total confusion and shock

“That couldn’t really happen, could it? I mean, not to an actual person?” she finally managed to say, swallowing hard.

Dave smirked and nodded. Grayson nodded too as such things were quite well documented in his personnel file.

She looked back to her notes and asked her question without looking up, “Tell me about your background.”

“That’s really more of an instruction than a question,” he said thoughtfully. “I didn’t always deliver towels, you know? I was once a man with dreams, before the weight of the world crushed my spirit with freely available alcohol and laws to prevent the murder of accountants.

“I grew up filled with dreams and aspirations, which is why I studied hard in the hope of one day becoming the Prime Minister of Belgium. In the pursuit of realising my dream, I learned everything there was to know about chocolate, after a slightly misheard conversation in a sweet shop and a near total misunderstanding of how politics actually works.

“After three years of eating every kind of chocolate I could find, a medical professional told me I had to lose 50kgs or I would have type 6 diabetes for the rest of my life, or about three months, whichever was shorter. This, of course, made me realise the folly of my actions. I also realised that, probably, politics was not for me.

“I was now massively overweight, obsessed with chocolate, clueless about what was actually going on in Belgium, and had to have strict controls over every aspect of my life if I didn’t want to have my small intestine drop out of my anus. This was when I decided I was now qualified to be the emperor of Germany, which I thought was a small town in Southeast Asia.

“After a further misunderstood conversation at a travel agent, I began my quest to learn everything there was to know about towels. This is, of course, what led me to become the passenger services professional that I am today.”

She refused to look up from her pad and grumbled something about him not taking this seriously.

“Check my personnel file, it’s all true,” he told her.

Grayson looked up and nodded his confirmation that indeed it was all quite correct.

She muttered something that sounded a bit like ‘Thank you,’ and began gesturing wildly for the next person in line to take over from her.

Dave looked over to a grinning woman whose eyes pointed in totally the wrong direction—not even both in the same wrong direction—but who also sported a fairly amazing beard. He was actually quite impressed.

“Sir or Madam, while I’m utterly sure you’re of less value to society than what I most recently flushed away in the bathroom, I would like to compliment you on a very fine array of facial hair.”

“It’s ‘Madam,’” she told him, her eyes rolling around the room seemingly at random.

He briefly wondered what exactly was causing this and whether the substance would be available to guests later on.

“I had the beard added in support of the ‘Menimism’ movement, which I support thoroughly. I feel men have been the downtrodden underclass for far too long and it’s about time someone stood up for their rights to free expression.”

“Bless you, Sir or Madam,” Dave said. “And in the interests of expressing those rights, I would just like to say that I would still consider dating you, even though you are appallingly unattractive.”

“I completely support your rights to find me appallingly unattractive,” she said and nodded, almost bowing to him. Her face was that of a person who had been licking the back of an entire pond

full of poisonous frogs dipped in heroin in the hope of finding a prince in there somewhere.

“Please ask your question,” he said. “I’ve a feeling it’s going to be a good one.”

“If you were an animal, which animal would you be?” she, or he, rolled his, or her, eyes around gesturing madly with her oddly muscular arms, covered with even more oddly smooth skin. “I mean, what animal do you identify with? What is your spirit animal?”

Dave thoughtfully rubbed his chin while the monstrosity stared all around the room at nothing in particular.

“I don’t have a spirit animal, because those of us who live in the real world employ a thing we like to call ‘science.’ You see, science is a way in which we gain a deeper understanding of the universe through observation and the careful, methodical, rigorous testing of hypotheses until we’ve sufficiently failed to prove them false, and thus have to eventually concede they must be true, at least as far as our understanding of the universe currently extends.”

It made a gurgling noise while playing with its hair.

“You see, religion varies quite largely from science in that it requires no proof, no real observation of the universe, no careful testing of anything, and not a single rational thought anywhere in your head. Telling people they should try being nicer to each other may be commendable at some level, but religion can never just stop there. It has to be the answer to everything, and the further you get from any moral core it happened to have been founded upon, the more made up on the spot every such answer becomes.

“What’s really annoying about many religious people is the lack of rigour. They often fail to adhere to their own dogma, veering off quite wildly as the mood takes them.

“As someone who thinks that people share an unconscious connection with a creature who probably eats its own faeces, then please feel free to wear animal skins and chew on decaying bones. Where I lose the very last shred of respect I ever held for you, is the point at which you wilfully enjoy the fruits of science’s labours while looking down your nose at people who think we’d all be better off if you’d been strangled with your own umbilical cord.”

“I’m sorry, what animal was that then?” it said with a slightly confused look on what passed for a face, that was something exactly like you’d expect to find on such a person looking at its own reflection in a mirror.

“I am a pomegranate!” Dave glared at it.

“Oh, how exciting,” it squealed with manly delight.

“Please... Next...” Grayson quickly moved things along.

“Tell me something that’s true, that almost nobody agrees with you on?” said a man with an unfeasibly large nose but who otherwise seemed quite normal.

“You’re an idiot!” Dave ventured hopefully.

“No,” Grayson called out. “Please reply with something that almost nobody agrees with you on.”

“Oh, I am sorry,” Dave replied. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment. “You see, that’s a difficult question since most people disagree with me on an awful lot of things, but most people are either less intelligent than a dog, utterly psychotic, or plainly too lazy to think of anything for themselves. In fact, that’s my answer, most people are either less intelligent than a dog, utterly psychotic, or plainly too lazy to think of anything for themselves.”

“I don’t agree,” the executive frowned at him, rather proving most of Dave’s point, the rest proving itself by virtue of the question having been asked in the first place.

“Very good.” Grayson looked up, tapping his stylus on the desk. “Who’s next please?”

Next was a woman wearing a pink suit that had no place in anything outside of Swedish porn, which was much more violent in the future than you might imagine.

She looked very serious for a moment, as if waiting for just the right opportunity to reveal her glittering gem of pure wisdom. “Are you ready?” she said condescendingly without realising the irony of the situation.

“I doubt it,” he grumbled.

“How would you describe yourself...” she paused dramatically, just waiting to let the tension build before she could reveal the last, final shock, the twist in the tale, the game changer that was going to turn the whole interview on its head with its sheer original brilliance. “... in just one word?” She sat back as if the effort of revealing such things to mere humans had exhausted her.

“Bored.”

“Next.”

Dave looked over. He was a slightly ginger man, dressed in a black shirt that must have been borrowed from a Turkish waiter, he assumed. He looked pale and nervous. He had a look on his face of a man who had just accidentally soiled himself, and hadn’t yet decided who to call about it.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” he said softly, reeling back as if scared of his own question.

“I imagine someone asked you that question once. You replied that one day in the future you hoped to be a condescending idiot, asking stupid questions to people with far better things to do than waste their time playing children’s games. Right now in the staff bar, there’s a pack of cards waiting, and every time an even number is dealt, I have to drink a beer. You’re keeping me from that kind of serious adult work.

“Plus, men never grow up, so the only suitable answer is ‘a woman,’ I guess?”

Dave looked over to where the bearded woman-type-thing was rubbing its face on the desk and sniffing the air rather too loudly, “No offence intended.”

“None taken!” it replied.

Dave looked back to the slightly ginger executive and finally lost the internal battle he’d been fighting since he’d first seen him. Consequently, he asked, “Have you ever had a girlfriend?” The man stared back incredulously. “I don’t wish to be rude,” Dave continued rudely. “It’s just that you’re ginger.”

“I have!” he said flatly.

Dave nodded as if accepting the fact, but not quite able to make sense of it. He vaguely heard someone shout the word ‘next’.

A very serious man with a very serious suit glared at him. He looked like he’d had his entire sense of humour ripped out through his anus. This was still considered fairly minor surgery if done in a good quality hospital, although it did have a curiously long recovery time and required the use of a specially developed cushion that made a farting noise when you sat on it. If you smiled, the operation wasn’t considered a success.

He looked at Dave seriously as he moved around in his chair. Dave was sure he heard the unmistakable sound of a small squeak. Since there was no smile, this could only confirm his worst fears.

“I have a question for you, son,” he said in a thick accent that sounded suspiciously like he came from the place that used to be known as North America, where it was now only considered polite to speak to normal people if you held up a flag with ‘We’re sorry’ written on it. The flag was present and correct, and social convention allowed Dave to acknowledge him with a curt nod.

“Son, I want to ask you what someone would say about you if they didn’t like you?” he said, waving his flag robustly.

Dave held his hand up to the previous executive. “Sir, what do you think of me?”

“I don’t like you.” he said simply with an apologetic shrug.

“As you can see, someone who doesn’t like someone else often has negative things to say about them. In consideration of the fact that personal judgement is frequently drawn from a personal projection of how the world is viewed by the individual, rather than based on verifiable fact, this is often unreliable. You would actually know more about me if you’d asked if I liked unicorns.”

“Dave, do you like unicorns?” Grayson called over.

Dave nodded. “They were serving them in the staff canteen last week, absolutely delicious with spicy sauce and a little freshly squeezed leprechaun oil.”

Grayson nodded in agreement and scribbled something on his pad. “I preferred the griffin sausage. Less glitter-poo.”

Dave looked up to the next woman on the panel. She was dressed in something quite appalling, as if style and taste had been surgically

removed with a blunt instrument and then fashioned into clothing with a very thorough bludgeoning against a dirty rock.

She was old—old enough to know better.

Dave said as sympathetically as he could, which was roughly analogous to anyone else trying their very hardest to be as rude as possible, “I don’t like anything you’re wearing. Was it designed by a blind person, perhaps?”

She cast an angry glare to Grayson who by now wasn’t even bothering to look up. She seemed highly offended, so Dave continued more tactfully, “It’s not that it’s bad exactly. It might look alright on an attractive person.”

“Tell me about your failures,” she told him, tapping at the desk in irritation.

“I don’t really have failures,” he said. “I have opportunities to try harder.”

She looked suddenly very impressed, and there was a sound of many members of the panel gasping in awe.

“Nah, just kidding. I have many, many horrible failures. For instance, only this very week, a young woman was struggling to come to terms with her feelings for me.”

“I would rather eat a dustbin-full of my own toenail clippings than date you!”

She was quite attractive, especially when she was angry, which Dave could only assume was going to be rather a lot. To Dave, a girl losing her temper and shouting at him was a vital step in the courtship process.

“You could do both!” he suggested flirtatiously, but the overall effect was only flirtatious within the confines of his imagination and just slightly disturbing to everyone else. “I usually suggest going out

for dinner so that would save me some money and we could go straight from the shouting stage to the ‘weary resignation that this is actually going to happen’ stage.”

She frowned, considering the fact that such words couldn’t come from a rational person unless there was some hidden, underlying cleverness that she hadn’t quite spotted yet. This didn’t seem to be the case, even for, and perhaps especially, Dave.

“So...” she almost choked on her own rage. “You’re suggesting that I stop shouting long enough to eat my own toenail clippings and then skip straight ahead to feeling bad about an upcoming romantic interlude with someone dumber than my own hair?”

“Yes!” he replied simply, relieved that they were finally understanding one another. “You know it would have been funnier if you’d suggested I was dumber than your toenail clippings. That would have added a nice piece of closure to your earlier comments. It also might have been more factually accurate. Of course, with this opportunity lost, we’ll never truly know, will we?”

She paused for a moment, still seeming not quite sure what exactly it was that she was missing about this whole conversation. She was apparently much more certain what he was missing, and it appeared to be a considerable chunk of his brain.

“Do you always walk up to complete strangers and ask them if they have low standards, a sketchy relationship with their father and poor self-esteem because you’re interested in dating them?” she dug her balled fists into her hips angrily. “Do you think that’s appropriate?”

Dave briefly thought to himself that this was going rather well, at least better than usual. “I prefer a sketchy relationship with a step-father, that’s almost a guarantee that she’ll put out on the first date.”

“How are you allowed to walk free aboard this ship?” she glared at him.

“I don’t know,” he said and shrugged. “I don’t really know how these things work. I mostly just deliver towels.”

“You deliver towels!”

“And unblock toilets!” he added, proudly. “I actually have a number-2 rating. At least, that’s what the Captain said I was at the last meeting.”

“Would you like to know what I do?” she asked and leant slightly inward, perhaps trying, and definitely failing, to be threatening.

Dave thought to himself that the only possible answer could be ‘No, not particularly.’ He couldn’t care less in the slightest. She continued anyway, so he assumed it must be important to her.

“I’m the ship’s phonics specialist. I work to process information to extract reason from communications. I have one of the most important jobs on the whole ship.”

Dave stopped smiling just long enough to look slightly confused for a moment. “And yet you seem to be having trouble understanding that you’re being offered the chance to go on a date with a very attractive towel-delivery specialist with a number-2 rating in the unblocking of toilets?”

She muttered something under her breath, rolled her eyes and looked away. “You are a pitiful little man.”

“I know,” he agreed with quite a lot more enthusiasm than anyone would have expected. “But maybe you have a burning need for a towel, a blocked toilet, or a boring evening with no handsome man to say cheesy, and often blisteringly illogical things to you in a fairly romantic way that will seem increasingly romantic and decreasingly illogical the more drunk you get.”

“You seriously think I would date someone like you?” she said and tapped her foot on the ground, her face flushed red—steam very nearly came out of her ears.

“You can consider it a favour,” he told her. “I accept payment in beer, for the most part.”

She seemed even angrier than before. “I’ll tell you what... I’ll date you,” she grinned slyly. “If you can show me that I should consider you an equal then I’ll go out with you.”

“You want me to shout at you angrily for no apparent reason?” he offered.

She rolled her eyes in what he had been told was exasperation. Such things were of so little concern to Dave that they frequently failed to register.

“You show me you have a deeply profound understanding of galactic phonics. You unscramble any message held in the buffer marked ‘unreadable’ and I’ll go out with you, so long as you can also do something to make up for your appalling behaviour, by way of an apology.”

“What was that first part again?” Dave wasn’t giving her much to worry about.

She just grinned.

“And how am I supposed to make up for my appalling behaviour? What was so appalling about it?”

“That’s your problem!” she told him.

The women made some notes on her pad and made a sort of disapproving noise from the back of throat like she was drowning in a bathtub full of anxiety-flavoured custard.

“Next, I think!” said Dave as he moved along the panel.

“Are you the smartest person you know?”

He had a face that was puffy and bloated from eating too much junk food, his skin was red from high blood pressure and he had a beard that made him look like a total idiot. Dave looked closer and realised it that the beard really wasn't the source of the problem.

He was snorting with his own sense of superiority.

Dave nodded, “More than that, I'm the smartest person you know, and you're not even smart enough to realise it.”

“What?” he frowned. “I don't think you understand the question. Furthermore, you have no idea who I am, young man!”

Dave nodded and continued, “I knew you were going to say that. I can predict with a high degree of accuracy every move you make and every question you're going to ask.”

“I don't think so!” he said, stifling a sarcastic laugh.

“Well that was highly predictable, you were obviously going to try to counter in that way. Of course, you have only three options from here. Please try to show some intelligence and don't say, ‘Tell me what I'm going to say next then’ because that gets boring very quickly,” Dave said, sitting back and grinning smugly.

“I don't...” he said and then frowned. He flustered. He began rubbing his unusually large nose as his hand covered his unusually closed mouth.

“Ah, you've narrowed your options down to one,” said Dave. “If you're to challenge me in any way there's only one thing left you can do to not look hopelessly ridiculous to everyone.”

He seemed to be vibrating with rage. He sat back in his chair and glared silently.

“Silence. Then that leaves me with only one thing left to say...” Dave grinned.

The man shrugged and kept his mouth shut.

“Next!”

“Just a second...” Grayson called out. “How did you know what he was going to say?”

“I had no idea what he was going to say!” Dave smirked. “If you accuse someone who thinks they’re better than you of not being as good as they think they are, they’ll naturally have an irresistible urge to do something stupid. I once played this game with a child of five so I was pretty sure it would work.”

“I see,” Grayson said evenly. “Next.”

Dave looked over to a female executive. He thought that she would have been quite attractive with a completely different face and body, attitude and level of intelligence.

She smiled awkwardly and leant forward towards him. “How old were you when you had your first paying job?” she said after a slight pause.

“That’s not a bad question,” he said, nodding in approval. “I was 84.”

“84?” she frowned. “You don’t look that old.”

“I’m not, but thank you for noticing,” he said with a smile. He then sighed and looked remorseful. “I will one day die aged 84. I retired seven years earlier, and was living on a farm raising wild free-roaming carrots while surrounded by my seventeen loving, teenage wives. When the banks foreclosed on my mortgage for political reasons, I took additional work selling my body to science, since specimens of my level of attractiveness command a very high price. In a horrible accident, my memories are sent back in time and into the body of my younger self of age 8. The trauma sent me quite mad and I voted for the clone of somebody who had been really unpopular in the political arena several centuries earlier in the next

Earth Prime Ministerial election. Only three people voted, but it was a landslide victory. I partly blamed myself.

“I have always known of my death aged 84, and the first job I ever had, as an 8 year old boy.”

“My god!” she said. “Is that true?”

“No,” he replied simply. “Next.”

He winced at the crystal blue eyes of the next executive, the weird face and bizarrely white teeth.

“I would like to ask...” he said slowly with the enthusiasm people usually reserved for the funeral of a relative who is leaving them a large sum of money. “What motivates you to get out of bed in the morning?”

“My alarm clock!” Dave frowned as if such a ridiculous question was a ridiculous question. “The Captain said it wasn’t motivating enough, and had an engineer measure my bunk so that an electric cattle-prod grille could be installed. That was oddly highly motivating. Nobody wants engineers in their rooms. I already have one and that’s more than enough.”

Dave looked to the next one. She had thin, pale white skin stretched sternly over bony features. She was grinning and had a look of something not quite right going on in her head. Dave quite liked her.

“Are you an animated corpse?” he asked. Her grin never faltered. “My uncle Derek was an animated corpse. When he died, my aunt had his brain scooped out and replaced with a simple computer that allowed him to breathe, kept his heart pumping and made him shout at the neighbourhood kids every five minutes to get off his lawn.”

“Really?” she grinned while speaking by some miracle of makeup, cosmetic surgery and snake venom directly injected into her face.

“Yes, actually. The family were against it until they discovered that he had always dreamed of a career in local politics and he was suddenly eminently qualified. As far as I know, he’s still serving on the bench of the regional council.”

“I find that’s fascinating,” she grinned and her eyes moved very, very slightly.

“I think that says more about you than it does about me,” he mumbled. “So what about your question?”

“Yes, yes!” she might have enthused, it was difficult to tell with her face frozen like a Halloween mask. “If I were to say to a bunch of people who know you, ‘Give me three adjectives that best describe you,’ what would I hear?” She grinned for all she was worth, which was probably quite a lot as the galactic economy made no sense whatsoever.

“My immediate guess is that you’d hear adjectives from each of them that they think describes themselves, since you worded the question that way,” Dave told her. “Then it occurred to me that you’re talking to people I know so it’s unlikely you’d hear adjectives at all since it’s doubtful that they were educated beyond walking upright, and perhaps not even that in some cases.” He rolled his eyes thoughtfully. “My guess is that you’d actually hear a lot of burping and farting sounds and some awkward laughter as someone mumbled that your face looked oddly like it died several years ago and was hanging around until the rest of you caught it up.”

She grumbled and grinned and grinned and grumbled. “Then what three adjectives would people say about you if they were educated, intelligent and actually knew what adjectives were?”

“That is a better question,” he agreed. “My guess would be that my friend Rob would say that I probably don’t know what adjectives are, my supervisor would say ‘horse’ and my Uncle Derek would shout at you to get off his lawn. I hope that gives you a deeper insight into my life.”

“It does actually tell me rather a lot,” she quipped.

Dave gave her two thumbs up on a job well done. “I think we all know a bit more about you as well now.”

Grayson by now was looking rather fed up. “Next, let’s move this along shall we?” he said with a distinct note of melancholy.

“Can you tell me the story of your prior successes, challenges, and major responsibilities?” said a man-child who looked like his mother had dressed him but given up half-way through.

“No, I deliver towels,” Dave told him. “Next.”

Dave looked to where an attractive woman was looking over at him, but seemed to be lacking any sign of romantic interest. He hated it when that happened and it happened a lot. “You’re a very attractive woman but you seem to be lacking any signs of romantic interest in me,” he told her as though he was detailing a very specific problem to a person whose job it was to fix it.

“You’re very perceptive,” she quipped obnoxiously.

“How dare you!” he cried out angrily.

“Perceptive means that you understand what’s happening,” she told him, not quite as confidently as she probably would have liked.

“How dare you!” he cried out angrily.

“It was a sarcastic compliment...” she tried again.

“How da...” he stopped in his tracks. “Compliment, you say? That’s more like it. I’m thinking that after this, we could get a drink

or two, or three? I get some free beers and you get something to brag to your friends about while you struggle to get over the emotional upheaval of our breakup, after an amazing but ultimately meaningful evening. You should probably get yourself checked out at a clinic too afterwards, mistakes have been made over the years and it would be a shame if your nose dropped off, like so many of the others.”

“I think I’d rather just ask my question and move on with my life,” she told him, staring blankly and yet directly at him.

“Seven,” he told her and she looked confused. “My shift finishes at seven. I might be a little late, of course. There’s a toilet on deck three that keeps backing up. We never managed to quite get it working again after a very large passenger managed to block it twice. The engineers haven’t found anything actually wrong with it and have diagnosed the issue as ‘emotional.’ If I have to unblock it then I’ll need to quickly head back to my cabin for an extra lick of the under-arm deodorant which I’ll later describe unconvincingly as a ‘shower’.”

“What?” she scowled.

“Your question was going to be about what time I finished work, right?” he seemed confused and yet strangely over-confident.

“My interview question then, is this...” She seemed sad, her faith in humanity not entirely dead but on a ventilator in a poorly equipped hospital with a large rat gnawing on the power cable. “Can you tell me about a time you ran with a project from start to finish?”

“Certainly,” Dave said rather proudly. There was a lengthy pause. The room descended into expectant silence.

“This morning,” he said, his attention fully turned towards the group, building to some grand revelation, “I took a towel from the store to a customer’s room...”

There were significant groans around the room.

“I keep telling you this, I deliver towels. I’m not saving the universe, I don’t uncover galactic conspiracies, witness the face of god or reveal terrorist plots.”

“Are you an idiot?” she frowned at him, glancing over to Grayson as if she didn’t really understand any of this.

“Finally!” Dave shouted in exasperation that at last someone was listening—really listening—to him. “I’m socially classified as someone who shouldn’t be able to do simple things for himself. That’s why I have to keep hanging around with smarter people than myself. It’s also while I feel so awkward when I’m surrounded by executives.”

She grunted and shook her head. “Next.” She gestured along the line, moving things along or at least away from her.

“Why only this week, I had to ask a favour from my friend Rob.”

“Next!” she insisted but it was already too late. It was far too late. It had always been far too late.

The Wikiweb was a huge repository of information, a vast integrated pool of wisdom that stretched throughout the known galaxy. For some inexplicable reason it didn’t come with a set of instructions.

Dave stood in the crew lounge with a pad, pouring over the details of an index page that made less sense to him than washing regularly. This wasn’t an idle boast, he’d gathered solid facts that supported his argument that washing was nothing more than a scam created by soap companies and backed by the government to use up your valuable free time and keep you distracted from matters pertaining to cheese.

He preferred to keep his deodorant in his back pocket, just in case the smell should become too offensive to tolerate (again). As his

favourite brand of deodorant had chosen a genetically engineered rat, augmented with the tongue of a large dog, as a delivery system, the deodorant preferred to be anywhere but his back pocket.

“Rob...”

“This had better not be about phones again!” Rob told him angrily.

Dave sat down next to him at the bar and made a face that was meant to inadequately convey innocence. Dave had little understanding of the concept and Rob had failed to adequately explain it, even with diagrams and a special ‘explaining stick’ which was used to hit him as a form of negative reinforcement.

Dave had quickly learned to enjoy the experience.

“I don’t know what your obsession with phones is. I mean, this is the future, we’ve probably not used phones for centuries,” Dave said and shrugged.

“Why do you say things like that?” Rob grumbled.

“Sometimes your lack of grasp on reality gives me a literal headache.”

“I’m so sorry that you chose me to be your best friend out of the hundreds of people lining up to have a drink with you,” Dave quipped.

Rob glared back at him. “I didn’t choose you. Nobody would choose you in anything other than a selection of who they’d like to see fed into a food processor feet-first.”

Dave just smiled. “Thanks, Rob. That means a lot.”

“So what do you want?”

“What makes you think I want anything?”

Rob huffed a weary sigh, “You always want something.”

This was true, entirely true, and Dave made no attempt to disguise it. "Can you make sense of this?" He handed Rob the pad with the open index page.

Rob looked at him with eyes filled with apathetic venom and growled with poorly-developed angry apathy, "This is all about phones!"

"Yes!" said Dave.

"You said it wouldn't be about phones."

"You said it shouldn't be about phones," Dave corrected. "It is though. That's not my fault, is it? If it is, then I don't really see how."

"Yes," Rob told him. "You've been going on about phones all bloody week. You're annoying enough on a good day, you don't have to work this hard at it."

"That's nice of you to say," he said with a smile, one of them evidently missing the point entirely.

"The headache is getting worse, Dave."

"Thanks," he said.

Rob just grumbled and rubbed his temples.

Dave continued sympathetically. "Would a bowl of macaroni cheese help?"

Rob just stared at him incredulously for a moment. "Has this got anything to do with why you were eating toenail clippings?"

"It may have started out that way but I've developed something of a taste for them," he said before staring away for a moment thoughtfully. "This has helped me come to the realisation that I'm quite different from most people."

Rob just glared at him incredulously for another moment. He began to nod very slowly.

"Are you going to help me or not?"

Rob sighed wearily, knowing he would eventually and that resisting fate would only make it worse on him when he finally gave in. “What do you want?”

“Phones.” Dave pointed to the pad as though that might explain everything. Rob shrugged at him since it actually explained nothing. “Phones,” he insisted. “I met a girl and she’s a phone. At least, I think that’s what she said.”

“Nobody is a phone,” Rob told him. “You must have misheard or got it wrong.”

Dave nodded that this was quite likely. “By the way, while we’re on the subject, are you recording everything that happens in our room?”

“Yes!” Rob told him with another, even wearier sigh.

“Why?” Dave asked, grinning but frowning at the same time.

“Because you told me to.”

“Did I?” he said and struggled to remember, a struggle he appeared to be losing. Rob seemed angry but struggled to control his temper, a struggle he appeared to be losing right along with him.

“You woke up with a very overweight girl covered in hair, who smelled like wet dogs,” Rob began, Dave nodding as he followed along—mostly. “You said you couldn’t remember anything about who she was and insisted that I record everything that happened from then on for your own sake, in case you woke up with a ginger girl.”

“A ginger girl?” Dave frowned quite seriously. As if alarmed by such a suggestion.

“Yes, I actually did explain to you at length that they do actually exist.”

“But should they exist?” Dave added philosophically.

"I take it you don't remember any of this which rather proves the wisdom of it in the first place, I suppose." Rob's headache was approaching the point where macaroni cheese was starting to feel like a good idea.

"So we have proof of me eating toenail clippings?"

"Because that is the kind of thing people often lie about..."

Rob said sarcastically.

"This is all working out perfectly," he said, but of course it made no sense whatsoever, even to Dave at this point.

"If we're sitting here a year from now celebrating what a great 12 months it's been for you in this role, what did we achieve together?"

Dave looked over to the source of the question. A middle aged, and quite boring-looking man was staring back at him. "Well nobody has told me what the role actually is. I'm going to go ahead and assume, for the sake of argument, that you're looking for someone to teach you how to relate to real people in the really real world."

"Erm, no," he huffed, looking around in confusion.

"Yes!" Dave told him with the same degree of certainty to which he clung to the theory that cheese answered every question it was possible to ask. "We'd be sitting in a place where there were lots of people. Nobody would be pointing and laughing at you in public any more. You'd actually miss it since you'd convinced yourself that they just didn't understand you really, and that you were actually more complex and sophisticated than everyone else.

"Still, you'd accept it as progress after seventeen meetings in which you'd discussed what constituted progress and come to the decision that things only qualify as progress if the progress is considered important enough to have a meeting about. Consequently you'd be taking notes ready for the next meeting.

“I’m not a miracle worker and we’re happy to leave things at that for now. You’re no longer ordering French sparkling-water with a twist of lemon in a glass shaped roughly like a penis. You’re drinking beer and have actually begun to like it, and the consequence of all this is that your testicles have started to grow back.

“You’re telling me how you recently held an interview and nobody stared at you, struggling to stifle a laugh because your questions were so far removed from normalcy that they thought you were either joking, or that a piano had quite recently been dropped on your head.

“You just asked the applicants normal questions and had a normal conversation during which you got to know them as a person. You see, you finally understood that you’d already established through their CV, references and qualifications that they were suitable for the post, so the interview process was merely an informal thing to see if their personality fitted your workplace. Nobody tried to trip the candidates up with stupid questions all of which could be best answered with a kick to the head from a horse. Everyone was consequently much happier about things and almost everyone in upper management had been demoted to cleaning staff where they actually belong.

“Grass is greener, skies are bluer, food tastes better, beer makes you even drunker and women are actually attracted to me for my mind instead of my devastating handsomeness. It’s a better world we’ve built, and I’m proud of it.”

There was an awkward uneasiness around the room. Dave watched in silence, quite proud that he’d caused offence without having to resort to picking on the usual easy targets of groups of people who so believed in their entitlement that they’d reached the

point where they remained in perpetual childhood. He was growing as a person.

After an even longer period of silence Gregory Grayson moved things along by saying, “Next.”

An older blonde woman was shaking her head vigorously and muttering things that sounded like ‘No, please no’ and ‘No, I don’t wanna.’

Dave grinned like a vicious predator that had seen a lame creature and was very, very hungry. He said, “Madam, do you have a question for me?”

She shook her head and was muttering to herself loudly, pushing back away from the desk before her. “I’ve got everything I need!” she shouted out, yelling like a crazy person.

Dave smiled to himself happily. This was turning into a good day.

“Just for fun,” he said. “Ask me an interview question. Come on, I’m on a roll here.”

She stopped struggling and glared at her notepad accusingly. “Well...” She looked away, rubbing her temples anxiously and sweating like a leaky drainpipe.

“Please!” Grayson added firmly, trapping her, although, from the look of her face she already knew that she was trapped and was more than happy to chew off her own head to escape.

“What’s your favourite part of your current job?”

“An excellent question,” he pronounced. “As I may have mentioned, I deliver towels. To many people that would sound more depressing than trying to get a Scotsman to pay his bar tab, or watching any ginger person talking to literally any female, even a female dog.

“However, as many of you might have noticed, I’m a people-person. I revel in contact with my fellow people. I am myself, a person, you understand, despite what my current legal status says after I was recently classified as cargo. I enjoy relating to other people; I enjoy meeting them, hearing their stories, learning what it is they have to teach me.”

She almost smiled. A look of cautious relief washed over her. “That’s a good answer,” she said softly, then more loudly. “That’s a very good answer.”

“Many times I’ve had the opportunity to see the weary and toweless traveller completely naked, which I have explained to the Captain many, many times is an educational experience. It also offers me the chance to distribute my leaflet entitled, ‘Tips are required on this ship and a bottle of beer is the absolute minimum that you should offer if you don’t want anyone to think that you’re Scottish.’ Since I’ve been handing them out, I’ve been offered a 100% increase in beer-related tips. I’ve also convinced the giftshop to double the price of beer to passengers and share the additional revenue with me. It’s a win-win.”

“Oh...” She looked sad.

“I hope you get this job,” Grayson told him, sounding slightly bored but less slightly angry. “It seems you might be getting fired from your current one quite soon.”

“It’s fine!” Dave assured him. “I didn’t get fired for running my Wikiweb site, ‘Toweless babes.’ I’m sure nobody will find out about this either.”

“I presume that’s because the Captain didn’t know about it?” he huffed.

“I’ve said the quiet part out loud again, haven’t I?” Dave grumbled to himself.

“Why don’t we move on to the next question?”

Grayson pointed to a young executive who looked to Dave as if his mouth was on upside-down. The executive smiled. He smirked. He began to chuckle to himself. “What would you do,” he began, struggling to stop himself from chuckling at the wickedly clever humour of his own question, “in the event of a zombie apocalypse?”

“Another one?” Dave shrugged.

“No, Dave,” Grayson said firmly. “I keep telling you, North America wasn’t wiped out by an actual zombie apocalypse. Many of the people were just considered mindless zombies by the rest of the world.”

“My apologies for my lack of historical understanding about which we can all agree is a very minor point,” he said insincerely. “Well we’d obviously need to get rid of all the zombies so perhaps we could get them all working as executives? They don’t actually need a brain for that, do they?”

“Apparently not,” Grayson agreed. “Good answer.”

“Hi. I’m Jeff!” said an executive with his shirt buttons open to reveal the greying hairs of his chest. He seemed more confident in his dubious sexual attractiveness than Dave, and he found that instantly disconcerting.

“Hi. I’m not, and I’m proud of it!” he said, glaring at the ageing man accusingly. He flustered slightly but continued behind his veil of confidence.

“I’d like to ask you a question,” he told Dave.

Dave shrugged, crossed his arms over his chest and grunted something incoherent.

The old man continued, "It's tricky so don't worry too much if you can't work out the answer."

Dave grunted again.

"A hammer and a nail cost \$1.10, and the hammer costs one dollar more than the nail. How much does the nail cost?" he said with a sudden increase in smugness by what Dave estimated was at least 84%.

"Is the answer cheese?" Dave asked quite reasonably. "Of course it is, the answer is always cheese. The answer to everything is always cheese."

"It's a maths question," he corrected, his smugness decreasing by an almost imperceptible amount.

"No it's not," Dave laughed. "It's a trick question. You want me to blurt out that it's a dollar which is the most obvious thing to say if you don't bother really thinking it through. Of course once you pause for a moment then you realise that the hammer costs a dollar more. You simply take the dollar away which leaves 10 units which covers both items equally so the nail costs 5 units."

"Well done," he smiled as if he'd hoped that Dave would find the right answer, but the disappointment was very clear on his face.

"But that, like all these questions, actually tells us a great deal more about you than the answer tells you about me," Dave told him. He looked up and the smugness reduced a little further. "You see, you think that's a tricky question. You think you'll catch people out with that, but actually it's so easy that it's laughable. That means you can't figure out questions this hard. This tells me that you're an idiot. Do you see?" Dave smiled for all he was worth. "Do you see? Do you see?"

The man grumbled and looked away, "Well done again!"

“Well done on the answer, or well done for knowing you’re an idiot? If it was a secret, it wasn’t a very good one.”

“Next, please,” Grayson called out.

A blonde woman looked up. She was older and looked like a mum, but with a look in her eye that suggested that she was actually entirely motivated by self-interest to such a degree that if she had wanted to be a mum, she’d have sold her children in order to buy better children.

“What’s your favourite quote?” she asked.

“A hammer and a nail cost \$1.10, and the hammer costs one dollar more than the nail. How much does the nail cost?” Dave said, beginning to laugh to himself. “I’m going to be telling that story tonight at the bar, and dozens of ordinary working people are going to be laughing at the sheer stupidity of a person who thinks that’s a tricky, brain-teasing question. We’ll get good and drunk and try to find someone who can’t work out the answer. I’m sure we’ll find an executive somewhere.”

Jeff gritted his teeth, his hands balled into fists, his eyes flared angrily. Dave laughed some more.

The last one made dubious eye-contact with Dave. Dave made confident eye contact back with him, confidence far in excess of his ability to do stupid things for almost no reason whatsoever.

“Your face looks like a bag full of snooker-balls,” he said. It didn’t, not especially. He wasn’t really sure why he’d said it. Just for a moment that thought had flashed through his mind and it had fluttered out of his mouth due to a totally inadequate filtering process of which he was immensely proud. “Do you like cheese?”

The man seemed to take a perfectly reasonable dislike to Dave, which was the only really reasonable course of action for most people to take.

"I have your last question, it seems," he said, glaring at him in slight annoyance.

Dave could almost see the thoughts going through his head as he assured himself that his face looked nothing like a bag full of snooker balls. "Maybe not snooker balls. It's like in hamsters, when they cram things into their cheeks and walk home with a bulging face," Dave said thoughtfully. "That's it. Your face looks like a bag full of hamsters."

"So my question," he grunted, obviously taking quite some considerable offence.

"Happy hamsters. Not dead ones. It's a big bag, plenty of room for them to move around."

"My question!" he growled loudly, obviously taking a growing amount of very serious offence.

"Hamsters like cheese!" Dave told him.

"My question!" he shouted, standing up suddenly and roaring as loud as his aged, tired old body would let him.

There was a very awkward silence.

"I wish you'd get on with it," Dave said finally. "Those hamsters are going to need the bathroom sooner or later, you know."

He growled. He sat down, chewing his flushed red face in sheer rage. "If you were a consultant, what would the sign on your door say?"

Dave nodded thoughtfully, making a big show of trying to take this seriously.

"Go away," he shrugged. "Oh no! I'd have it say 'Abandon hope all those who dare to enter here.' No wait, that's what my room-mates last girlfriend had printed on her necklace."

"Will you please take this stupid bloody thing seriously?" he roared angrily.

“Oh that’s good!” Dave nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I’d put that. I mean, it’s an executive position, nobody would take you in the least bit seriously, even your own parents. Yeah, I like your style, that’s what I’d put on my door. Thanks.”

“Impossible man,” he grunted.

Rob and Dave sat at the bar, where they often sat. It had been a long and difficult day for Rob, since he had spent some of it with Dave.

“How was your day?” Rob asked conversationally without much investment.

“Shut up, Rob,” he replied.

Rob sighed to himself. Was this really his life now?

He was going to weakly protest, which was all a part of their well-worn routine now, but then as he looked over he saw the chief of customer-services heading over with his personal secretary taking notes, walking respectfully behind him by just a few paces. The very sight of him plunged the bar into a muted hive of background chatter as the people dotted about feared they might lose their jobs, which in many cases would be the best thing that could happen, if they weren’t in the icy void of space travelling at speeds so fast that to write the number down would more than double the length of this already overly long story. This fact wasn’t lost on Rob.

Mr Grayson was wearing a suit that had come out of a tailor instead of a hole in the wall that accepted coins, as his own clothes had. He had a confidence that inspired a certain respect, a presence Rob could never hope to emulate without carrying a large automatic weapon and randomly firing it into a crowd. Rob was moved to silence, even though he objected since it was what Dave wanted.

“Is this about my performance at the interview today?” Dave asked sourly.

Grayson stood before him. He dragged out a bar stool and sat down. He nodded slowly his reply that indeed it was.

“How did I do? What did I do?”

“It was actually one of your better performances,” he conceded, although that wasn’t saying very much.

This fact also wasn’t lost on Rob. He watched transfixed as if forced to observe a horrible accident exploding in slow motion right before him. He found it an oddly uplifting experience.

“I swear they’re getting worse!” Grayson said with a sigh of weary resolution.

Dave was moved to agree. “I agree,” he said to really hammer the point home. “They were literally the worst and stupidest questions I’ve ever been asked, give or take ‘Can I get you another beer’ and ‘Do you love me?’”

“Unfortunately it’s a part of my job to test their interview technique,” he sighed. “I still can’t find a better way than to just let them all interview you. It’s almost like testing a battery’s ability to hold a charge by dropping it into a nuclear explosion.”

By now Dave wasn’t really listening as someone in the room had breasts and had made the mistake of smiling at him. His attention was now entirely focused on Grayson’s personal assistant who had noticed his relentless staring and rewarded it with a coy smile while giggling to herself flirtatiously.

Grayson couldn’t have failed to notice all this and looked back with a sternly admonishing glare.

“She’s a close friend’s niece,” he told him, a warning that they both knew was going to go unheeded.

Dave shrugged and looked back over to her where the bulk of his attention was set to remain until breakfast.

“What’s going on?” Rob finally managed, summoning up a tiny little bit of courage.

“Mr Grayson is just explaining that he owes me 26 beers and that he fully understands that my fee is rising by 20% to cover the cost of inflation,” Dave said, making things absolutely no clearer.

“You!” a piercing voice called out from the entrance, where a very angry woman seemed to be the source of the shouting.

Grayson looked over at Dave, and then, with a smile, he leant back on the bar in amusement, making no attempt to hide the fact that he was planning to enjoy this. “I like where this is going!” he said to Rob who awkwardly nodded back, slightly intimidated. Despite all that, he also liked where this was going.

The angry young woman came over with a small box that she slammed on the bar counter. Dave simply smiled as if all this was not just completely acceptable, but a welcome interruption from things that were just getting a little too normal there for a moment.

“What the hell is all this?” her voice screamed from her reddened face.

Dave peered inside. “I’m not sure I know, or really care,” he commented with a happy grin. “Do I know or really care? Should I know or really care?”

The very angry woman looked briefly at the faces of those who seemed also to share a degree of interest in all this. She turned her attention back to Dave where she seemed to believe it really belonged.

“You sent me a recording of you eating toenail clippings out of a dustbin!” she shrieked at him, clearly in the quite naive belief that this was the worst thing he’d done that day.

“Did I?” he smiled. He turned to Rob, frowning and shrugging. “Did I?”

Rob just shrugged back but the frown had left his face and his headache was feeling a little better.

“What could you possibly be thinking?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I like toenails. Maybe that was really all there was to it? I don’t know how these things work. I presume they do work. Rob?”

Rob preferred to stay out of it for now.

“And what’s this?” she flung a small black object onto the counter from the box. It was a flat black slab with a hopelessly outdated screen and buttons with numbers on it.

“That’s a phone!” Rob said, remembering it from the many Wikiweb articles he’d been recently and unwillingly exposed to. He regretted his involvement instantly.

“I remember that,” Dave said. “I think.” He struggled for a moment with or against his brain, “I had it made for you since you’re a phone of some sort. The whole thing didn’t make much sense to me but women don’t make much sense to me, if the truth is told.”

Rob and Grayson both winced at his tasteless but perfectly honest statement. The woman seemed to be growing angrier than science had ever imagined possible as he continued talking.

“It’s powered with space-electricity and uses the latest intergalactic something-or-others. It’s all very complicated, even compared to women.”

“Give me that...” Rob snatched it up and examined it briefly. “This is what you made me print for you. It has a subspace relay built into it because I had to modify the plans to use conventional technology we had aboard. You can’t just carry it around or use that near you without shielding. It could cause temporary memory loss, and even a loss of brain function...”

They all looked over to Dave who had started to drool a bit.

“And you sent it to me???” she screamed.

Dave shrugged and smiled. “Mystery gloss?” he slurred.

“I just presumed you’d been drinking too much beer, as is so often the case,” Rob said and then shook his head as some of the parts fell into place.

“Too much beer?” Dave frowned at him angrily as if such a sentence had no place anywhere near his ears.

The young woman began protesting to Rob who tried, with some difficulty, to explain that this had nothing whatsoever to do with him and that Dave was an idiot. That did seem to resonate with her and she calmed down significantly.

Grayson stepped forwards as the situation had grown increasingly less interesting now that Rob appeared to be dealing with it. He said, “As entertaining as all this is, I have work to do. I can only thank you again for participating in the interview process and helping us get rid of the very worst of the candidates. In fact four have since resigned all by themselves.”

“What interview?” Dave smiled back absently.

Rob finished up calming the woman down and brought her over for what he hoped against reason might be a forthcoming apology, despite them being incredibly rare and usually not very good, since Dave preferred to blame everyone but himself for essentially everything.

She dug her fists into her sides and glared at him angrily. “Well...” she said.

“What?” Dave stared back emptily, looking from her and over to Rob as if he was entirely clueless, which also happened to be exactly and entirely the actual case. This fact again wasn’t lost on Rob.

“What?” she turned to Rob with an expression somewhere between confusion and wanting to tear off Dave’s face with her bare teeth. He sighed and enjoyed his headache.

“Which one are you, Rob or Dave?” Dave asked with an increasingly lop-sided smile. Rob just sighed again, like a man whose arms had just been torn off, looking down at his brand new shoelaces.

“I’m off for a date with this... girl...?” he said and snapped his fingers quickly, struggling to recall her name, which was a losing battle for a man struggling to remember his own. “She has a very poor relationship with her stepfather so I’ve effectively lost all interest with everything else for the time being. It means she’s almost guaranteed to do something I like doing. I can’t remember what though; I think it has something to do with cheese.”

“What?” The angry woman glared at him, then at Rob and back and forward between the two.

“Bye!” Dave got up to leave with Grayson’s personal assistant, who presumably did have a name. “Oh, a phone!” He pointed to the little black object, “You probably shouldn’t use that. I was recently warned that they can cause exemplary rental floss. I don’t know what that is, you should ask a ginger person, that’s what I usually do.”

Rob and the woman watched him leave with Grayson’s personal assistant. They remained in silence until the door closed behind them, after all, what was left that words could actually express?

“He actually never remembers girl’s names,” Rob said finally.

She seemed to have calmed down significantly. She looked at Rob for a moment longer than was socially acceptable. “And you?” she asked just on the right side of flirtatiously.

"No," he assured her. "He actually doesn't usually remember my name either."

Rob slept alone that night.

Rob—not the other one—sat back and smiled hopefully.

"That was a lot of story," the other one said. "It's certainly filled up a lot of space."

"I don't understand?" he replied.

Rob—not the other one—looked at his terminal and tapped a few buttons. "It's all about your personal viewpoint. To someone viewing these events from a different perspective, this might all make perfect sense; or not. Who knows?"

"So I don't have to burn forever?" Rob pleaded.

"Well you never did. I actually don't know where you even got that idea from. But I'm knocking a few points off for trying to drag Dave down with you. You'll be going to a place where the macaroni is going to taste shop-bought, at best."

Rob shut his eyes and sighed loudly in relief. "I can live with that..."

The other Rob shrugged, "Well no!" With a sigh of his own, he put down his terminal and gazed at the pathetic, shambling mess of a creature that looked, acted and thought exactly like him. "Actually I'm going to do you a favour!"

"A favour?" Rob snapped up excitedly. "Yes, that sounds fantastic!"

"I'm going to punish you for trying to get Dave in trouble. I'm just going to send you somewhere where you can just burn away your sins, and then you'll be able to spend eternity right there with

Dave, eating nothing whatsoever but macaroni cheese and amusing him by failing to date any attractive angels.”

Rob’s face fell as near-panic set in. “Aww, don’t, Rob!”

He opened his eyes. Everything that used to be white was now black, a crushingly dark blackness, in fact. He looked around the featureless black walls, which might not have been walls at all in a room that might not have been a room.

“I was awake, wasn’t I?” Rob said, his breath ragged. He sat up suddenly, as if rousing from a very vivid dream.

“Shut up, Rob!” Dave’s voice told him from the other side of the room.

Rob closed his eyes, cringed inwardly and muttered to himself, “Oh no!”

“Get some sleep, you disgusting mess of a creature,” Dave told him. “Someone got very drunk last night, and might have sent naked pictures of himself with a mountain goat to the Captain—or their very handsome and charismatic friend may have sent them for him. In any case, I’m pretty sure you’re going to have a busy day.”

Rob sighed. He was back. Hell didn’t seem all that bad.

Oh, hello! You're still reading? I thought another five blank pages would be more than sufficient to drive the point home that the book really is over.

And yet, here you still are, no doubt looking for some kind of resolution.

Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there is no resolution to be had. This doesn't have to be a bad thing though. Life is often like that. The best we can do is make the best decisions we can with the choices we're given, play the hand we're dealt, and let the pieces fall where they may. The sooner we let go of this notion that we have any real control over anything that happens to us, the sooner we'll all be much happier and more productive.

Skipping over 5 blank pages at the end of a novel just to see if there's anything else there is rebellious, but ultimately futile, as more content isn't going to just appear out of nowhere, just because you wish it to. In order to will it into existence, you have to actually engage in the process of writing it.

So why not give that a try, and then come and talk to us about it at www.edgeverse.org.

—Jack and Seth, or like, whatever