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# Five-Sided Smile

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A COLLECTION OF SHORT AND NOT-SO  
SHORT STORIES BY CRAIG CAVANAGH





# Doing God's Work

In a police station that could be any and probably is, DC Carson and DS Vaughan are interviewing someone just brought in by the foot people. He was found standing over a corpse with a small exKGB issue pistol which even the most dubious criminologist in the world would suggest was the murder weapon. Initial tests have concluded that the victim was unknown to the accused and the crime appears to be motiveless. What gets our two guardians of law and order's noses up is that the accused, at least at the moment, feels no remorse for his actions. The pair have had to temporarily leave the interview room as Vaughan's patience was beginning to wear thin and in these moments only his friends Messers. Dunhill and Nescafé can tranquillise that innate cop instinct. Carson nods, suggesting that it's time to go back and, drawing a deep breath, Vaughan enters followed by Carson.

Carson begins the tape, announcing the date and time and embarks on a new line of questioning:

"Please then, tell me in your own words, how you came to be in the vicinity of the crime, and what you knew about the deceased. You mentioned something about God" Carson patiently began.

"Something about God?" responded the accused almost breaking into a laugh, "Well, the way I see it is, that God and, of course, religion is pretty subjective. Do you not think? In my case I've been around for more than a while and I've seen the changes. Anyway, I'm sure you boys know what I'm talking about as God's company has gone through a similar diversification process to that of your own good force. Take if you will as an example Marks and Spencer's, it's come a long way since the days of the stand in the street and why? Because it has had to move forward and God has done the same. The business isn't now like it was in what lamentably are known as the good old days, so we've had to plan and change our plans to get bums on seats and move into the twenty-first century.



Obviously, as a result of that diversification process, people within the company have now more clearly defined roles, there is a company structure and everyone knows what their department is.”

He continued “My department for example is linked to maintenance, but it’s not like M&S in too many senses, you know, we don’t have problems with inter-company gossiping, back stabbing or worrying about promotion, the mere fact that you have been chosen is enough and you are proud and honoured to do your job, well, God’s work, the best you can. What greater job satisfaction can there be than knowing you are doing God’s work? what can other companies offer you? Money? Flash Motor? Villa in the Caribbean? Hardly the same is it?” Carson and Vaughan are quite clear on how they would wish for their professional gratification to be materialised. They continue to let him speak as they still have yet to hear anything that might constitute making sense.

“So yeah, my department is, I’ll admit, not one of the most glamorous, but you get what you’re given and accept your lot. Of course there are times when I feel weak and fantasise about being in the Messages and Acceptance Department, or even Gospel Marketing, but they know who is the best fellow for each post and the moment passes. Then I realise that I am lucky and in some ways I do work for the other departments as I make their jobs easier by doing my own well. But I’m sure you aren’t overly interested in the omnigram of the company. My role, ostensibly, is one of mopping up, so to speak. God, as you know, is a reasonable boss, no doubt like your own Chief Constable, but his patience has a limit and that’s when I come in. Obviously, the blueprints for the human being are a design masterpiece, but just like in theory every Audi A4 comes out perfect we all know some don’t. Get my drift?” The two law enforcement officers looked at each other blankly and the accused takes this as a cue to continue.

“So, every now and again, well bloody often if you ask me, one slips through the net, and I have to, shall we say, maintain standards, that is, eliminate. Problem is these days is with the diversification, we’ve got all these quality control people in and things aren’t the same as they used to be, so much paperwork, procedures arghh! sometimes it’s the bane of my life. But, I understand that we don’t want the fallout if things go wrong. But in the old days you just got out you did your job and went about your merry little way, nowadays these do-gooders are taking a lot of the enjoyment out of it.” Vaughan’s patience is beginning to wane and it seems inevitable that Mr. Phillip Morris’ profits will rise a little. As he goes to leave, Carson takes the initiative.

“That’s all very interesting sir, but what does it have to do with you standing over a young woman’s corpse with a smoking revolver in your hand, a revolver I might add that is difficult to get hold of in this country and would this have anything to do with the dwarf who was shot last month?”

“Well I was getting to that” replied the accused. Looking unkindly towards Carson, his monologue continued “The dwarf was an assignment, like all my assignments, a person with one too many defects that the boss could not put up with any more, so he sent me a message. That’s how I find out about my assignments, messages. At first I didn’t know what it meant, as a nine figure number kept appearing before me in the strangest places. I’ll admit in those days I wasn’t the good citizen I am today, and religious, phwahhh not me at all, never set foot in a church, wouldn’t have been seen dead in one. So I’m getting these funny messages when I work out it’s a phone number so I give it a whirl, turns out it’s some bloke I’d never met and I just blurb out a few excuses and hang up. But this goes on for about four months and I’m getting other phone numbers and letters through the post with names on business cards, I’m also strangely attracted to the local church and go almost every day. I’ve lost all interest in my job and eventually hand in my notice, I know something is going on but can’t put my finger on it. Then I get a visit, completely against the rules a visit, these days you’d never get one, too risky, they’d have to let you go. But with me they wanted me and were prepared to bend the rules a little.”

“What kind of visit” asked Vaughan ruing the new no-smoking policy at the station.

“An angel, no less, can you believe it? She didn’t really say anything, she didn’t have to, just looking at her I understood and knew what I had to do. Next time I got a message it was down to work. I understood it was important not to rush the first job, take my time and make sure it was done well. So this time I didn’t phone him, just got the number and found out where he lived and watched his routine for a while. It was quite exciting to be honest, almost felt like I was in one of those films the boss doesn’t like. So when I knew the time was right, thud!! with a golf club on the back of the head, 4 wood if I remember rightly, thought that would do him in one, but he was moaning around needed another two to finish the job. I mean there were things I still didn’t understand, but I knew what my task was. Then as I got better and more efficient I began to work out the ins and outs of the defect policy and what my role was. You see, although I largely work in an independent fashion the department has many specialists for many different fields of maintenance, from the early days they had me in one of the most prestigious and at the same difficult departments, Physical Non-Compliance, the way it works is simple.” He drew breath and took a sip of rip off Coca Cola they had given him and continued.



“God, in his wisdom and patience, gives most characters 18 years to comply physically, which we should clarify refers to the aesthetic. Failures in other physical areas are taken away much sooner, but that’s a different department and not something I can comment on. Aesthetic failures are common in the early period of the life cycle, so therefore, we allow a period of grace, sorry, it’s hard not to laugh when I say that, until 18 and if things such as ginger hair, stutters, limps, uneven ears or wonky eyes are not straightened out then it’s time to go to work. That was like my first, a ginger-nut with BO, who had managed to slip through the net to 23, can you believe it? After him I was working every month sometimes two a month all sorts, often people you would consider everyday but when you look closely you realise that this kind of toleration cannot go on. After the first, I got myself some proper weaponry as I didn’t want to be banging away with a golf club all night and risk getting my shoes covered in blood!! Nowadays, message comes and in less than half an hour, job can be done and I can relax for a while. Pays quite well you know, plus being an international organisation you’re never short of a warm welcome in any civilised country.” He paused and looked at the other two expecting some kind of heroic pat on the back for his good work.

Carson, facially representing disbelief. asks “So you get messages from God telling you to murder people in cold blood? Doesn’t that seem a bit off to you in any way?” The accused returned the confused look.

“Who’s talking about murder? I clean, I improve what we have, removing things that shouldn’t be here.” Was his response.

Vaughan continued “Like the young lassie this evening”

“Indeed, funny though that one, I actually questioned that one with the man upstairs, who could feasibly make a mistake, she was such a pretty young thing I couldn’t find a fault with her indeed quite the opposite. However, the big man said that was the assignment and he didn’t like being questioned. So that was me off to work. Saw her coming out of the bar and dropped two warm bullets into the side of her head. That’s why I was looking over her when you arrived, I had to know her defect and her shoes looked funny, took them off and she had webbed feet. He never lets you down, does he? Always one step ahead, brilliant. Though, it’s not the first time I’ve had second thoughts about a job, there was a girl who couldn’t pronounce her “r”s and that reminded me of myself at school, but I just told myself I had a trial period and got through it. What else could I do? Can’t turn a job down” He smiled at the pair who seemed to notice for the first time that this man, in his early 40’s was in very good health and in many ways perfect.

There seemed to be a symmetry which connected his face in an almost mathematically perfect way. That was, however, no excuse for the unbelievable lunacy coming from his mouth. He had effectively admitted to what they both knew were a backlog of unsolved murders to which they had no leads. They felt like they should feel anger towards this monster and at least try to exert some revenge for all the grieving families they had had to console due to his “work” but instead they felt strangely compelled to find out more, and more importantly, how he managed to so calmly justify his actions. Carson took the initiative.

“So you saw us, we saw you and you realised the game was up, that’s why we brought you in” The accused looked at him dumbfounded by this suggestion that he had done something wrong.

“That’s what I don’t understand, at first I thought you were also part of the message centre and that’s why I got in the car, but all these questions, I really don’t know what you expect from me. I mean it’s the first time I have ever set foot in a police station, so forgive me if I’m not well versed in this little game. I actually can’t think why I am here, I would love to help you with any investigation that you seem to be having problems with but I cannot honestly think of anything that I would know that could help you. I am very particular about following all the necessary procedures in my work and always strive to do a good job, and anyway, the day working for God infringes the law will be a sad day for humanity” Again that look, but this time it was directed to Vaughan who at the same time received a message on his mobile. The message was just a strangely familiar telephone number that he couldn’t place. Carson continued with his questions.

“How many “jobs” would you say you have done since that first message” Vaughan was looking at Carson and thinking about all the times they had worked together and how something was niggling him about his partner of over 12 years. The accused continued.

“Well, I was 23 when I first got the message but didn’t get in the payroll until I was 24, I don’t have exact figures with me of course, but if you wish I can get in touch with the Social Security contributions department and they can give you more accurate figures. I’d say at least one a month, plus 2 or 3 in the busy periods, Easter and Christmas, sometimes summer is a bit quiet, average 15 per year, now I’m 43 so you do the maths. Never gonna run out of work though, more defects than ever these days. We’re looking at another recruitment programme next September.” That last sentence rings in Vaughan’s ears and he has to suggest a move outside to raise the nicotine and caffeine levels. They both stood up and walked towards the door.

As they left Carson was in front of Vaughan who got a whiff of what had been annoying him for 12 years. Carson's personal hygiene had always been disappointing but Vaughan realised it was not laziness but a medical problem. Also he could see the roots of his hair and it was clearly dyed with ginger roots showing through the lying bastard's mop. They stood by the coffee machine and Vaughan felt his mobile in his pocket, thinking about that telephone number and looking at Carson's face. Suddenly, Vaughan's mind went blank and the events of the proceeding moments were unclear to him. The next thing he knew, he was stood slumped against the coffee machine with the accused revolver in his hand looking at the pathetic figure of that odorous, rusty-headed liar who had deceived him for so long laying on the floor with two bullets in his chest. Another colleague grabbed Vaughan and pulled him to the floor as he saw the Duty Sergeant apologising to the once accused as he shows him to the door and he can go back to work.





# The Video Lounge or a Little More Thought

“Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid” Alan thought to himself in a way that he hoped would not be noticed by those passing by him who were forced to look the other way at the sight of a grown man seemingly punching his own hip while pretending not to. However, the hip deserved it, Alan realised that his planning had left something to be desired and a little more. Whatever had possessed him to meet Calvin outside the Baker’s in the High Street at 6pm on a Wednesday. It showed a lack of forethought akin to that of Monsieur Bonaparte’s ill fated winter breaks in Russia plan. Alan enjoyed having things in control and this lapse looked like it could go on to ruin his weekend as early as Wednesday evening, and therefore he was understandably upset.

By arranging to meet Calvin outside the Baker’s, Alan had placed himself at the mercy of all the elements which the gods in charge of ruining successful encounters delight in. Alan was not a habitual meeter of people outside the Baker’s and he had already decided that he had let down himself, his friends and his family by doing so. Alan, as we all do, knows that the secret of a successful encounter is reducing the element of embarrassment for he who arrives first. This can only be achieved in one single all pleasing environment, a bar. Meeting in a bar would automatically eliminate Alan’s current feelings as no-one gives you a second look and if they do, there are a myriad of ways to combat them. The well-versed bar-meeter has a wide range of defences to protect him from unwanted glares and emit an air of authority so that no-one would dare suggest this were a person bereft of friends or lacking somewhat in social faculties. Instead the tools of the trade of the experienced bar meeter allow him to give off an air of aloofness whilst he casually reads book or newspaper, every now and again checking his watch, not nervously but in a confident “Yes, that is the time” kind of way. If he were unknown to staff and locals, (not advisable for novices as this requires the control generally only offered by the advanced-level bar-meeter), the initial looks over the doubting shoulders would be instantly rebuffed simply by taking a stool and simply saying “When you’re ready love” thus leaving all the occupants of the bar aware of the newcomers status as a person awaiting company. This is immediately reaffirmed by the subject’s lack of necessity to begin an aimless conversation with



an unfortunate victim in the proximity, always a sign of a person who is clearly not expecting to be joined in the near or indeed very far future.

All this Alan had given up in favour of the Baker's and now he began to feel self resentment as time rode on to 6.08pm and still no sign of Calvin. Would that he were in a bar now, thought Alan still trying to show no signs of the internal torture that gripped every bone in his body. Passers by continued to adopt the wide berth policy. Apart from the confidence one can exude when meeting someone in a bar which gives them a unique sense of importance in the world and its environs, clearly this self satisfying moment would not be enjoyed waiting to go in for an interview or stand trial for high treason, the bar also brought with it a wonderful and unspoken etiquette. Alan, for example, had arranged to meet Calvin at 6pm. Imagine that Alan finishes work at 4.30 and lives 16 minutes by foot or 3 minutes by car from the pub. This means that Alan's house being incidentally 13 minutes by foot from his office would allow him to utilise the comforts of the very same by 4.50pm. However, as they were to meet in a bar Alan may not fancy remaining at home till either 5.44 or 5.54, we must add a minute either side for the car for door opening, tape dithering and parking as well as an extra minute in case of a negative traffic light disposition in Burland Grove. The bar, then permits Alan to leave at any time after 5.14pm, arriving more than 50 minutes early for a bar meeting as actually not considered ethical, him being welcome to have an extra one to relax after work or read the paper or hit the fruity. With the time approaching the arranged meeting time the first arrivee must make a decision based on his knowledge of the character of the person he is awaiting and the situation to be addressed that has caused this meeting to be arranged. The first arrivee controls the situation in the 30 minutes proceeding the meeting time by ordering or not ordering another beer, if the meeting is for serious business then the first arrivee will wait until the meeting time has passed before ordering a second drink, the other person forfeits all rights to whinging or the use of gesticulations followed by "Come on eh!". If you were to meet someone in bar with the intention of going to look at car stereos, the first arrivee may order a second drink at any time after 8 minutes before the arranged meeting time. The permutations are endless, down the first one then take 6 sips of the second one and pretend you've just arrived, it was a marvellous world to be part of and Alan through foolishness had excluded himself from it. He looked again at his watch, 6.16pm, he could now consider Calvin officially late.

Which caused more paranoia for Alan as Calvin was normally a punctual person. Alan wasn't but made the effort as his meetings with Calvin had gradually become more and more scarce in recent times. Calvin had married at 27 and now at 32 he had two young daughters who took up more than a modicum of his time. Alan's continuous failings in amorous affairs had caused a distancing between Alan and Calvin's wife, Laura, who did not consider him the greatest of influences. She had guided Calvin into a circle of friends who were couples with young chil-

dren or homosexuals in stable relationships. As Alan had no chance of joining either of these two categories his contact with his old best friend from university (Kalvin neurology, Alan Classics at Oxford, dropped out end of second year to do Journalism in Hull) had begun to dissipate. Kalvin, however, tried to maintain contact with Alan, desperately trying to introduce him to cousins and colleagues of Laura in a rather transparent way of sliding into her good books. These adventures always began well as Alan is charming and entertaining as well as boasting the correct number of features in more or less the correct number of places. These promising beginnings soon turned into thrown vases, tears and slammed doors as once again a lady had got to know Alan and left. This brought the situation to a new head with Kalvin deciding to bypass his wife for a biweekly meeting with Alan. To propagate this deceit Kalvin had gone to great lengths, joining a squash club and spending most of their meetings ungamely attired in Dunlop Green Flash and an Ivan Lendl polo. Alan began to ponder the possible reasons for Kalvin's lateness, they had agreed not to contact each other directly on squash nights, communication was maintained via their work emails pretending to be customer and client. Kalvin daren't use his mobile to call Alan except in emergency and he already had an excuse prepared for the eventual inquisition. "No, I was going to call your father Albert and pressed the wrong button". Laura had still not asked him why after all these years he had decided to call her father Albert and not Bert as everyone had done since the last dinosaur sneezed. More dilly-dallying from Alan had taken the time to 6.19pm. It was time for drastic action, he reached for the mobile.

This time Alan made no attempt to contain his utter disgust at his own ineptness. No phone. In the year 2002 undertaking any activity involving two people arriving from different directions is unthinkable without a provider of digital communication. Despite the fact that if surveys were done about how many important or sensible conversations were had per year by persona using the mobile, (obviously this would not be necessary for text messages as no-one has ever said anything worthwhile or at least concise in one), the results would be terrifying and no doubt cause normally calm librarians to petrol bomb Nokia's head office in Helsinki. However, Alan felt himself in need of the mobile, more than ever, it was his only link with the truth. A tool so powerful it could traverse the doubts of why and how with the simple push of a button. Alan now felt naked and sick, he quickly thanked God for his strong heart because he would probably have left home without his pacemaker had he needed one, though he could always fall upon a cigarette-lighter within 5 seconds. Beads of sweat began to form on his forehead, he refused to look at his watch again but knew that there would be little change from 6.30. He could go to a phone box and phone him at home, land line numbers generally consist of a combination of nine numbers and most human beings are capable of remembering a large amount a family and friend's numbers as well as business associates. However, no-one in the history of the mobile has ever been able to memorise more than two mobile numbers and Alan fell below this average himself being unable to offer his own number to those who re-



quested it. No, he could not ring Laura, there must be a sensible logical explanation, Calvin would turn up looking like a geography teacher on sport's day in the next five minutes and within twenty lager would be swilling at they would be laughing about this. Another five minutes passed and still nothing. Alan told himself to be calm but his journalistic mind had already begun to spring into action. Alan now tended to write sentimental pieces for tabloids, he had wanted to be a serious journalist but wars, natural disasters and famines required more self-discipline than Lottery Winner Bonks Barmaid Behind Barbara's Back. Paranoia and failure to think logically had been an asset for him in the tabloids and now his frail grasp on reality began to reconstruct Calvin's fate.

He took a step back and leaned against a wall, noticing for the first time that he was near a populated bus stop, from which glances did not emanate respect and admiration. He immediately blamed himself, he envisaged Calvin leaving his house and being bundled into a car by masked men with eastern accents, he saw the car speeding out of the city into the outskirts and along the back roads to the airport. Or maybe, he had forgotten some essential piece of evidence for the squash charade and had returned to house. Unable to find it for some reason, he knocks over a glass of water and with a wet hand switches on a light and is electrocuted. No, that was it, he'd stopped to lace up his green flash and a clumsy removal man had allowed a piano to fall on his head. It had to be one of these options as nothing else plausible could have occurred to the soon to be greatest scientific mind in the country, but either way Calvin's demise had been the fault of his inconsiderate friend who had never been able to hold down a relationship or make a go of anything. If Alan had been more like Calvin then none of this would have happened. he imagined his widow telling the Press. And the Press! No doubt those bastards would turn their innocent meetings into some kind of illicit circus, the fatherless children teased in school, the brilliant career in neurology ended before its life's work could be completed. Alan finished work at 4.30pm but could easily get out at 4 or stay till 5, he could have gone to Calvin's house instead of meeting outside the stupid Baker's and hid by the doorway till the coast was clear. That way he would have had a chance, they would never have got to the airport or the glass wouldn't have been knocked over or the Steinway's dullest G sharp would never have sounded. Anyway, why did he have to give Alan this time every two weeks, would Alan's life be any different if he only saw Calvin at Christmas and birthdays like he saw his own parents. He despised himself for allowing his selfishness to take Calvin's life. He looked round again at the people at the bus stop muttering, how could they know already? A voice stopped his train of thought.

"Spare us ten pounds for some drinks" A dishevelled old man was tugging at his shirt sleeve. The first time Alan could not comprehend the man's words, when they were repeated a second time he got the gist.

“Ten pounds” he replied, finally assimilating the words and deconstructing them into sentence form, but bemused as to the audacity of the request.

“Yes, ten pounds, you see what I fancy is four cans of Stella, a quarter bottle of Bell's and ten Superkings, ten pounds should cover it. I can't be bothered asking a hundred people for ten-pee so you get to give me the lot” Alan looked round but it appeared that our friend was flying solo, Alan had no desire to enter into any form of debate with what looked like the ghost of Fagin and so opted for a swift dismissal.

“Get lost eh? Granddad, I'm waiting for someone” That should do the trick, he thought, giving him a mini-hard look for good measure.

“What, a woman?” The old man sniggered, seemingly amused with this witty observation. Alan refused to take the bait and smiled at the old man. Just as it looked as if the old man were to do as told, he turned and approached Alan again. “Strange theories” was all he said.

“On what?” Alan didn't want to be but was enticed by this incongruous comment.

“Well, masked men with Eastern accents, bundling Calvin into a car on the way to the airport. And as for the light switch theory, ha ha, not since I was a lad has anyone gone that way. Anyway, Calvin had those dimmer switches installed in '99 so there's almost no way you could get a shock from them let alone pop your clogs. Look” He showed Alan a bill from Kenwick Illuminations for work carried out in Calvin's house, replacing the old light switches with energy-saving dimmer switches. Enticed was now appearing to be a very small word. He grabbed the bill and tried to come to terms with what this old man was prattling on about. Before Alan could speak the old man continued. “Feel guilty Alan? Blame yourself? Somewhat paranoid n'est pas? But in some ways you're right to be, you made these cock awful arrangements so you must accept their consequences. Now what about that ten pounds?”

“How?” was all Alan could mutter.



“I saw you outside the Baker’s and thought, well yes, he’s got something, he’s the kind of person you can show things to. Know what I mean?” Not surprisingly Alan did not. The old man continued; “So I thought, ask him for a tenner, he’ll give you a tenner. You don’t need to understand now, you may not later either, but I’m not gonna think for you as well, you lazy twat, this is what I can offer you, you come with me and I’ll show you things. I can make you re-evaluate your postures on life and prevent you from making future calamitous decisions that will take innocent lives. After I have shown you things, you give me ten pounds and we say no more about it. What do you think?”

Alan composed himself and gave his retort. “Look, I may have got myself a bit worked up there and started talking to myself and you’re a wily old fellow who’s chancing his arm, but it has been a trying time and I do not wish to discuss this further, you old fraud” Alan felt pleased with himself for the verbal onslaught.

“What about the bill? How do you explain that?” Alan hadn’t remembered the bill and had to admit to himself a more than passing interest in the current situation. He didn’t need to bother preparing a second retort as the old man was well used to doubters and so he embarked on one of his little performances.

“Alan Martin Butler: Born London (Croydon March 16th 1968, 4.27am (Caesarean) Educated Croydon Primary School, Park Road High School: 8 “O” Levels and 4 “A” Levels History B, English Lit B, Classics A and General Studies C, Granted a place at St Marks’s college Oxford, 1986”. He then extracted a handheld TV which was showing lowlights of Alan’s life. The image continued with the caption: “Major relationships; Catherine Barnes April 25th 1983 – December 31st 1983, left you for your elder brother Carl at a New Year’s Eve Party you organised in her honour. Helen Jones March 16th 1987 – September 25th 1989, Sarah Banton April 10th 1990 – July 1993”, followed by the old man’s own comment; “and a few more who all left you after actually getting to know you. Need names, dates?” The old man drew breath. “That’s always been my favourite part, the look on their smug faces, they think they know it all, but yes indeed, that makes it all worthwhile”

“No” Alan managed to force out.

“Well employment-wise, left Hull in 1991 and joined the Hull Advertiser on the society pages, moving to Leeds in 1993 and then onto the Mirror, Star and finally the Sun, where were you still are. Coming?” The old man gestured for Alan to follow him and he responded willingly if a little confusedly. He opened the

door to a slightly time beaten Fiat Panda and invited Alan to take one of the unimpressively furnished seats. Alan sat in the passenger seat, desperately trying to compose himself as they began to drive.

After a couple of minutes, Alan managed to restore his breathing and heart rate to a level that would not instigate a conference of cardiologists. The car was at least twenty years old and did not appear to have such luxuries as speedometers, windscreen wipers and most worryingly, a cigarette lighter. Alan reached into his inside pocket for his trusty Marlboro Lights, but could not locate them. The old man gestured towards the glove compartment. Alan opened it and found a packet of Lights, a lighter and a can of Lilt. Alan hadn't realised, but as he sat in the luxury guest zone his throat had become itchy and as the city began to disappear he felt a craving for something he knew he hadn't had for years but couldn't place. The desire to satisfy this urge had helped him to relax and taken his mind off the old man's frightening monologue but when the glove compartment swung open, finally one of his questions was at least answered. Lilt. As Alan sipped on the refreshing liquid, he secretly hoped that this would be the first of many answers.

The can looked like an everyday can of Lilt but as they moved into the country something was having an effect on Alan as they continued their drive to an unknown destination. He struggled to keep his eyes open and couldn't understand how the springs poking out of the Panda's seat could be responsible for such a feeling of comfort and warmth. With every minute that passed, Alan's eyes became heavier and he glanced over to this chauffeur who drove cautiously with a little smile for Alan. The now-contented passenger felt the can fall from his hand and he drifted into a deep and profound sleep.

He awoke with a jolt as they found themselves parked in what was an astounding area of natural beauty, but which Alan had never seen before in his life. It was still light on a clear mid-September night, so he calculated that they couldn't have been driving for more than two hours, yet the place was completely unknown to him. It clearly looked English but there was something about the sharpness of the colours and the intensity of the landscape that continued to disorientate him. The old man gestured him to turn round and in the middle of a field was a brilliant white marquee occupying almost all the middle of the field, and behind it the motorway with cars flying past, seemingly unaware of this far-from-everyday sight. He noticed that he could see drivers not even turn their heads as they continued to rack up the miles. Despite all that had happened Alan felt serene, though he still questioned the Lilt, and was keen to follow the old man into the marquee.

"I suppose you have one or two questions" Alan was asked.



“One or two” was the perhaps over-sarcastic reply, he could see his host did not like that and immediately tried to rectify. “Well, could I at least know your name, I mean if I ever get to tell this story to anyone I don’t want to spend the first six pages saying the old man.”

“You would prefer to know my name, that would make you feel better? Well my name is Martin.” said the old man

“Martin? Is that your name?” came Alan’s response.

“Why not? Now, come inside and we will begin, we have wasted enough time today and I do not intend to throw any more away.” Once inside the marquee it was clear that it was not a marquee. The inside resembled what appeared to be how a child would draw their interpretation of a NASA craft had they had no access to television. Everywhere was flashing lights and screens and cables and other things that must have names but we will have to wait a few years to become familiar with them. Despite the chaos and disorder there seemed to be a clear route to a pair of swivel chairs in front of an array of screens. Martin told Alan to sit, and duly he sat. Pressing a few buttons, he turned to Alan and asked;

“Do you want to know what happened to Calvin?” Alan tried to feign disinterest as if this kind of thing happened to him every day. Martin had seen it all before and prepared himself for what would be his swan song, Alan just hoped it wasn’t going to be Stairway To Heaven with an extra-long guitar solo. He was getting ready to be wanting out, but curiosity wasn’t going to let him make a run for it. Anyway, where was he and where would he go? He was 34 and Martin at a push 75, he was never much of a fighter, but would expect decent odds from Lad-brokes should the case get to fisticuffs. The buttons previously pressed now presently began to make a sound and the screens began to light up. On the main screen there appeared a set of boxes which Alan understood to be a menu. Martin touched a box marked “NEW SUBJECT” and a microphone appeared from the side of the screen, a cold, unfriendly computer voice required of Martin a name and a date of birth. Alan wondered how much all this must cost and whether they ran out of cash for the original budget when the only thing left to fit was the voice. That is how the poor machine got lumbered with this bad Speak and Spell voice instead of a voice that sounded like warm honey being poured onto your chest by a lady of great similarity to the heroines of modern computer games. Martin had not responded and the voice repeated its demand much to the amusement of Alan who was quite pleased with his own little comment.

“Anything wrong?” Martin took this quite seriously and Alan realised his mirth was misplaced. Martin began, “JOHNSON; KALVIN with a K, 23rd May 1968” he spoke clearly into the microphone. The menus on the screen changed and offered a series of options all seemingly about the life of Mr. Johnson, who some would call Dr Johnson. Martin touched an option marked “CURRENT STATUS” and the message “searching” appeared, after a few seconds this was replaced with “SUBJECT DECEASED 18th SEPTEMBER 2002 18.01 CAR ACCIDENT” After that, more options appeared of which one was “VIDEO” Martin touched the screen and the image of Kalvin’s house appeared, the clock marked 17.56 and Kalvin was hurrying to leave but his wife Laura was asking him to do something, the dialogue was inaudible on the video but Martin pressed a button and subtitles appeared, she was asking him if he could give the squash a miss as their youngest, Sara wasn’t feeling too hot. Actually, at the same time Martin pushed another button that was a little green cross in a white box which indicated “HEALTH STATUS” and showed his daughter to be with a 39° fever, yet Kalvin kept his appointment. He entered his car at 17.58 and began to drive, looking at the time he let out a minor exclamation and although he knew it was against the rules he reached for the mobile and rang Alan. No response, somewhat maliciously (Alan thought) Martin split the image, so that on one side there was Kalvin ringing and on the other the image of Alan’s mobile on the bed in his house, never to be answered. The image returned to the shot of Kalvin but this time it was an overview of the car and the time at 18.01. The angle changes and we can see Kalvin driving with the mobile still in his hand. He looks at the mobile screen to check he is dialling the right number and that is when we see him fly through a red light and is caught by an oncoming number 27 bus. The final image was of the scorched Audi A3 1.9TDI’s front seat with the charred remains of Alan’s friend, obviously, still seated. Martin looked at Alan and said nothing. he continued touching his screens and treated Alan to some highlights from the future, although Kalvin had none.

The first scene was at the house at 18.43 when an inexperienced officer clumsily breaks the news to his wife. We see the looks of disbelief on the children’s faces as Mummy explains that they don’t have a Daddy. Then we skip forward to a police station where investigators have managed to salvage the SIM card of Kalvin’s mobile and are asking Laura who Alan is, the last call is to “ALAN MOBILE” at 18.01. Next we see Laura outside Alan’s house shouting and again with the split screen we can appreciate Alan hiding behind the curtains and pretending to be out. Lastly, we see the funeral itself with Alan skulking in the background but seen by Laura who spits in his face and her burly brothers offer to help him to the exit.

“But there is always the possibility that this is a pile of shite” Alan tried to grasp the last straw he had, although he knew that there was something about all



this that seemed toO real. Martin handed him a phone and into the microphone said “ROYAL HOSPITAL, ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCIES” the number appeared on the screen and rang. Alan instinctively said on hearing the operator’s voice;

“Yes, Hello, I’m a friend of Calvin Johnson I believe he was admitted this afternoon” The operator asked him to wait a moment and returned with less than good news but would he like to speak to Mrs Johnson? He wanted to say no but before he could vocalise he realised Laura was on the other end.

“Who’s this?” She enquired

“It’s Alan” came the logical response.

“Look Alan, something terrible’s happened to Calvin on the way to squash. He’s been killed. I can’t speak now” and she hung up. Martin pressed another box on the screen marked “NEWS REPORTS” which divided into two subsections. “PRESS” and “TV” He pressed the first option, and on the front page of tomorrow’s local paper came the story about the accident. Two pensioners on the bus had also perished. Then from TV a poignant female reporter told the story of the senseless death of this brilliant young doctor and how her TV station were to initiate a campaign to stop drivers using mobile telephones.

“Let’s zoom a bit into the future” Martin told Alan who did not seem enamoured with the idea. He saw himself, notably aged, and expected the date to say something like 2028 but unfortunately the screen informed him the year was 2012 and Alan did not look good, placing flowers by the grave of his late companion. He could not bear to look at the gravestone and in particular the words “senseless waste” which cut like a knife into his already wrinkled organs. Martin smiled and pressed the health button on the screen and got a quick rundown of Alan’s so-called health. Sclerosis of the liver, one collapsed lung, panic attacks, heart problems at least a stone overweight, and much to his consternation, the eczema hadn’t gone either. Now Alan did not fancy another can of Lilt.

“It could have been oh, so different, just a little forethought. I suppose you’re wondering what the other machine does?” Martin enquired. It hadn’t occurred to Alan that all this had been provided by one of the two machines, maybe, oh please God maybe, machine two had the power to undo bad things and make things good and whole again. Of course, now Alan understood he had been

taught a lesson and hey what a show but let's get back to normality and bring back young Calvin. He smiled at Martin who did not quite understand why Alan should be so content all of a sudden. "Yes, machine two, my favourite, number one is so clinical and scientific, ceaselessly churning out facts that quite frankly no-one wants to hear. Oh, but Lady two, my dear what a mind she has, what vision. There is so much we can learn from her" Alan was hoping for something a little less vague but still maintained that "Lady two" as she was called would bring back Calvin. He decided to move things along somewhat.

"So machine two can undo all this and, well, you know" Asked Alan in a way that was clearly asking for answer that he immediately knew he would never get.

"Would that it were simple, my friend. I lack the power to actually travel in time and change things that have happened. Simply through these machines' mathematical capacity I can show how various equations would reach their conclusion. Obviously it seems rather a hypothetical conjecture but my past record is exemplary, through the use of logic and calculations, these machines have continually and accurately predicted the future". Alan failed to comprehend the gist of the discourse but knew that machine two or the bloody Lady two as Martin seemed to think it be deemed worthy of such a moniker, was not going to make him, or indeed Calvin, feel much better. Alan started up machine two and looked worryingly as if he were to give another monologue but simply said. "This machine shows you what would have happened if you had made a different, dare I say better, decision. It can't do anything for Calvin but it might save the rest of the world". The menus appeared as on the other one and Alan began to press a few screens and Martin prepared to explain. Alan hoped that this time the explanation would be at least comprehensible for a Sun journalist.

"Imagine, as you told yourself outside the Baker's, you had gone to his house and hid in the bushes until the coast was clear. Let's look at the projection of Calvin's life from 5.58 onwards today." On the screen an image of Alan leaving his front door is shown, immaculately attired for a nerd Olympics. He puts the rubbish in the bin and gets in his car. Adjusts the rear view mirror and Alan appears and gets in quickly. He starts up the car and they drive off. The time is forwarded to 7.47pm and they are in their favourite pub, the Windsor enjoying a pint of Director's and a game of darts. Forward to 10.34pm, Calvin's house, an unfriendly looking Laura is asking Calvin if he thinks this is the right time to come home. Calvin replies that he stopped for a couple after squash as he had beaten Barry for the first time, She swallows it and they go into the bedroom where we can only assume that... The image changes and the tactile screen asks for a date to be input. On the left hand side there are a selection of dates which must refer to memorable moments in Calvin's future. Martin randomly selects 2020. in which we see Calvin rather older and greyer, although as he is at this moment rotting in



a morgue he probably doesn't look too bad, receiving the Nobel Prize in Stockholm, his loving wife with tears in her eyes. We go back to 2012 and see little Sara win Junior Wimbledon, moving to 2031 we see Calvin near retirement age but still working in his laboratory and finally achieving a way of reducing the electric power produced by the brain's impulses which helps to slow down the growth of and eventually eliminate the most threatening diseases on the planet. Then they look at Alan's life which doesn't offer quite as many dates and none later than 2013. Martin goes to press one of the dates but Alan simply reaches out his arm and says "Don't".

Martin looks back at him and informs him "yours is not the greatest story ever told".

Alan looks up at Martin and says "So, it's all my fault or what? I still don't really see why you have brought me here, especially if we can't do anything about what has happened" Alan now looks despondent as Martin tries to clarify.

"Come on son, it's not all that bad. Remember Helen Jones, you left her just before moving to Leeds and you didn't know if you'd made the right decision? Well take a look at this". He puts some more numbers into the machine and we see today's date and me in a grubby-looking bedsit sat on couch full of dubious holes next to an even more grubby-looking Helen Jones with three youngsters running about, giving the general impression of not being well acquainted with good school reports. And, no please, the eldest has a stud in his left ear, and no, that can't be I'm wearing a sovereign ring. I appear to be in a Burger King outfit, this is clarified when Martin presses the CV button and it appears that my proposed move to Leeds was put off, and the charming Miss Jones missed her following monthly dose of justified anger as she was expecting Alan's first. The details were none too clear but for some reason the move to quality journalism didn't happen in this life. As he returned to his current one he wondered if it had here. However, before this almost pleasant image of having made the right decision, Martin is at it again and presses more buttons and we see Alan graduating from Oxford, proud mother and father in tow, proving there is no better way of demonstrating that a person has reached the pinnacle of the education system than dressing them up like a tosser so that all those who never got there think they're probably better off without it. The years roll by Alan as a Classics lecturer at Oxford and an active member of the local socialist group, not to mention heartily involved in Amateur Dramatics' Society, has access to an ongoing flow of young and impressionable young ladies impressed by his lofty role in society but unneeding of anything tantamount to a relationship. His professional career has seen him rise to be one of the country's leading experts, continually solicited by news companies and any other emergency in which a life or death threatening situation can be solved by someone distinguishing a Doric column from a Grecian urn. As the

highlights passed by prizes, awards and decorations led Alan to that most envied of status: a pompous, old scholar with endless permission to shout at grandchildren and touch up young nieces.

“That would have been nice” Alan sighed and looked at Martin finally understanding why he had been brought here. “I’ve not made the best decisions, have I?”. He looked at Martin hoping his response would ease the pain in his heart, but no.

“Not at all, your decisions have and will continue to cause those close to you pain and misery. That’s why I brought you here and who knows, maybe in the future further mishaps can be avoided. That’s yer lot, son. Let’s get back in the car as I’m starting to get more than a little thirsty.” With that he walked towards the exit and Alan considered the best course of action was to follow him. As he caught him up he felt the need to ask more questions.

“So why don’t you do something else about it? You’ve got all this stuff here. Can’t you make the world a better place? Why tell me?, surely I’m not the worst. Instead of being a dirty old dosser you could make a difference.” Spittle was now flying from Alan’s mouth as he tried to make himself feel better by making a point.

“Could do” responded Martin “But it’s just too much hassle, you tell people things and five minutes later they’re back to thinking ‘bout themselves. It’s just a waste of time. Thing is, these days I’m knocking it back too much and this is an entertaining way of passing the time without drinking. Also it has the advantage that the next few are on you. Get in” He opened the car door and Alan entered. They began to drive and Alan felt once again the comfortable feeling overwhelm him and this time not trying to fight it, he fell into a deep sleep. As he began to awake the Panda was working its way through the traffic to the initial point of departure. Alan stretched as the old man parked the vehicle in front of the Baker’s. Without speaking he handed him the ten pounds and got out. The last words he heard were “Think about it” and the Panda moved off into the traffic.

Alan looked at his watch and saw the time was 6.38pm. It was time to make the first decision of his new life and it would begin with waiting till 7pm for Calvin, and if he didn’t turn up by then he would go for a drink on his own at the pub across the road. That would be easy enough. Just wait till 7 then go off if Calvin doesn’t appear. It got to 6.47 and Alan thought he wouldn’t mind a ciggie just to speed things up to the agreed hour. He delved into his coat pocket and fished out his vice, although strangely unaccompanied by a lighter, again cursing himself



he wondered how to address this situation. He was averse to asking people in the street for a light as they were often wont to handing the lit cigarette instead of a lighter or a match, and that was completely unacceptable. He saw the Newsagent's, three doors down from the Baker's, and decided that going in for a box of matches was akin to waiting outside the bakers as he would be able to see Calvin arrive. It was decided, he moved towards the Newsagent's and stopped, thinking "IS THIS A GOOD DECISION?" He looked at his watch, 6.49pm, he had to go through with it and entered the small shop. He waited patiently as an old woman had a grandson's birthday card dilemma before it was his turn, continually looking out the shop door for his friend's no doubt imminent arrival. Eventually, (now 6.53pm) the shopkeeper asked him what he wanted and before he could answer he heard a screeching of brakes and a deafening thud. He ran out of the shop and stood speechless as the number 27 bus had spun off the road and into the front of the Baker's causing what would have been the grave of one Mr. Alan Martin Butler of the Sun.

"Think. I'll have that drink now" He said out loud, crossing the road to the pub the time 6.56pm and still without a lighter.



# Love in an Elevator

Derek heard the ping, and stepped forward into the lift accompanied by the usual throng of familiar unknowns with which he rose up the innards of the twenty-one storey block every working day. The lift was not by any means the highlight of his day, although the competition was none too stiff. Derek was not overly satisfied with his toil situation, In many respects it was like his life, something he took part in simple as it was there, at least it meant he didn't have to watch Richard and Judy every morning.

He had awoken on this Monday morning somewhat dissatisfied with the Sleep God's offering to him. He always found it something of a bind to get a good night's sleep of a Sunday and despite trying various methods to guarantee tiredness around 10pm, the anxiety of the coming week always managed to take hold of his thoughts and keep his eyes wide open. Not that there was much anxiety related to his work, more worry came from his personal situation; nearly 30, living with his parents (still), shy, unsuccessful socially and with the opposite sex, somewhat behind the times. Derek had spent so long getting on with things that now he realised that time was passing him by and was actually converting him into a Derek. He often pondered that if his parents had given him a name like Brad or Marco would he now require a secretary to tell the impatient young ladies to form an orderly queue while Derek/Brad/Marco eagerly prepared his shitty stick.

He did not blame his parents for his shyness though he did recognise that perhaps his overexposure to them in his twenties must be seen as a contributing factor. He had decided to try to be more independent by joining an amateur dramatics society, with the hope of unleashing an acting talent hitherto guarded from society's gaze. Unfortunately, it did not work out like this as he was immediately relegated to backstage activities and due to his professional experience he was given the responsibility of the books. Therefore, his escape from home and work ended up as an extension of the latter.



Which brings us to 8.37 on Monday morning with Derek in a crowded lift and ruing the disappointing night's sleep that was supposed to have prepared him for this moment. As he surveyed his travelling companions he noticed a young girl he recognised from another department and from various rather naïve attempts to catch her attention near photocopiers, staplers and other items which had produced the catalyst for a passionate love affair in other people. But for Derek they generally just served for joining several sheets of paper with a small bent piece of metal. He had desired this young colleague since he first saw her enter the building over a month ago. Inevitably, her presence caused some upheaval in the company as those who would put on their CV's such ludicrous claims as Office Romeo spent many a wasted hour practising their cheesy repertoire to various levels of embarrassing failure. Derek became even more infatuated with this beauty as she continually rebuffed these transparent advances. Perhaps her purity was to be saved for someone of equal worth, he thought to himself with a daft look on his face and then felt himself plummet to the ground as his next thought had a less tenuous relationship with reality.

Still there she was, and she had also been on his bus to work. Too much coincidence thought Derek, he was resolute, he was to act, like the man on the telly said "on impulse". So, everyone in the lift would think he was a bit of a tosser when she gave him the awaited knock back, well that would hardly make them members of an exclusive club. As the lift began to rise the first of the twenty-one floors necessary to take Derek to his recently denominated "work station" he moved forward in the lift and was now directly behind her. The lift was going to stop at the seventh floor, so he would have to initiate his sales pitch before the stop. Tiredness was making him think twice, though he made sure he had a big old yawn before opening his mouth as not to answer any potentially positive response by showing her his unimpressive set of fillings. He looked upwards as if there were some resident God in the top of lift shafts who despite ignoring him all this time would now offer him protection and guidance at this most difficult of times. He tapped her on the shoulder and announced.

"My name's Derek, I work in the accounts department". Hardly one for the history books but Derek believed that part of the Beatles' magic was their musical simplicity, and whether this was a result of limited musical talent in indirect proportions to creative genius Derek did not know. He only knew that it was best to treat this situation like he were a bass line from Please Please Me. Besides, Derek imagined that anything half decent she would have heard before and from much better actors. He recognised the beauty of Hamlet's soliloquy but would never suggest that George Formby would recite it better than Sir Larry. She smiled at him and offered him her hand, that was approximately 600% better a response than Derek had anticipated. She was going to speak as well, she had her mouth open and if she didn't say anything violent or repulsive this had a great chance of attaining the status of his greatest conquest to date.

“I know you’re Derek, I’ve seen you many times and wondered why you were the only male in the office who never spoke to me. Of course, it was easy to work out as you were too shy. However, I have seen you many times and was close to doing the introductions myself.” She was still holding his hand. It was now official, could this be considered a relationship? Derek realised it was his turn to speak as the lift stopped on the seventh floor, and extra cargo meant that there bodies were forced together as the lift started up again.

“I thought you would think I was boring, you could pick and choose, everyone was after you. I was sure you didn’t know I existed” Derek was keen to use the self deprecating ace he had up his sleeve.

“How can you say that? I saw in you something I had been looking for for a long a time. My other relationships had not been too successful, you see, and I’m a great believer in following your gut instincts. Why don’t we get out of this lift?” She asked as her little finger stroked the back of Derek’s hand up to the wrist. She became more insistent, “The next stop, let’s get out of this lift take a taxi somewhere and live a little.” She pushed the button to stop the lift.

Derek felt one last dose of common sense overwhelm him as he enquired about work. At the same time he felt an uncontrollable desire to viciously mutilate some part of his body which seemed to consider what was happening an everyday occurrence. He retracted the concern for the company, he hadn’t taken a holiday in four years and his superiors were of the opinion that a break would do him a lot of good. They did not, when referring to a break, consider a weeks’ camping in Llandudno with his parents quite what they had in mind. The company would not crumble to the ground if Derek were absent a short while and when Mr. Jenkins found out how and with whom there may even be a bonus in it. The lift stopped and the pair ran out. Standing in the doorway of an alien company, they embraced. She told him her name was Laura, he told her he knew. He knew other things as well but thought it best not to appear a stalker for the time being. She indicated the stairs and he had little option but to follow.

Halfway down the first flight she stopped and reinitiated the embrace that still contained unfinished business, she held his gaze in hers and placed her lips to his. He hoped that his practice in the privacy of his bedroom would serve him well. He was a self taught kisser using his sister’s dolls, not something he was proud of but if a child only has a slate and a stone does that deny them the right to learn to write for mere lack of pencil and paper?. He fought the urge to go for tongues straight away, and gave a silent thank you to Mr. Gere the Hollywood lover, as he



tried to copy the technique. He vowed there and then never to curse when Saturday's "Super Movie" was "Pretty Woman". Laura did not seem too horrified by the incident and indeed deemed there enough in the pot to warrant seconds. The journey down the numerous flights of stairs seemed to take no time and they found themselves in the street.

Laura continued in control of the situation and between adolescent giggles proclaimed, "Taxi, first to your house, pack a bag and get your passport and then to mine ditto and to the airport" Before he could say anything she had flagged one down and they were inside. The taxi journey was also peppered with more of this mouth-to-mouth lark and Derek now considered that the Gere fellow would be soon issuing a Masters from his Kissing University. They arrived at Derek's place and its "owner" breathed a sigh of relief as today was Monday and his mother would be at the market all morning. They entered and Laura was impressed, "Very homely" she commented. Derek hurriedly threw some clothes into a holdall. Normally, packing a bag for an unknown destination would require almost military preparation but somehow the shorts, swimming trunk and a white linen suit made their own way into the bag and taking his unused passport from the drawer he was ready.

They returned to the waiting taxi and made their way to Laura's flat. This was on the other side of town on the waterfront, where the young and beautiful people mixed with others of their ilk and where Derek felt like an intruder. She told him she would only be five minutes and went inside. He watched a beautiful young couple decked out in squash gear, laughing as they climbed into their convertible BMW and thought that maybe she would never get back into the taxi with him. Why hadn't she asked him to come up with her? Surely whilst getting her things together she would glance at a photo of an old boyfriend or something that would cause her to think twice. If he ever saw her again, her only words would be "Look, Derek..." He should have known better, what was he thinking of? Now he would have to return to the office and put up with all the sniggers and whispers. He put his head in his hands and was planning Gere's assassination when the taxi door opened again and Laura, smiling, held up what appeared to be the product of a bikini factory that had run out of cloth and couldn't make a whole one. She waved the flimsy piece of material in his face with a very cheeky smile and instructed the driver to make haste to the airport.

Derek recovered from his mini paranoia and resumed his new found favourite taxi practice. At the airport Derek gave her his passport and they went to the first desk they saw. In less than a minute they had two seats on a plane leaving in twenty minutes for the Caribbean with a stopover in Miami. As they ran to the gate Laura stopped and with a wicked look in her eyes dragged Derek into the toilets and despite disapproving looks from the users of the same they flew into

the nearest cubicle. Derek's lack of experience was indeed an asset given the amount of time they had to board the plane. As Derek began reciting the closing lines of his speech the airport tannoy announced that their flight was closing and would they make their way as quickly as possible to the gate. Laura readjusted herself and they continued their sprint.

As the flight attendant was closing the gate they appeared, pleaded and were granted access to the jumbo. Taking their seats they were still giggling as the plane began to move. Holding hands and taking no notice of the flight safety procedures Derek wondered if they would find time to use the toilets on this nine hour trip. He looked out of the window and said his goodbyes to Manchester. The plane began to gather speed and took to the runway, he looked at Laura and asked "You're sure, aren't you?". To which she replied, "It's a bit bloody late now, isn't it?" She laughed and kissed him passionately as the plane prepared to take to the sky. In seconds the plane was almost at optimum speed for take off, Derek could not take his eyes off Laura as the plane sped down the runway. Suddenly, the pilot slammed on the brakes and the plane came to an abrupt and worrying halt. Then there was silence and darkness, he could not see Laura, he felt disoriented and took a few seconds to open his eyes. As he did he saw the almost empty lift with the door open at the twenty-first floor. He looked around and someone indicated this was his stop and he exited the lift. As the doors closed he cast an eye but Laura was nowhere to be seen. He went through the double doors to his office and wished Mr. Jenkins "Good Morning."





# In Birkenhead You Can Kick the Pigeons if you're quick enough

Peter McKenzie awoke with a start, the red digits on his alarm clock informing him not that he was to be treated to Wigan's premier local radio station in three minutes and so once again why bother setting the alarm, but that it had just gone three o'clock. The almost ecstatic feelings that could be roused in a person when the gift of four more hours sleep is bestowed upon them were not present in Peter as he knew that no more sleep would be possible that night, or indeed when would he sleep well again?

Peter is in his early forties, unmarried, a woodwork teacher in a dull secondary modern on the outskirts of Wigan. More often than not he had found himself pensively pondering in the staff room with such heart wrenching questions as "If I had my time again would I be happy if I found myself in the self same position?" He knew the answer was no, and every day saw himself more as a non-descript man going through the motions of a non-descript life. Since hitting forty this feeling has been exacerbated, he observed the relationships and lives of his ever-shrinking circle of friends and could not justify a change in his life towards the role of father and husband would make things any better, indeed, it would probably be the opposite as he was sure that all he would be able to scrape together would no doubt be some divorcee with kids in tow and enough emotional baggage to rise Samsonite's share prices a good few pennies.

As sleep was not an option any more, Peter got out of bed and decided on the East End stalwart of brewed leaves from old Ceylon to save his evening and aid his thinking process. If procreation was not the answer nor the union of his soul and body with a consenting partner, the answer then must be in some way spiritual. At just after three in the morning it is however rather tricky for an atheist to find a spiritual answer to the woes of his life even with the help of Tetley's roundest and most flavoursome drop. Peter was not particularly adept at making decisions at the best of times, he was more accustomed to decisions on the scale of blue shirt or white, caravan or tent, crisps or peanuts amongst others, these causing him all manner of panting and puffing before some random method was employed to save him from all the preoccupation and palpitations involved in such vile proliferation. As he sat at the kitchen table awaiting inspiration it occurred to him that maybe biscuits would be of some use in this process or at least would not have a negative effect on the positive decision co-efficient. It was

clear that Wigan had given him all that it could offer and perhaps that this bilateral agreement was helped by Peter having expectations that the town would not find excessive. As he reached for a chocolate hobnob (he always bought these from the corner shop to avoid the difficult supermarket decision of plain or milk chocolate) he felt the first pang of inspiration, he realised that the world was a little bit bigger than the one he had experienced. If he couldn't decide, then the biscuits would. He fetched an atlas from the living room and opened it on the somewhat lacking-in-detail double page political map of the world. He took a bit of the all-time-winner snack, now promoted to the role of orchestrator in the future of Mr. Peter McKenzie, deliberately being careless and allowing a chunk to fall to the table, unfortunately the aforementioned chunk was three times the size of New York and so precision would not be an element. He decided on the rules. He would, with his eyes closed, toss the chunk onto the map to first find his "destination country". When this had been ascertained he would go to the country's page and repeat the performance to find his new home. Obviously, there were some permutations that would need to be computed or end in a re-throw, taking into account the rather large amount of water on the world's surface many places would not be suitable. He already doubted his capacity to live a full and meaningful life above water, so below it was clearly out of the question. He took the piece and looking up at his teaching certificate hanging from the wall and with more than a small amount of apprehension, hurled the hobnob into destiny. Somewhat disappointingly, the crumb fell on the UK and edging towards the North West, reluctantly he opened the Atlas on the UK political page and thinking to himself that there were some advantages to be had from a move inside his native land, at least he wouldn't have any linguistic problems like that time in France. He had skills to offer and although tired of teaching via the state education system felt he had something to offer in another sector. He had lived what some may consider a frugal life but this had not been his intention, more the result of an unsatisfactory social life and an inability to remain dignified after more than two pints of mild. Various social disasters as a result of this had led him to a disassociation from other staff members in a social sense and as the years rolled by, the invitations stopped coming. He saw all this flash before him, but decidedly rolled again. To his utter disappointment the crumb fell on top of the insignificant dot on the map which was marked Wigan.

He sat rather deflated at the table and thought that maybe this was an overreaction, as he looked at the crumb on the map he laughed at how it seemed to have avoided Stockport and Burnley, bouncing onto his already home. He was sure if he had tried the experiment with a Wigan street map the crumb would have landed on his very street and probably on the right side. He prepared to finish his tea and head back to bed. If he couldn't sleep then he would watch late-night TV in bed, secretly hoping for that programme where the feller goes round interviewing people who work at night in airports and weather centres etc. Tomorrow he could call in sick and spend the day watching his collection of The Professionals on DVD. He had always been envious of Doyle and should he be of-



ferred the chance of reincarnation he wouldn't think twice about pulling on the tan leather jacket and parking his car sideways before running into a building site after a villain. He laughed to himself and got up, again his over-active mind stopped him. Would Doyle, or even Bodie, give up? Would he accept Wigan out of all the places on this planet? He was sure that some higher force was trying to test him or to prevent him from completing his life's work. He took the crumb again and turning back to the world map tossed the biscuit again and to his excitement it fell in central South America. He flipped expectantly to the page which offered exotic delights that would normally bring him out in a rash, and once again repeated the ritual. It landed on a part of the map that had no name and appeared to be in the middle of the Amazon rain forest. He marked the point on the map and finally retired, tomorrow was to be a busy day.

Despite a lack of snooze-based rest, he leapt out of bed with a feeling in his bones that he would have like to have felt when he was twenty-five. First port of call was his school. Local education authority cut backs have caused the school to feel the pinch and the woodwork department has been, without Peter's knowledge, earmarked as an area where a few English pounds could be saved. So when Peter had to break the bad news to his head, the man in charge, out of respect for the misfit Mr. McKenzie, pretended this was a devastating blow for an essential part of the education system whilst wondering if he could get down to Dixon's at lunchtime to get a couple of scanners for the computer room. Also he could get rid of the old woodwork room and have it done up into something much more useful and importantly profitable. Perhaps some kind of web-design project. There are some very talented youngsters who wouldn't mind sharing their talents in exchange for Benson and Hedges. That would impress that very charming Mrs. Chalmers on the PTA whose pants were surely hot enough only for the Headmaster. Peter said goodbye and that he would miss the old place but he felt there was something that he had to do and began to explain his mission to his ex boss who was already ushering him out of his office and counting the savings on salaries and materials.

He had a similarly tearless farewell with his students. After spending half an hour tidying up his things he decided to leave the school without passing by the staff room as the reference library beckoned. He was no stranger to this place as he often found himself in the depths of the library, gathering information that would have been victorious in local pub quizzes had he ever received an invite. Unfortunately, the well-documented problem with the sauce led to temporary amnesia and if he ever got to pint number three his capacity to name the capital of Russia was severely diminished. With the page from the atlas now ripped out he set about finding information about what was to be his new abode. He went straight to the encyclopaedias and began to hunt through their well-thumbed pages. He located the nearest civilisation to where the crumb landed to be that of the Hwundinui people, an ancient tribe who apparently lived in peace and har-

mony with the world in an unspoilt way that had seen no changes in the past millennium or two. It also mentioned that little was known about this tribe, and their contact with the North West of England had been minimal. He suddenly felt that this was the sign he had been waiting for, and although was none too sure how he would be received by these people or whether he could offer them anything in terms of woodwork skills, he somehow knew his destiny was in the small Hwundinui village of Mukbrukipi.

Time was getting on and he had still quite a bit to do, Visas and vaccinations for a start, would probably be held under the umbrella term good idea. He found to his surprise and disgust that this was something of a lengthy process and despite explaining his utmost urgency to be deposited in the less accessible part of Brazil it was made clear that this process would require two weeks of impetus draining. The inspiration buzz was now strong in him and a chance was taken in the form of a hypothetical question along the lines of, would there be any way that the process could be speeded up, for example if the perpetrator of the purple papers were to receive some form of incentive to ensure a speedy and admired piece of work?? He even managed to ask the question with two question marks, something he was immensely proud of. Peter was sure that the responder did not reflect on all civil servant's hypothetical response but was pleased as the servant in question answered in the positive. For the princely sum of five-hundred English pounds, the necessary documentation could be obtained in less than one day. Peter obliged and was sent to a private doctor used for just this type of case. After a final pub lunch washed down with three halves of mild he left with a sore arm and a six month visa valid for North and South America. He was now jolly pleased with himself and had only one more doubt to resolve. What on earth was he to do with these people when he got there?

He arrived home and switched on his computer. He did not think of this machine as a friend, but he felt weak at the thought of a travel agent's. He found British Airways' page with ease and in a matter of minutes was booked onto the next day's flight to Rio de Janeiro via Miami. Next he wrote a letter to his sister in Leeds and explained what he was doing. He told her not to come after him although doubted whether such a thing would cross her mind. He left instructions for what to do with the house, to be sold at a price she felt reasonable and the money to be divided thus, 50% for his sister, his only living relative as his loins had never been called on, 25% for the reference library and 25% to go to the school hopefully to be used to create a woodwork department that would be the envy of Greater Manchester. The plane would leave from Manchester International at 7.30 in the morning. He wrote a final note to his neighbour Mr. Jones telling him if he fancied a freebie then it would be in the short stay car park tomorrow morning with the keys behind the right rear wheel. He popped the Professionals DVD in the player one last time and put the kettle on, as he watched he thought to himself, "Goodbye Wigan!!" again with two exclamation marks.



Peter had not had much experience of flying and this was his first venture outside Europe within twenty minutes he was bored and already anxious to arrive in Mukbrukipi. He began to regret not travelling first class but did feel it was somewhat against the principles of him eschewing the Western World. As the flight dragged on he managed to fall asleep and when his fuzzy head next noticed an annoying pain in his ear he realised he must be coming into Miami. He was enormously proud of not having had to endure a nine hour monologue of a fellow passenger intent on recreating the major moments of their lives in the comfort of three basketball players sharing the back seat of a 1984 Ford Fiesta. He would have eight hours to kill in Miami but had no plans to leave the airport as he did actually watch the news, thank you.

Connecting flights offer the modern traveller a unique opportunity to feel overwhelming disorientation by making them feel that they have taken nine hours in a steel box to get to exactly the same place from whence they left. Even with Peter's limited experience of flying, Miami International could just as well have been Leeds-Bradford but with better general fashion. Again the conspirators had got together to make the simple action of getting from one point to another in an enclosed space as cumbersome as possible. He began to think he would need all eight hours just to find his departure gate. He dared not ask a fellow traveller as he had heard of the American's reputation for friendliness and decided that being escorted would be far too harrowing an experience. Instead, he huffed and puffed, punctuated with the occasional sigh and wandered from monitor to monitor in search of Gate 45B. Eventually, the quest was over and our brave knight had completed said quest. Now all he had to do was wait the seven hours twenty minutes before boarding could commence. Fortunately having found the gate, everything a Westerner could want was close at hand, Peter decided a book would be a good idea, something light that he could read and leave as he had decided to leave all trace of the West behind in Rio (except his cash which he would burn on his safe arrival in Mukbrukipi).

Despite the ever-accommodating American's insistence that he "have a nice day", his idea of which did not involve waiting eight hours in a Starbucks, Peter was rapidly bored and though in no way questioning his decision to change his life, he was at least keen to find out when it would begin. He was under the impression that although there were still three hours to go before boarding asking an airport employee when this would take place would obviously speed up the process. The response he got was not to say the least the one he had desired. He hadn't really noticed that he was the only person milling around gate 45B for a prolonged period, apparently there were lots of flights from Miami to Brazil but the Aerovias Brasil representative regretted (Peter could not actually detect regret in her voice and neither knew how to measure it) to inform him that the

flight he was booked would leave at that time, but tomorrow. He showed her a ticket with the dates given to him by his friends on the so-called world wide web but to no avail there was no plane, pilot, crew or passengers apart from himself. She suggested his luck may be somewhat better the following day. As he planned to leave his luggage in Rio he did not bother making enquiries and recognised the best thing to do would be find a hotel. He was under the impression that this would merely entail asking "Can I have a room please?" and receiving the response "Certainly Sir, That will be \$X per night, would you come this way please?" But no, a credit card was demanded if he didn't want to try his luck on the streets or spend the night on the ever-so-comfy departure lounge chairs. He informed the assistant that he had left his credit card in the UK and was leaving his old life behind in favour of newer, deeper sensations. He had thought that his American cousins would lap this up but he was indeed wrong. Various members of the airport hotel staff began to congregate as the rumour circulated that someone was actually trying to participate in the human race without a credit card. Again he offered cash and the staff's reaction made him think he was suggesting that he pay for the room with Heroin, their disgust was more than evident. Finally, he had the brainstorm that if he had paid for his ticket with a credit card the airline would have his details. This was checked and it was agreed that he could be charged via the airline, after a police check was run on him and his credit history. After another forty minutes he was accepted into the welcoming arms of the Windsor Hotel, Miami where the same receptionist wished him a very pleasant stay.

When he got to the room he immediately felt the urge to make himself more unpopular with the hotel staff and pay them back for their warm welcome. On the room service menu it mentioned that nothing was trivial for their guests and any request would be dealt with to the very letter. Surely this was asking for trouble and Peter gleefully ordered a Lamb Byriani, a deep fried Mars Bar, a Scandinavian foot massage and four cans of Boddington's Gold with a widget. He lay back on the sumptuous bed and laughed, preparing a \$50 tip for the waiter who could fulfil such an order. He began to snooze a bit and wondered if he couldn't get used to this then, realised that having left his job and sold his house without seeing a penny it didn't really matter if he could get used to it or not. He calculated that he could maintain such luxury for eleven days before having to declare to the already frosty reception staff that his assets were not as liquid as they might be. He was brought back to reality with a knock at the door and a tall blond man walked in, boasting what seemed to be curing hands. He introduced himself as Olaf and asked if there were any special podiatry requirements about which he should know. Anyway, Olaf opened a can of Bodington's for him and theatrically rattled the widget, to Peter's pleasure. He had taken the liberty of bringing eight cans and opened one for himself as he gratefully accepted the gratuity. Peter enquired as to whether his employers would be expecting his presence in some professional capacity, but he just said he had finished his shift and was off out after this last job. As he drank and he watched Peter eat, Olaf was informed of Peter's



plan and vision. Olaf was quite responsive and positive to the idea although secretly he did not see how Peter could possibly integrate with these people but if that his chimera, then so be it, he had earned \$50 tips in more painful ways and at least this time he could enjoy the snug armchair.

As Peter finished the curry and moved into the dangerous area of can number three he concluded to relish the deep fried Mars Bar post-massage. As Olaf expertly manipulated Peter's aching extremities with his large hands Peter realised that he could wither have nothing or want everything and was now more resolute than ever to continue with his mission. He thanked Olaf and opened the last can, and devouring the deep fried Mars Bar he fell quickly and drunkenly asleep on the king size double bed. For the first time in a long time he was sleeping with a smile on his face.

He awoke at 8.15 and cursed that the flight was at 9.20 though he was actually in the realm of the airport and his luggage was checked in all the way to Rio in Manchester. He got out of the bed where he could quite happily spend the rest of his life (or the ten days that he could afford) and stumbled into the bathroom, he tried to remove the sewer-like smell that was infesting his mouth with the complementary dental products but the pestilent smell prevailed. Jumping into the power shower he was rather ungamely battered around the shower for two minutes, and once he had gathered his composure he managed to grab the tap and turn it off thus ending the water cannoning. He wasn't sure if he actually felt better as most feeling had been suppressed and would not return until the bruising came to the surface. He dressed and for some reason made sure he had gathered together all the possessions he planned to leave on his arrival in Rio. He left the room and in the reception informed the staff of his departure, these managed to contain the water works and perhaps in their distress at not being able to form a meaningful relationship with him, he was not wished to have the customary "nice day".

In five minutes he was back at Gate 45B and this time a flurry of people anxiously awaited the announcement that the 167 passengers could all excitedly stand in a line, all determined to be the first person on a plane that will not move until the last passengers' duty free has been stowed away in compliance with international aviation laws. He was still distressed by the quality of his breath, and as any movement towards the sky would be slow he decided to pop to the news stand and get some chewing gum to mask the unpleasant odour. He picked the first packet of strong-minted chewing gum he saw and handed over a dollar. He didn't wait for the change and returned to the queue which was now moving for those lucky passenger is rows 38 through to 24. He opened the gum which came with a marvellous loyalty reward gift for the young consumers of this product in the form of a picture of a supposed singer of whom he had never heard and who

went by the name of Britney Spears, Peter looked at her photo and laughed to himself thinking “Sure, you’ll be around this time next year”. He put the gum in his pocket for later and extracted his documents for inspection. Finally he got on the plane and was about to make it three continents in three days, he was glad to have put the Miami incident behind him.

Up in the air he found time to try and fight his hangover despite various members of the travelling party falling under the misapprehension that just because they were flying to Brazil meant that there must be a carnival in the cabin. Finally he fell asleep after having to put up with the same Richard Gere film he had seen in every continent he had spent time in this week. Uneventfully, an unknown period of time later, they landed in Brazil and Peter went straight to Immigration without even bothering to find out where to reclaim his luggage. He knew that some form of deceit would probably speed things along and he informed the official that his two great passions in his life were football and rainforests and therefore where better than Brazil. Little did they know his true intentions, perhaps with the benefit of hindsight they wouldn’t really have been interested in him, though a warning may have been given as to the lucidity of his judgement. He was now outside the airport and in a taxi to the train station, finally about to undertake the last leg of his journey. A taxi from Wigan to Manchester airport can be yours for around twelve to fifteen pounds sterling so Peter was somewhat surprised when the journey from Rio International to the Estação D Pedra Il was going to set him back nearly 70 pictures of the Queen of England. Still money was no longer an issue, well almost nearly. He had been advised by his friend at the Consulate that internal rail travel once in Brazil should be undertaken in first class, as tourist class would certainly introduce him to the local colour though it would be doubtful that his exit from the train would be completed with any of the possessions with which he had boarded it. Also the question of comfort would be a matter which would make Mr. Branson appear a generous benefactor. Then with the best Portuguese an interested party could acquire from Wigan Reference Library he purchased a single first class ticket to Chosho the nearest train station to his soon to be new home. He was now down to \$2000 dollars in cash, he calculated that a driver could be tempted to take him as close as possible to his promised land for \$500. As the first class ticket included a meal and refreshments he came to the conclusion that he had \$1500 in the excess column. Taking his seat in first class he could see through the door into the next carriage populated by undernourished families and others less fortunate. He stood up and went through peeling off \$100 bills to confused but grateful recipients. He then returned to his seat and awaited his meal. Initially the service was exemplary as the news had already run through the train of a deranged Englishman with an unplaceable accent dishing out miniature portraits of Mr. Washington. Unfortunately, for the compliant waiter Peter only had his last \$500 and was determined to leave the train with the allotted amount for the car journey, and so the waiter went without. From that moment on, the chips were cold and the custard lumpy. Again Peter found sleep easy, the fear factor of what he was about to try



had not hit him still, as he had for the past two days enjoyed the lap of luxury. As he slept he dreamt he was back in school and his students had made him a fine table of oak, with funds they had procured out of their own pockets to say thank you for the education which had been imparted. As the train pulled into the station he laughed at his incredible dream and prepared to set foot on his new soil. As he left the station, taxi drivers immediately began to make offers which seemed to include air conditioning and the optional use of wives/daughters/domestic animals and should he need any substance which could have the effect of powerful household cleaners then he need just ask. He went towards the most honest-looking of the drivers and offered him something that he considered out of the ordinary.

His driver had no problem in accepting the proposition and although the conversation was far from vibrant, they managed to make themselves understood. The journey would take about two hours, the driver claimed his name was Pelé though Peter had his doubts. Pelé seemed to know a lot about the Hwundinui people as one of his colleagues had left the tribe to work as a taxi driver. They had actually had more contact with the *homem branco* than the rather romantic encyclopaedia's vision of rural harmony had led him to believe. However, they had yet to become like other tribes in the region which actually organised Westerner immersion courses through the Internet for people to spend a short period of time at one with their environs, before returning back to their pressurised middle and upper management positions as better and wiser people. Of course, within a month they were back to playing with people's lives and emotions as if they had never been, but then found it was a hell of an opening line for attractive young people in bars. As they left the city behind, Peter tried to take in what he was seeing and compare it with Wigan. Obviously as they edged closer to the Amazon the comparisons became more and more difficult. Pelé told him he had made a good choice as the Hwundinui were a peaceful people who believed that all visitors should be treated with the utmost respect and benevolence. It was just that they don't get too many. Once they got to as far as Pelé could take them he drew Peter a map and told him more or less to stick to the paths and he would be fine. Peter was reminded of An American Werewolf in London and laughed but could not share this with Pelé as Wigan Reference Library was woefully under-funded. He waved goodbye to a person from the modern world for what he thought would be the last time, and began his walk into the forest. He made sure he left all remnants of the West behind and in his now slightly dishevelled C&A two piece suit entered the rain forest.

It didn't take him long to realise that his attire was not overly appropriate and he tried to turn his grey pants with a fashionable turn up into shorts. He thought that also given the circumstances, maybe he could dispense with the tie. He kept the jacket on though in case it got a bit chilly later on. He felt he was making good progress and as he had rather intelligently stored away some bread and

cheese from the first class dining service, he decided it was time for a snack. He did want to make good time as he supposed that the rainforest was likely to be replete with unfriendly snakes and other rainforest dwellers which could place him in a tricky situation. Despite the apparent dangers of a woodwork teacher from Wigan walking alone in the Amazon, he was struck by the fact that it reminded of Broughton Woods on the Wirral, only a lot hotter. Also, there were more palm trees than sycamores, but it definitely had a Broughton air about it. He finished his snack and continued walking. The late afternoon heat was beginning to have an effect on him as he wearily continued along the path. Pelé had assured him that a brisk pace would have him at a tribal supper in three or four hours. He had been walking for three already and could not see a whole community springing up from nowhere in the near future. What he did not want to do was camp out on his own, but he felt his strength beginning to wane. He carried on bravely for another two hours but was sure that now he could not tell one place apart and now the map he had seemed of little use. He sat down to eat the last of his bread and cheese and hoped that his excessive inspiration levels of the last few days did not mean he had used up his quota and there would be a little left to help him find his new dwelling.

Night began to fall as he sat pondering his next move. He, in leaving behind all traces of the Western society he had shunned, had also deprived himself of such things as matches or a lighter which would really be more use to him now than the C&A jacket. He proposed to walk on, assured in the convictions of his heart which told him that you must always go north. The only problem with this is that if you are without a compass in the middle of the Amazon at nightfall, the average rambler from Greater Manchester will have profound difficulties in determining which way is indeed north. Faced with four options, Peter opted for the crumb route again and in the soil marked N, S, E and W. Wherever the crumb falls would be north. Crumbs had brought him here and surely they were not going to let him down now. The crumb landed on the W so west was north. He composed himself and began the long march, the night was now almost upon him and not for the first time Peter's mind was perturbed by the wisdom of his decision. He began to feel the cold and estimated the time to be around 9pm. This information led him to believe that the night was going to get a) darker and b) colder which would probably have the ungrammatical consequence of getting him c) lost. Nonetheless, he walked on and on into the night, now not out of determination but knowing that if he stopped it just might kill him. He had no idea how to make a shelter or a fire with sticks, he had seen it in films but was sceptical about its ease. If Tom Hanks was going to need a fair while to do it, Peter McKenzie might as well forget it from the start. And so, cold and hungry he meandered through the forest, cursing the lying crumb with tears now forming in his eyes. He could barely feel his feet and hardly looked up during his solitary procession. It was now pitch black and he was tired of bumping into things, he would settle now for capture by natives and being put in a cauldron, at least his feet would warm up.



That was the last thing he remembered of his first night in the forest, for soon he fell to the ground exhausted and passed out.

When he woke up, he looked directly towards the sky and the bright light overwhelmed him. He thought that maybe his recompense would be a place in God's kingdom. He moved his head and then felt his aching legs and feet and realised he still had some work to do before St Peter would be on the mobile. He had survived the night but now had no food or strength, and if he got to the second night it would be the end of him. He was about to renounce his atheism when a strange noise could be heard. It sounded like speaking, but the kind of speaking made by children if they have to pretend they can speak a foreign language. Peter managed to get himself to his elbows and saw he was surrounded what he deduced was a tribe. He thought, could it be a miracle? had God brought him to his new people?, who was Mohammed and who was the mountain?, it didn't matter. He cleared his throat and vocalised "Hwundinui". The tribesmen looked bemused and he repeated the word. Laughter came as the response. Next he tried the word "Mukbrukipi" and the laughter became the All Amazon Hyena Impressions Competition 2002. He continued repeating the words and whilst the laughter still continued he was helped to his feet. He stumbled and was helped back up by one of the tribesmen, to whom Peter said "Mukbrukipi." The tribesman repeated the word and Peter felt an inexplicable surge of self satisfaction as he had single-handedly broken down the barriers of communication between the new world and the old. After a few minutes they came back with a chair that could have been bought in IKEA and gestured to Peter to sit down. He was happy to do just that and was then lifted as the group were on the move again. They began singing a song that was to Peter's ears rather strange, but he was sure that it was a million times better than that Bunty Spearmint or whatever she was called. Periodically they said Mukbrukipi to him and laughed, however, he was just pleased to have found his people and to be on the way to Mukbrukipi.

After about twenty minutes' walk they arrived at what was surely a mistake. In the middle of the rainforest there was a village, half traditional huts and the other half boasted an Internet café and a mobile phone shop. Peter let out an exclamation in his native tongue and a surprised native enquired if he could speak English. Peter responded in the positive though the members of the tribe felt he was being somewhat negative. He was approached by a member of the tribe who claimed his name was Alan. Alan had left his tribe in the late 90's with the intention of making his fortune in Rio. When this didn't happen, he came back with the idea of Tribal Tours, he explained that more and more people were interested in this simple life kick, and they organised holiday stays in authentic tribes. Of course from time to time and when demand was high authentic tribes were hard to come by and his staff had to double up working in the office and hunting in the forest. They began with just one computer and a modem connection but after just four years they now have a staff of over 100 and an annual turnover of

\$16million, hence the modernisation of the village. Future plans include a bowling alley and a steak house. However, for business ethics they maintain the traditional side of things as to not get caught out by snoopy University tourists who think they know everything.

Obviously, they wanted to know Peter's story. They had assumed he was on a tour and had got lost. It was now too difficult to remember all the visitors by name or face, and quite often members were misplaced. However, this was actually good for business as they went back with fearsome tales of how their cunning and guile had defeated the rainforest. One visitor, when bitten by a snake instead of phoning her lawyer actually gave them double what her holiday cost. Peter's tale of leaving his job and coming to live with the Hwundinui astonished them. Alan asked if he was joking, Peter said he wasn't. Alan said he didn't recommend it as they were somewhat backward through extremely affable. Alan offered Peter a job as English teacher for the tribesmen, as there were still some communication difficulties. Alan had learnt English via an Internet correspondence course but in the last year it had gone bust after Alan had subscribed the entire tribe onto the course. Peter declined and said his mind was made up, Alan told him he would make a few phone calls and organise him an escort to the Hwundinui. He told him it wouldn't take long as they had the ADSL put in last week.

Peter was taken for something to eat with some of the members of the tribe, who had managed to get in a few English lessons before the course went bankrupt though they should really go ahead with the lawsuit as there were still rather large holes in their education. He wondered what kind of local delights he would be able to savour in this off-the-beaten track cuisine. Steak and kidney pudding and chips with garden peas and gravy. Better the devil you know, thought Peter and tucked in, just as he was being offered a jam roly poly for afters Alan returned and said everything was arranged and that they were leaving immediately. Peter said his goodbyes and they were on the move again, this time on scooters through the rainforest. Peter confessed to having no experience on such a vehicle and did not consider that moment a good time to start, so he was to be the passenger on Alan's. They rode for a good half hour up a steep hill, before pulling a sharp left and entering the outskirts of a community more like the one Alan didn't belong to any more. They stopped the scooters and hid them by the trees and entered the village on foot. Alan was now less Alan than he ever was, and he began talking to the people of the village and pointing at Peter. A form of handshake took place and Alan made to leave, bidding Peter farewell and good luck. They left the village with a few very restless natives staring at Peter. Peter had been told that Mukbrukipi was not a village they used as it was incredibly conservative and remained blissfully unaware of Alan and other leaders' activities. Peter walked towards the centre and it was the children who were the first to approach him, laughing and poking and prodding. He directed himself to what



seemed to be the elder of the tribe to introduce himself. As was becoming now something of a custom, his initial gambit was “Mukbrukipi”.

The children began to laugh at Peter’s outburst and he, not knowing why, smiled along with them and walked towards the centre of the settlement. He was now on his own and needed to prove his peaceful intentions to all, he wished he had some sort of gift to offer the children and made a mental note for the next time he decides to drop everything to go and live in a remote tribe, he should bring Opal Fruits. The philosophy of the villagers meant that they had to accept Peter into their fold, and they guessed by his appearance that he wouldn’t stay for long. The hope was that it wouldn’t be too painful. In the meantime Peter had hit upon the idea of offering a song to his new hosts, Elvis, he thought, would be inappropriate so he chose Simon and Garfunkel’s “The Boxer” in the hope that soon everyone would pick up on the lie-lie-lies. Peter wasn’t the worst woodwork teaching singer in Wigan but he certainly wasn’t top five material either. The children screamed with laughter and the elders had to do something quickly to prevent an encore.

Old Wise Krumguppi, was generally accepted as the main man in the village, although a system operated similar to that utilised in Ancient Greece whereby power and decisions were made through the gift of democratic decision. In an ideal world, collective wisdom would lead to simple and effective decision-making but arguments and back-stabbing were commonplace. However, OVK (it was easier to refer to him thus) proposed that something must be done about Peter, and preferably before another song was offered. Immediately, it was decided that Peter should stay with the Teacher, as he was the most learned man of all the village and would no doubt have the most capacity to communicate with him. The Teacher was none too pleased with this set-up, but their form of democracy meant that the decision could not be reversed.

Peter had to play it all somewhat by ear until he was sure of the villagers “acceptance” of him. As he went with the Teacher, he knew what was happening, but something in the back of his mind was trying to make him believe he was being led to his slaughter. The first evening was another strange affair, Peter started to sing again but realised when the elders offered gifts whilst making gestures for him to cease maybe the muse wasn’t the way to win their hearts. So Peter remained as a guest in the village for a few days and all was very pleasant for him. He would have preferred to understand at least one word of what was being said, he had heard a few words on a number of occasions and could recognise them but did not yet know their translation.

However, after a few days Peter began to feel both restless and something of a sponger. He hadn't lifted a finger since he had arrived and apart from the singing, had offered nothing. He looked on as the male members of the group worked extracting some kind of liquid from the trees. Peter did not know what the liquid did but its extraction did not look too complicated. Further on in the fields, more members performed a farming routine that reminded Peter of a trip to the Jorvik Viking Centre. Peter felt like that lad in the bath who had the idea, with his training in woodwork no doubt he could offer some help, even with the somewhat rudimentary tools. Perhaps, he could even make tools and become the village tool-maker. He took his C&A jacket off and left the hut. The workers were somewhat reluctant on seeing the stranger approach. Peter tried to take one of the tools off a worker. The same man assured Peter it was not necessary but felt a little phased by his insistence. Peter took the implement and faced the tree. He spent a few seconds to get his handling, and thrashed it towards the tree in the same way he had seen his fellow workers do. The intention may have been the same but the result was noticeably different. At first there were signs of a giggle, but when he repeated the action the apparatus smashed into various pieces. Any potential humour was lost, the workers' tools were highly prized as they took a long time to produce from the scant resources available.

The days went by and Peter continued his desire to participate. The elders, at the agitation of the workers, needed to call an emergency meeting as Peter threatened to destroy their entire reserves of equipment necessary for the village's survival. The elders asked the Teacher if he had made any inroads on the communication side of things and he had to admit that progress had been slow. They looked to the Teacher for a solution and he looked out onto the fields where Peter was at work. On the edge of the field the workers took an impromptu break as any advancement was rendered impossible with Peter at the helm.

The Teacher was given the task of finding a way to get Peter out of the fields. He considered the idea of Peter teaching the children his language, but that was laughed off as a ridiculous idea, what possible use would this man's language be? The Teacher sat despairingly as Peter destroyed another tool, out of the corner of his eye he saw one of the less applied members of his students, lying blissfully in the grass and watching Peter. As the Teacher observed the boy's reaction he was struck in the face by inspiration. Peter's work-style was indeed novel, even humorous at a basic level. The child should be studying but what had taken him away from the classroom? This student wouldn't need much, but the pull of watching Peter at work gave the Teacher the solution. He ran back to the elders and informed them, they did not seem pleased but had nothing better to fall back on. The Teacher's idea was for Peter to entertain the children but only when they had successfully completed their day's schooling. In one fowl swoop he had cured the epidemic of truancy and possibly saved the village's resources. He tried to in-



form Peter of the new situation but to no avail, Peter guessed they were suggesting a break which his blistered hands would appreciate.

And so the rumour was spread amongst the children, who for the first time in a long time diligently completed their work in anticipation of the great show in the evening. After nightfall, Peter was led to the centre and given a tool, the children sat in anticipation as he began to attempt to extract sap from a tree. The result was seen as hilarious by the children, whose laughter could be heard all over the village. The older members of the group thought it all a little basic, but understood the power of the hold over the children. Peter quickly understood what was happening and although he didn't arrive at the village with the intention of being a Western clown, he realised his rather inconsequential contribution to the village's production. He wished to stay and didn't want to test the villager's peacefulness. So from then on, every evening at around 9.30pm the visual highlight of the day starred Peter. The Teacher was given the credit for a genius masterstroke, attendance was at 100% in the school, progress and application had reached hitherto unseen levels. Peter was moved to a new hut next to the leader's and treated to the most sumptuous luxury the village could afford.

Harmony, it would seem, had been achieved. The children adored Peter and understood that their continued viewing of him depended on their school work. One of the children though, was more curious than the others and vowed to herself to find out more about the mystery clown. One night when the rest of the children were immersed in the entertainment of Peter, young Lumkupgribi sneaked away from the group and into Peter's living quarters. There was not much to be found in there but she saw his jacket and began to look inside the strange yet enormously practical holes it had. She found nothing inside, she looked at the label and assumed the C&A must be the name of a God of some sort. She was about to give up when she saw the inside pocket and found the picture of Britney Spears, carelessly left inside from the airport. She looked at the photo and stood awe-struck in the presence of such beauty. She was convinced that she was contemplating a Godlike vision, the clown's Goddess, she felt possessed by a mission to find her and tucking the photo into her clothes she immediately began her new challenge.

Taking advantage of Peter's performance she walked out of the village and onto the road she knew led out to the next towns. Lumkupgribi had never left the village and the walk through the jungle could have scared her more than just a jot. Still the photo of the Goddess gave her some form of divine protection. After a few hours walking she came across a man with a donkey, unfortunately the dialect was different and understanding was impossible between the two. She knew she had to get to the coast, even though she had never seen it, she remembered the Teacher's lessons, claiming it was the gateway to Heaven. With the ges-

tures she made the man realise that she wanted to travel and took her to a railway line. Smiling, he left her there and she continued walking. She was aiming for a land of water and after walking for many hours she found two trains, both stopped and both heading in different directions. She did not understand what this vehicle was or how it worked but took it as a sign. Her next problem was which train? The Teacher had also always told Lumkupgribi that towards the east was the way to new dreams. With this information she pulled herself onto the train heading east and waited. Surprisingly, Lumkupgribi did not feel hungry or thirsty despite her journey, and assumed that this was further proof of the Goddess' protection. She fell into a deep sleep as the train began to move.

As she slept, she dreamt of her eventual meeting with Britney. The train carried on through the night and she awoke in the land of water. She had been wondering how travel was possible in the land of the water, and thought that people had done well when she saw the magnificent liner before her. Again inspired, she felt she had to board it somehow. Despite her dress, no-one seemed to take much notice of her and she climbed the gangway and was soon on deck. Wandering around the cabins she came upon an open door. She entered and saw a cardboard box on the floor. Inside the box were T shirts with pictures of the Goddess, she took out the picture and kissed it, thanking this celestial being for her guidance. She put on one of the garments and fell onto the comfortable bed. Of course, she had never used one before and didn't realise what it was for but had to admit it did feel nice. As she sat down she did so on top of the remote control for the TV which began to blast out MTV and surprisingly the music of Britney. Whatever power Lumkupgribi had felt from the photo was nothing in comparison with seeing her in the flesh. Over the eleven day voyage, Lumkupgribi watched MTV continuously and survived as at the same time every day a kind man left a trolley full of food by the door. This she ate gratefully, though was always a little confused when he seemed irate at the food's disappearance on his return. The continued access to the broadcast also had an effect on Lumkupgribi's language and she felt that after only a few days she could understand and interact with the presenters. She slept each night on the floor at the foot of the bed and awoke each day with a new found zest for her quest.

On the eleventh day of her journey Lumkupgribi looked out of the window and saw the city of Miami as they entered the harbour. An announcement came over the loudspeaker that they would soon be docking. There was a knock at the door and a ship's attendant entered, quite surprised to find Lumkupgribi sitting on the edge of the bed conversing with MTV. He enquired as to how she arrived there, why she was only wearing a Britney Spears T Shirt and just, well, how? Her story was told, not articulately but she could be understood, her lexis was rather unusual as she assumed that all Caucasians and Afro-Caribbean's communicated in the same way. He took Lumkupgribi to the guards who were equally dumb-founded, she was taken into Miami to the Children's Welfare office where a deci-



sion would be made. She repeated her story, now having had a chance to remove the grammatical errors from its first telling and in no time the story was all around town. News crews came in their droves to see the girl from the rain forest who talks like Puff Daddy, inevitably she was on TV herself, on her beloved MTV. Again she repeated the story and in true Surprise Surprise. fashion guess who was there to meet her? Lumkupgribi and Britney hit it off immediately and it was decided that Lumkupgribi should accompany her on the next tour of the States.

Over the next year Lumkupgribi and Britney became very close, Lumkupgribi learnt a great deal from her new mentor but felt that it was time to go home. Happiness needed to be spread. In the last couple of months she had been thinking a lot about those she left behind and so taking enough Britney merchandise to clothe the entire village, she left for Brazil in Britney's private jet. The plane took her as close to her village as it could and she did the rest of the journey by mountain bike. The village had not changed at all since she left, the children were still laughing at Peter, who had moved with the times and added some new touches to his act. When the villagers saw Lumkupgribi, they could not believe their eyes. Obviously she looked different but she also radiated a new beauty. She told them of her trip and her year with Britney, she showed them the Photo of the White Goddess, and the rest of the villagers too fell under the spell. Peter, who could now speak some of the language and was known as Gudrubbi, said he didn't know what all the fuss was about. Soon everyone was a devoted Britney fan and no-one went to see Peter's performances. He tried in vain to add a daredevil element but his moment had passed. As the children danced in the centre of the village to Britney's music, Peter collected his jacket and a few tokens to remember the place by and waited for the shopkeeper to appear and take him back to Wigan



# Trés Grande Vitesse

Alain passed through onto the platform of Paris Gare de Lyon train station with fifteen minutes to spare before the departure of the 1900 TGV to Lyon Part Dieu. The station, as all points offering an exit from Paris on a Friday evening, seemed to contain enough of the capital's population to leave the entire city bereft of people for the weekend. Alain moved slowly and awkwardly through the crowd of people attempting to find his First Class carriage at the front of the train. Whilst moving, he noticed the quality of the stewardesses rising in accordance with the upgrades of the SNCF fare scale. As he wandered past the cheaper compartments the ladies' reaction went from unimpressed to grovelling as he found the door to his seat.

For Alain even to have a seat on this train on a Friday evening was in itself something of a miracle. No doubt the rest of his travelling companions were looking forward to a weekend out of the impersonal, unwelcoming capital, a chance to see friends and families and disconnect from life in the big city. Alain though was not taking this journey of his own accord, but rather due to an unexpected business trip sprung on him by his knowing boss who politely asked if he wouldn't mind going to Lyons if he had nothing better to do. His boss's tone was affable, but Alain could hear between the lines the if you changing into as you haven't anything better to do. Alain hadn't, for life in Paris hadn't lived up to his expectations after a move from his native Normandy three years ago. Alain was something of a promise in computer troubleshooting and was inevitably head-hunted when the company where he was working was swallowed up by a Parisian giant. The small office in Saint Hilaire du Harcouët had been started by Alain and two friends from school, but it could in no way survive when the brains were enticed to the capital.

Alain had expected the transition to big city life to be eased by the presence of his two school companions as well as the generous financial incentives offered by these small fish now enjoying the extra space in the big pond. However, it did not work out that way as the immense city with its faceless population forced the



three friends into different neighbourhoods and the telephone calls became less frequent as the thought of traipsing across Paris even by Metro or car caused the other two to think better of a possible three line change up to Barbès Rochechouart in order to see their old friend. They had also managed to find interests outside the office and despite them feeling obliged to include Alain on a few occasions during his difficult first few months, his old schoolmates soon became reluctant to invite Alain as this tended to cause other, more glamorous capital dwellers to cry off when Alain's presence was announced. Alain then began to spend more and more time at the office and though this was rewarded professionally with the title of Project Leader it distanced him from his only friends (rapidly becoming acquaintances) in the city.

The board were delighted with Alain as he seemed to have no vices, no commitments and the only thing happening in his life appeared to be The Company. A problem area for senior management was that information systems could go wrong at any moment and few staff were enamoured with the idea of being sent all over France at weekends because an incompetent member of staff in Montpellier had forgotten to plug in the modem. But as Alain was also keen to please it did not take long for his superiors to pull out their first "would you mind?"

Within weeks, Alain was spending a number of weekends away in return for extra days off during the week in which he moped around his flat, had breakfast and eventually rescinded, arriving at the office mid-morning on a flimsy pretext. When the job in Lyons arose management came up with the shortest short list in the company history as to who would be right man for the job. Alain had even begun making his own travel arrangements as it gave him something to do after work. The job came up on Wednesday afternoon and Alain was indeed free and offered to see his travel agent for some much needed human contact. He wasn't even put off by the fact that chances of getting a TGV out of Paris were at best minimal. The travel agent laughed to himself as Alain asked him to check the database, this laugh became unable to be withheld when Alain reminded him that all his company executives travelled First Class. This policy had been adopted by the company as it had been found to increase performance on visits, whilst at the same time impressing the recipients of the visits as they felt indeed valued. When managing directors discovered their problems would be solved at over 250km/h they began to ignore their astronomical bills, preferring instead to make outlandish references in loud voices in restaurants about the quality of the customer service they receive. The travel agent scratched his chin and shook his head, also tempted to throw in a complimentary tut when miraculously a cancellation came through. Destiny seemed to want him on the seven o'clock train to Lyon and as he handed over the company credit card he looked out of the window as the Paris nightlife began to kick into action, once again without him.

The idea of a business trip also gave him the opportunity to vary his routine once he arrived home. Like many people with a stagnant (moving towards moribund) social life, he found himself doing particular things on particular days, Wednesday was spiced up by a Chinese take-away in front of the retro cinema channel which often offered the work of François Truffaut. On Thursdays, he did his ironing whilst listening to the France's Premier Jazz station. That would have to change, it wasn't that Alain didn't embrace change, he just rather hoped that it would be able to give him a hug back from time to time.

The preparations were a part he liked, deciding on the literature, music and attire. He could pretend he was going somewhere where the welcome would be genuinely warm and maintain this faint hope alive until he was, well, met, or as was more often the case not met, except if you count a taxi drive brandishing a print out of his name. He had arrived an hour before the departure time, as was his custom, and had patiently joined the queue of similarly punctual passengers when the train was first called at 18.40. Alain boarded the train and began the next tiresome task of finding his seat.

The seating arrangements on this TGV had placed Alain at a table, this meant he was guaranteed three travelling companions. The fact that the extra cost incurred in the First Class carriage was considerable did not guarantee that the person sitting in front of you would help you to enjoy your journey. As Alain found his table he noticed that it was still empty, thus meaning that he did not even have time to acclimatise himself to his new friends.

Alain was not a good traveller. He generally travelled alone and felt uncomfortable at the thought of sporadic conversation with strangers. His weapons to defend himself against these onslaughts were the meticulously selected literature and music. Alain had sufficient time to prepare what he considered compilation tapes for his Walkman that would ease his suffering and hopefully in some subconscious way reduce the journey time. Once he arrived at his seat he began to unpack his armaments. He took his seat and looking up at the mass of people trying to squeeze through whilst other passengers as rapidly as possible attempted to stow their belongings, then becoming angry when they reached their seats and other passengers had the audacity to do the same, he tried to guess who would be joining him on the way to the Rhône Valley. He knew better than to pray for someone, not exciting, beautiful and fascinating, but someone of a similar social prowess to himself with whom he could pleasantly sit uncomfortably in extreme comfort.



Clearly, the Gods did not share his desire. As he glanced up from his magazine and saw an immaculately dressed, expensively groomed Channel coat-hanger with teeth, he knew who would be sitting in front of him. She was about 30 and to a large extent a very beautiful woman. Unfortunately she was also the kind of self-obsessed megalomaniac that drove fear into the heart of Alain. He had never been a success with women and this type he could do without, he had no desire to be strung around by women with the warmth of those who generally offered dubious apples to sweet young things. She stood by the table and held up her hand luggage so that it was visible. This for the benefit of anyone who should fall into the trap of helping her, the poor defenceless one. Within seconds, an elderly gentleman had made a fool of himself by placing her bag in the luggage rack and offering her his hand so that she might take her seat. She did not even reward him with a look. Let alone degrading herself to thank the old man, who tried to brush it off with something along the lines of if I were twenty years younger!! Alain thought to himself “Yeah, more like if you were twenty times richer” and let out a little laugh. The woman looked up and gave him an unpleasant glare, Alain realised that spontaneous comedy was not his forte yet at least thought that she wouldn't be bothering him for inane chat. One less.

Unfortunately in the midst of all this revelry, Alain realised that the second twenty-five percent of the table would be occupied by this amorous sexagenarian who had now begun to make his excuses to the woman. These fell on deaf ears as she would not deign to engage herself in conversation with either of her travelling companions. With two minutes to go before departure Alain pondered the chance that maybe he had been in some way fortunate and the fourth member of the table had either missed the train, or thought better of it. As the doors began to close, the sound of a suitcase being thrown onto the train gave the entire carriage an interested pause and a brief conversation point. There was only one seat left in the carriage so Alain knew whoever owned the bag would be joining him. Joining the bag was the type of male that Alain most disliked. He carried off good looking and worldly without moving a single hair, all his clothes looked impeccable, as if hours had been spent deliberating shades and tones. He oozed perfection and was in short the type of man Alain would like to be, but was unfortunately not. Alain cursed his luck as the train sprung into motion at one minute past seven. It had always struck Alain as something of a curiosity that trains in France, as well as in Spain and Italy, should be dependable. It was not a trait that these nations shared in other nationalised industries and was something more thought of on the part of their more efficient Teutonic neighbours.

And so there they sat, all four in silence whilst mini television screens came down from the luggage racks, welcoming them aboard this high speed train from Paris to Lyons, their estimated journey time being just under two hours. Alain felt they would be two long hours in silence but if they were peppered with conversation from those he now simply denominated L1 (The Love Machine), L2

(The Chanel Bitch from Hell) and R2(Bless the old dear, but please do not speak to me) and Alain (he for the duration of the journey would not worry if he were referred to as R1 as it was his position). He decided he was not keen on participation in any getting to know you better opportunities that may occur on the table. If any did come it was clear from which direction. R2 had already tried to initiate a conversation with L1 and L2 (see luggage incident) so at some point soon he would make a play for Alain. To combat this he took out his Walkman, although there are travellers who will not be put off by a Walkman and even drag the headphones from your ears in order for you to listen to their dull observations / commentaries / suggestions / requests. It was then essential that Alain avoid eye contact with R2 as that would render the Walkman powerless. With great effort he maintained his neck rigid, trying to look out over the window, somewhat to the dismay of R2 as they had entered a tunnel. After about two minutes Alain's neck muscles began to send out warning signals to any part of his body that could organise a rescue operation and against his will he felt his head turning toward R2. He told himself to be strong and then, just as one of his favourite songs came on to help him through his mission, disaster struck.

If the entertainment for the trip is going to be based around the use of a portable apparatus for enjoying music on the move then the provision of batteries must come reasonably high on the list of priorities. Alain had bought some earlier in the day but feared he had left them in the office. Those entrusted to power his Walkman to Lyon had just failed. He tried to remove the headphones in a way that suggested he did not want to listen to music after all, but the game was up, his neck also let him down and his gaze was caught in that of R2, who pounced immediately.

“Are you from Lyons then?” was the almost perfect opening gambit for the situation.

Alain shook his head hoping that the simple impolite gesture would be enough to detain this singles bar dialogue.

“Parisian then? What takes you to Lyons? Want to see how the poor live?!” R2 laughed to himself (obviously) and Alain now had to respond else R2 think he were actually from Paris.

“No, from Normandy actually, I just work in Paris” came the (terse) reply. The gods upon high began to sense an incoming anecdote related to his homeland.

“Ah! La Normandie!!” The last two letters seemed to have nine syllables. “It is a beautiful part of France, La Normandeeeeee, much nicer than Paris, Paris is over-rated I say. That is the real France. Exquisite”



Alain wanted to thank him for his kindness, he had never realised in the twenty odd years he had lived there that it was beautiful. Alain smiled and picked up his magazine but it had the reverse effect.

“Ah! A fan of the seventh art, I see?” and so it continued as the train made its way slowly through the Paris suburbs hardly appearing to deserve its name as it reached speeds of around 25km/h until the city began to disappear. R2 incessantly quizzed Alain on French cinema and particularly productions that featured location shots in Normandy.

As R2 continued Alain looked at L1 who had yet to speak, the waitress had brought him some red wine just by him raising a finger. Alain wondered what he would be given if he raised a finger and then didn't want to know. As L1 puffed on a Gaulloises he somehow managed to avoid the smoke's uncomfortable arrival in the eyes of other passengers. He had also seen a young lady on the adjoining table and was making very suggestive eye contact which was being reciprocated. He ran his fingers through his hair and left it looking even better than it had done before. He gave a flawless “Excusez-moi” to all and sundry and left in the direction of the bar or more probably the facilities. A few seconds later the young lady in question giggled out the same line and scampered off unashamedly into the toilets with L1. R2 continued speaking and had now taken it upon himself to inform Alain about every aspect of his knowledge of Normandy.

L2 now sprang into action as her mobile telephone gave a high pitched rendering of some ghastly current en vogue pop number and she embarked on an equally unlistenable conversation with a “friend” who Alain immediately suspected had been told to ring her just as the train was getting into gear. Her conversation was based around how she could let as many people know in as fewer words as possible, how talented she was, how they were going to give her the part of a dolly dealer on a new game show on France 3 which would be her launching pad. She also informed her friend, and in passing the entire compartment, how the director had tried to get her to go to bed with him, and how there were no decent men in the business these days. She went on to conclude that the previous night she was at a party with none other than Joël Robuchon and that they would be going away to Corsica together in May. The conversation was painful for Alain listening to L2, that even R2 was beginning to feel weak. As L1 returned with a smile on his face, followed by the young lady looking slightly unkempt, adjusting herself with a saucy smile for L2 as she retook her seat.

A brief moment of mercy came as they went through a tunnel and L2 lost her mobile connection and was forced to hang up. Again Alain let out a little laugh and again she gave him an unfriendly look in return. The train was now gathering speed and as they left the tunnel they finally said goodbye to Paris. Within seconds of their return to the surface, L2's mobile went off again and the conversation was reinitiated. R2 continued his monologue and had now become so kind as

to share his knowledge of trains and other motorised vehicles for Alain's pleasure. Just as he thought that they would hit top speed and this nightmare be over soon they began to slow down and pull into St. Florentin station. The stop was brief but managed to destroy the momentum Alain had convinced himself the train had built up.

They left the station with little more speed than an injured, asthmatic snail. Alain seriously considered writing a stiff letter to the SNCF suggesting they should not in the future have the cheek to call their trains what appeared to be an extravagant lie. Though of course, as life has continually proven when you have a thought like this, the opposite is bound to happen within fourteen seconds. The train came to life and the little that one could of the French countryside in twilight went past in even more of a blur. L1 was brought a bottle of champagne, this time without even lifting the finger and taking a sip he went back to the toilet this time with the stewardess. L2 kept on talking and now a group of children were asking her for her autograph as other sycophants informed her of her immense talent. R1 had now been joined by what appeared to be his identical twin and both were rattling off the history of the motorbike.

Alain looked out of window and prayed for some respite from the onslaught as the trains got faster and faster. The carriage began to shudder and for the first time it occurred to Alain that it might be going just a little too fast. The carriage shuddered again as L2 put her phone down with a horrified look on her face. Alain saw further down the passageway L1 drop his champagne glass as he pushed his second new friend of the day to the floor. R1 ceased his monologue and could only mutter "Mon Deiu!" as the lights went out.

In the darkness Alain closed his eyes instinctively, though the chances of you being helped in the dark by closing your eyes were slim. He could not tell how much time had passed, he remained with his eyes closed and tried to listen. Hearing the familiar chug of the train on the tracks he felt sure it was safe to open his eyes. He did so slowly and saw before the same scene as had caused him to close them in the first place. He almost felt relief, he turned to R1, though would now address him as the dull old man in praise of this miracle and asked:

"Are we alright, what happened, the noise?" the dull old man looked quite bewildered by the question and sternly replied.

"The lights went out, that's all, nothing to worry about, son" He laughed and took off his coat. Alain looked in front to L2 whom he would now name Posh Slag out of happiness and before he could speak, her mobile phone went off. She began a conversation which seemed all too familiar for Alain's taste as he had the sensation he had heard every word before. She finished her conversation and



within seconds the mobile went again and she began exactly the same conversation, word for word. Alain began to sense something strange was afoot when he caught the dull old man's eye by accident.

"Are you from Lyons then?" He asked, Alain was phased, he knew he had had this conversation before. All he could muster was a shake of the head.

"Ah! Parisian then? What takes you to Lyon? Want to see how the poor live?!" Alain was now shaking. He looked out of the window but could distinguish nothing that told him where he was. He managed to splutter out "Normandy".

"Ah! La Normandie!!, It is a beautiful part of France, La Normandeeeeee, much nicer than Paris, Paris is overrated I say. That is the real France. Exquisite" The dull old man laughed and Alain sat back in his seat sweating as the passenger previously known as LI returned from the toilet with more champagne and another young lady that was, Alain's sister. The mobile phone went again and the Posh Slag once again embarked on exactly the same conversation. LI got up with his sister and went to the toilet. He looked again at the dull old man who asked him.

"Are you from Lyons then?" At that moment the train pulled into St. Florentin station. Alain could not stay in this company and made his way into the restaurant carriage which also boasted a very necessary bar. The barman was with his back to Alain as he asked him for a brandy. Miraculously, there was a brandy on the bar, and as the barman hadn't appeared to hear him, he took it as his own giving that the circumstances warranted it. They left the station and began to pick up speed, Alain looked at the route map and then realised that the train had already stopped in St. Florentin. He tried the barman again but as he went towards the bar the toilet door opened outwards and out stepped LI with his sister. He heard a mobile phone ring and there was Posh Slag and her conversation, the barman turned round and asked,

"Are you from Lyons, then?" The dull old man stood laughing behind the bar as Alain grabbed his brandy and went back to his seat. As he got comfortable, the mobile phone went again and the driver announced they would shortly be stopping in St. Florentin station.



# The Alpine Man

“Fucking machine” Phillip exclaimed to the surprise of the other restaurant customers who would have preferred his displeasure to remain an angry part of his own internal dialogue. Phillip found it difficult to be angry in private and his vocal chords were normally directly linked to his alterable temper leading to the odd blue exclamation. The cause of the outburst was the second button on the tobacco machine that made him think he would soon be the owner of a fresh deck of Marlboro Lights. Not the case, just as had happened with the first option, an empty chamber connected the button to Phillip’s hope. A machine which boasts two options of a popular brand must demonstrate the owner of the establishment’s well defined connection with their customer’s needs, which meant that it would be a social faux pas for both chambers to be empty. Despite the fact that it was Friday evening, that this popular restaurant in the Italian Dolomite village of Cortina, famous with those financially endowed not to need to worry about the escalating costs of the Alpine resorts, was one of the pages first folded over in the guide books of those with a little extra on the hip, Phillip still took the lack of his brand of choice as a personal insult.

He returned to the table and began to plan his next move. For someone who had not just come out of one of the worst years of his life, preceded by what could neither be described as a golden age, Phillip was not in the mood to negotiate with the machine. His options were then, accept another brand of lights, or in an emergency move, up to full strength, already discarded. The only viable option he had was to hit the road and get a packet from one of the bars in the vicinity. He looked out of the window and decided that as they had only just arrived that he could sneak out for five minutes. He took his jacket and made his excuses to the table.

The table had ten chairs at it and nine remained occupied. The evening’s luxury was in celebration of what was referred to as “coming out the other side” by some members of the party. It had been a torrid period for more or less all present, Phillip and his wife Laura had been as close to divorce, violence and poison-



ing as one could get. Their relationship had suffered as both hit forty and the only emotion they could muster for each other was contempt. Inevitably, secretaries and gardeners received bit parts in the episodic imbroglio that was laughingly described as their marriage. Something needed to be done, Phillip seriously considered leaving the daughter of a wealthy factory owner who had set him up as a Managing Director in the company. Financially, the marriage had been Phillip's best move, twelve years ago she was an attractive and intelligent member of a social group which Phillip felt would always exclude him. They began their courtship, Laura's father was pleased that his wayward daughter appeared to be settling down and was out of the gossip columns. As soon as Laura's parents saw the relationship was heading towards six months, the Archbishop was told to get the Hoover out on the cathedral as there would be a do in the near future. Phillip then quit the company where he was working, obviously there is no better preparation for being Managing Director of a major producer of leather goods than spending five years at a call centre. Laura's father, Gordon, now became both father-in-law and boss to Phillip, not an ideal situation but every twenty eight days his payslip made him think that things could be worse.

And so Phillip was installed as MD, he liked that title, the company did not need a great deal of work and what it did was generally done by Gordon, he not being a fan of an oligarchy in his company. Phillip took easily to the life of a young executive, that is, he enjoyed doing sod all. His engagements tended to be extensive lunches with clients who needed a little buttering up. Lunches that often spilled over into the early afternoon and evening in Gentlemen's clubs all over the capital. When he did get home to their opulent dwelling he was in no fit state to entertain his young wife. Gordon did not extend the generosity of his company to his daughter, he considered her role to be one that many sectors saw as antiquated, but Gordon felt was the cornerstone of any successful marriage, the little lady at home. And who could argue with Gordon's success? thirty three years married and in all that time only six affairs, his wife Emily has only tried to take her life on four occasions, she has only been admitted into psychiatric institutions on three and paid up all her subs to Alcoholics Anonymous twice. Had she been forced to work as well all this happiness may have been lost and the extra pressure could have caused her to do something extreme. For Gordon, there was no question Laura was, as he put it, to keep the home fires burning and make Phillip feel welcome and loved after a hard day's whatever it was he did. One of the principal problems with being a housewife when you are the daughter of a millionaire manufacturing magnate is that even if you wanted to iron, cook, clean or sew, not that Laura's upbringing had particularly prepared her for these tasks, there were so many servants on hand that only wiping her arse and changing her tampon were duties not assigned to the staff.

Inevitably, Laura become disillusioned with married life, before she had had a number of outlets to fill her days. Flings were two a penny and she found a par-

ticular penchant for married men who tended to initially give more and then go scurrying back to their wives just before she got bored with them. Added to this were her numerous friends, most of whom she couldn't stand until the forth G&T, who holidayed in glamorous locations all over the world. Winters were spent skiing, summers topping up the and following the fashionable crowd around Europe's most costly beaches. As she, and her liver, began to approach thirty, her parents were of the idea that the tomfoolery was to come to an end, Emily's health problems had caused their family to remain a trio rather than the sextet with a touring percussionist Gordon would have preferred. This meant the onus was on Laura to produce an heir, when she was informed of her feudal role in the family pleasure was not an emotion she openly demonstrated to her father. This minor misunderstanding was instantly cleared up when the cutting of her allowance was mentioned. Her plan was to go along with her father's wishes and have a string of continuously failed relationships that never made it to the altar. If the worst came to the worst, she felt capable of getting in the family way and then it was a fifty-fifty draw to produce a sibling for whom the family problem of facial hair would be acceptable. She did worry about the possibility of producing a daughter, which would greatly displease her father, and was informed by one of the servants from Peru that conception from behind would almost certainly guarantee a male offspring. This pleased her as she was more than a trifle partial to that particular form of coitus so she set about completing her father's plan and looking forward to an easy peaceful existence.

Laura had no problem finding suitors, she was in her prime, similar to a midfielder with a cultured left foot who, at 28, is at the top of his game. She happily informed her parents that this was the one and waited for the romance to fizzle out before moving onto the next one. This would have continued had she not met Phillip by accident. Her meeting with him changed her perception of relationships, she had always been a fatalist and was convinced that the planets had been aligned in perfect harmony to bring them together. Their first meeting was when Laura visited a plastic surgeon as she had adjudged herself to be lacking in the bosom department, so as she was driving to the appointment and checking what mother nature had given her in the rear view mirror she managed to clip the back wheel of Phillip's bicycle with her Porsche. She was immediately surprised by the way Phillip took the incident and his reluctance to sue. Once it was ascertained that he would live she resumed her journey. After about 100 metres she thought maybe it would have been good form to offer him a lift as his two-wheeler had been rendered dysfunctional. However, the traffic lights changed and he was gone. The operation was not a great success and less than a week later she had to got hospital to remove the offending extensions. As she sat waiting in casualty she recognised someone sitting opposite her who was holding a finger recently involved in a argument between a kitchen knife and some celery. When she finally worked out where it was she knew him from she became profoundly in need of finding out more about someone she had managed to run into twice in a city of ten million inhabitants.



She initiated the conversation and Phillip was soon receptive to the idea of Laura, he had yet to find his other half, he had yet to start looking if the truth be known. Phillip's parents had noted that he wandered through life with an apathy for everything except his rather old-fashioned and definitely unprofitable hobby of pottery. So began a romance that was more a gusty breeze than a whirlwind. Still, both sets of in-laws seemed please with the progress and things moved along. The offspring side of the bargain looked like it would a matter of clearing up the paperwork as Phillip realised one of Laura's few charms for later life together was a horizontal one. Marriage was announced and soon Laura was in the family way, the Peruvian advice showing itself to be of the good variety as a healthy young male popped out nine months later. Motherhood was something of a struggle for Laura, even with a multitude of staff on hand for the bits she didn't like, which were plenty but most of all nappies were an area she preferred to avoid. She was also dreadfully disappointed when she found out that only her breasts would serve as feeding zones for her little one. Still life continued and the fruits of Gordon's labour meant that any hardships were soon forgotten.

Problems came later on as Laura and Phillip became more and more distanced, and he began to spend more time working and less at home. She, for her part, was quick to send Gordon Jr. off to boarding school as soon as she could get away with it. This left her afternoons free for drinking G&T's lightly based around the T and rolling around with the young Greek gardener. Phillip was awake to what was going on and confronted her, then suggested to Gordon he intervene but Phillip was told he would have to find his own solution, just as Gordon had. Phillip then began to take solace in the company of his secretary Mandy, and she became a regular name on the team sheet for business trips. Phillip decided he had had enough and wanted to leave, he was prepared to give up his cushy number in the company just to make a fresh start with Mandy. However, Gordon was in now way party to a messy divorce that would cost him money in the courtroom and knock some pennies of the share price. Phillip seemed destined to spend the rest of his life in this family. Gordon's advice was to have some fun, but be careful. It seemed that bastards were less highly prized as legitimates in Gordon's eyes. Over the next few years their relationship became moribund, without even the interest to argue with each other, and rarely a kind word offered. Gordon Jr., in this delightful family environment was growing into a world class, moneyed, misogynist, asshole, though he spent more time in detention than with his parents.

Eventually it was Laura who broke down first, she confessed she had been to see a hit-man about solving the Phillip situation, it was only at the last minute had she had second thoughts and not gone through with it. Surprisingly, the news that his wife had paid someone to kill him was the shove they needed to get back on

track, well at least harbour the thoughts of assassination for a few years. They re-took their vows and tried to build a relationship with their son, this was achieved with the aid of a child psychologist who then had to call in resources from adult ones as well. After more than eleven years of failure they basically got together what would be the essence of a family, not Dr. Spock, but not Grange Hill either. Phillip accepted the new situation as preferable and curbed his extra marital wanderings. Gordon and Emily took this as the stimulus to readdress their differences, and came to the same conclusion. The inspiration spread to their best friends, best friends Phillip inherited from Laura and if there were a more odious pair walking the earth, apart from Gordon and Emily, Phillip hoped never to meet them.

Hence this dinner, this holiday, paid for by Gordon to celebrate their new found happiness and that finally they had understood the meaning of the word family. Phillip would have preferred the divorce but it wasn't to be. He was though, still sensitive after the turmoil of the last few years and was becoming rather finicky in his middle age. This explains the situation about the cigarettes, that which led him to put on his jacket and walk out into the cold night air.

Across the road from the hotel he saw a bar which appeared to exist for rich foreign tourists in need of plentiful refreshment. For a society closely linked with the grape, both Phillip and Laura considered the abstinence and glaring looks of their Lombardian cousins somewhat contradictory. The row of bars and restaurants that were spread out before him, and geared towards foreigners, offered a fine amount of boozing without snotty looks. Phillip got a stride on as the night air was brisk. He entered the first bar and to his delight saw a machine boasting Marlboro Lights. Excitedly, he put the money into the machine and nothing again, the machine refused to register the presence of his easily earned euros, he approached the bar in hope of a solution. The barman was quick to make clear that the problem was not his, he suggested Phillip try again. Phillip returned to the machine and realised all his change was now inside. He begged of the barman's attention again and asked if he could possibly change a note for the purchase of the cigarettes. The barman informed him that he would not be able to assist as he could not justify giving all his change to a non-consuming customer so that this person can buy cigarettes from a machine which belongs to a third party and will have no reflections on the evening profits. Phillip ordered a beer, the barman was a little more polite now, Phillip tried to pay but the barman ignored him, Phillip held the note in front of his face and was informed that libations may be disbursed upon their completion, Phillip downed the golden liquid, which he would have enjoyed much more with a cigarette and paid the man. Now in possession of change he went back to the machine and as he was about to insert the coins the barman informed him that the machine was empty, had been all week, problems with delivery. Phillip thanked the kind man and left the establishment.



Next stop was an Irish pub, ubiquitous and essential in all parts of the world. Surely with the advantage of mother tongue and natural understanding between the Irish and plastic upper-class twits his request would be seen to completion this time. As he entered he located the machine, he made sure the change he had would be sufficient and made his way to the appliance. As he was approaching it, he felt a hand on his shoulder and someone cry “Davey”, someone who had obviously forgone supper and stayed on the apéritifs was convinced Phillip was a long lost friend, despite Phillip’s claims to the contrary a Guinness was ordered for him and he was made to partake. Thankfully, the person who confused him with Davey smoked and smoked well, so at least he was able to procure a couple for the duration of this nonsensical journey down someone else’s memory lane. Phillip continued in his insistence that he wasn’t Davey and when the penny finally dropped his new found companion was far from pleased at being forced to buy a drink for an impostor and shouldn’t he be ashamed of himself pretending to be other people to scrounge free drinks. Phillip could have made it to the cigarette machine but decided it was best to leave. Especially as the bar staff had taken the drunk’s side and his chances of leaving with his good looks intact were becoming increasingly minimal.

Outside the bar he stood and began to despair, perhaps this was a message from above telling him to give up. He could see one more bar at the top of a hill and, opted for a climb to success, or never to smoke again. As he reached the top he became unsure as to whether he actually wanted cigarettes now as his chest informed him their friendship was in jeopardy. Nonetheless, he had come this far and he had to triumph. In he walked, the bar was empty, a young lady stood behind the bar, he asked for the cigarette machine and she said the place was bereft of one. With a tearful look in his eye, he went to leave the bar when she told him they had tobacco behind the bar. In seconds he was in possession of his long awaited packet and even stayed for another drink as he felt sorry for the girl in such a dull bar. She told him that the original owner was a fell walker and that explains the location, when he died of a heart attack her father bought the place but no-one likes the climb. He finished his drink and bid farewell she said she would like to see him again soon but he doubted it. Finally, after nearly an hour he had a packet of Marlboro Lights, he knew there was a five star bollocking awaiting him in the restaurant but he had beaten the elements. As he strode downhill he puffed away merrily.

When he re-entered the restaurant he found they had not only ordered but were tucking into the second course. The chair where he had been sitting had been removed and no-one seemed concerned about Phillip’s absence. He thought nothing of it as he was used to feeling like an outsider in the family. He pulled up an unoccupied chair and sat next to Laura.

“You would not believe what I’ve had to go through to get a packet of tabs. Three bars, nearly got my face ripped off in one cos’ someone thought I was Davey. I see you’ve already ordered, to be honest I’m not too hungry, I’ll be OK with just the main, Gordon could you pass me the wine please?” Phillip hadn’t actually looked at any of the members of the table but all seemed to have an expression that Mr. Collins dictionaries would describe as aghast. Phillip could not explain this strange behaviour so chose to reiterate his request.

“Gordon, the wine please” as the waiter came past Phillip ordered a Fillet Mignon. Gordon could contain himself no longer.

“Who are you? And how do you know my name?” Gordon looked piercingly into Phillip’s eyes.

“Very good, is that the best you could do in an hour? Let’s pretend stupid old Phillip is a stranger, a bit childish wouldn’t you say Emily?” Emily nearly choked as he mentioned her name.

Gordon stood up and said “Now look here, I don’t know who you are and I don’t really care, but what I will not stand is someone sitting down at my table and abusing my family.”

Phillip tried to defend himself, “But I am part of your family, Laura, you’re my wife” At this moment Laura burst into tears and left the table. Gordon picked up a fork and through it at Phillip, catching him in the neck. He began to bleed and Gordon promised more. Desperately he tried to find some form of identification that would prove his identity but nothing coincided with his story, a driver’s licence and a snooker centre membership-card did not have the power to prove he was married to a person who now appeared to be a complete stranger. For a brief moment he thought of the possibilities of never having met Laura, but then came back down to earth at the thought of his previous finances. He failed to comprehend the situation, but had no intention of all the work he had done putting up with this collection of half-wits being for nothing. He pleaded to his son, Gordon Jr.

“Gordon Jr. You know who I am, I’m your father” Gordon jr. began to laugh and his only response was to say Phillip was fucking nuts, which earned him a reproach for his language. Within seconds the head waiter was at the table, less



than happy that this expensive restaurant should play host to the type of people, as he put it, that should be on the Costa del Sol. Gordon explained the situation and Phillip was ejected from the restaurant. They actually had no idea who he was, he had a photo of Laura in his wallet but nothing corroborated any link with the family. He needed to find out what was going on and as they were busy dining he thought the best move would be to go to their, or his, or her hotel.

It was probably sensible to think, so Phillip thought. Clearly, the family's reaction would be mirrored by the hotel staff. He decided that bare-faced cheek may help him get to their or her room. Should, or when, that failed he would try to get in through the back door. The hotel in Cortina was expensive but traditional, that appealed to Gordon's taste, which meant it appealed to everyone in the party's taste, Gordon being a far from enlightened despot. Therefore, security, Phillip thought, would be lax. There would be no alarmed doors or surveillance cameras to stop him getting into the room. Just in case there were, he calculated that within 30 seconds he would know the truth. If they came for him he knew the second floor window backed on to the garden, and a jump may cause a nasty sprained ankle, but would not mean the end of the life that it appears he now doesn't have. Phillip walked to the hotel and took out a Marlboro Light. He couldn't help letting out a little laugh as he started to evaluate the situation. He wanted to make a mental whiteboard with a line down the middle, dividing the board into two categories: ADVANTAGES and DISADVANTAGES of being the husband of Laura Lincoln. After only three or four drags his list was complete. He so much had wanted to get the little one in on the advantages side, but even his own son could not be considered thus. Possibly, had he made more effort as a father, the bond would be stronger. Too late for that now, though Phillip, flesh and blood or not, the lad was a little swine. As he puffed away down the street he examined his list. On the advantages side was MONEY, when the Lincolns talk about money it is perhaps a concept difficult for most to envisage. Their wealth was immense, and this word at times fell short of the mark. Phillip's own personal portion of this never-ending gâteau was, to him, unknown. He had never needed to know, since his marriage the check balance option was not in his top five cash-machine activities. He had shares worth, he didn't know, but the word immense was threatening to rear its head again. His salary was astronomical, bored of immense now, but was merely the tip of the iceberg. The disadvantages column just said NONE. However, he did not fancy the idea of working for a menial salary. He was now getting on a bit, and the years of corporate laziness had taken their toll. He would now be effectively unemployable. Time for another decision, after the hotel he would need to undergo a convincing blackmail programme. He knew enough about her, whether it was true or not in the current light of things was another matter, to make her sign a cheque to keep the smile on his face for the rest of his days. It might even be quite enjoyable.

At the door of the hotel he threw his cigarette on the floor and entered, trying to look confident and important. Barely had he taken two steps inside the hotel when he was accosted by a meddlesome hotel manager. Stereotypes are generally off the mark for most people, and should be discouraged, but the scriptwriters of *Pretty Woman* and *Home Alone 2* got it bang on with their snooty, more British than anyone in the nation's history hotel managers. The Manager of the Continental Hotel in Cortina was Italian, though considered this more of an accident of birth. He would have been more at home in colonial India taking a big stick to the natives. He made it his life's work to memorise every face that entered his hotel and be repugnantly smarmy to those checked in, whilst maintaining a vile hostility to those whose names are not in the register. Phillip asked for the key to room two-hundred and eight, he even threw in a *por favore*, but to no avail, Signor Matterzzi-Smythe, I kid you not, was already on the case.

"There seems to be some dreadful error" He informed Phillip with a look of *thou shall not pass* in his eyes. "That is the Lincoln's suite, they are very fine customers of ours and have given us strict instructions not to allow anyone strangers in" His look suggested the exit may be Phillip's next port of call. Phillip decided to continue chancing his arm.

"Stranger? I am the husband of Laura Lincoln" He tried to look indignant at the same time.

"In that case you must be a visitation from the after-world. How jolly spiffing!" More plummy would be difficult. The region around the Alps, as is common in the north of Italy, is famous for its somewhat exaggerated rising and falling intonation, which gives the speaker the effect of seeming to sing their words. This bloke though, would turn heads in Knightsbridge when he opened his gob. "I am a great believer in life after death, tell me Mr Lincoln, how did you regain such a fine physical appearance after the fatal car crash? Do they have celestial plastic surgeons in the great bullshit dome in the sky? I have asked you once, politely, another time with perhaps a piquant of sarcasm, but I must warn you sir, I'm not in the habit of asking the same thing three times" Phillip knew that it was the tradesman's entrance or nothing. As he prepared to leave a phone call was taken in the lobby. It was Mr. Lincoln informing the hotel staff of the incident in the restaurant and advising them to keep on their toes.

That was exactly what Phillip did, surprising himself with the speed with which he was in the Alpine air again. He lingered between two cars in the car park for a couple of minutes, but when he saw that his new friend would not be joining him, made for the back the door. Phillip had never illegally entered an Ital-



ian hotel before. As he surveyed the comings and goings of the staff he was struck by something that could possibly constitute a marvellous piece of luck. Deliveries of bed-linen were being made, despite the fact it was nearly eleven o'clock, by groups of men in civilian clothes. Phillip removed his tie and jacket, placing them behind a bush next to a red Alfa Romeo and joined his new fellow workers. Standing looking rather stupid and suspicious, he was told to get a move on and take the basket to the second floor. He told his new boss no problem, and took the linen into the service lift. He thanked the man, or woman, as there is no conclusive proof as to the gender of our benefactor, he had bothered to learn Italian. Phillip had lots of business trips around Europe, and as he had nothing to do on them he studied languages, whilst the Directors of his company thrashed out the deals so that Phillip could put pen to paper and taken all the credit. He also found it handy in the clubs afterwards, it was a good conversation starter, and as the Latin looks were his particular favourite, he made more headway with the Italian than struggling through the painfully dull German clauses. In no time he was on the second floor and outside room two-hundred and eight. He checked the coast and found that with a firm push the door failed to move a millimetre, but he almost dislocated his shoulder. He tried a kick with the same levels of success and cursed. Desperate, he drove the linen-basket into the door and it swung open. Inside the room he saw what had been up until this evening the room he had shared with Laura. The photo on the bedside table showed Laura with another man, but the photo was dated. There was no trace of a male presence in the room. It was too clean, Phillip thought of that old song, "To All the Women I Have Loved" or something like that, he had been around and seen the world, but still failed to understand women. Why do they, in a thousand-dollar a night hotel, feel the need to keep it spic and span? Why not enjoy the fact that you can live in squalor and no-one can tell you off? Still, Phillip did not have time for this philosophical meandering, he took a glance around the room, opened the wardrobe and accepted that he didn't exist, at least for Laura Lincoln. Then he heard a voice which was all too familiar and decided it had to be the window to freedom. When he was about to jump he noticed a pile of notes on the table, thinking it could come in handy he stuffed the money into his pocket, operating on the sheep as well as a lamb theory, and jumped. The landing was not perfect, and there would be some swelling. He collected his jacket and hailed a taxi. He told the taxi driver to drive to into Brescia, thinking the nearby Alpine towns of Trento or Bolzano too risky, he decided to get a bit of distance between himself and the Lincolns. The driver informed he would require a liquidity assessment before starting such a journey. Phillip waved the wad in his face and they were off. Phillip counting the notes whilst they travelled at great speed along the mountain roads to the city. Despite an oncoming headache and a large dose of fear, Phillip ascertained there were about four-thousand euros in the wad. Good, he thought.

In Brescia, he paid the driver and made his way to a medium-sized hotel. He did not trust the hotel manager in Cortina, but knew he would only inform hotels of the same category as his. Something of the snob in the refused to down-

grade whilst grassing. He checked into a comfortable room and was pleased to discover that there was Internet access in each room. Once installed in his room, he ordered a sandwich and a few beers from room service and started to run a nice warm bath. Feeling refreshed and clean, he hooked up to the net. First port of call was his Internet banking service, he waited with a lump in his throat as his bank's home page came up. He entered the account details, and was pleased to be informed that he was a Platinum customer, that didn't sound poor. He was asked various questions to protect his account from unwanted access that would require the skills of someone who had spent half an hour conversing with him to crack the code. Once in he was presented with a nice array of options, his favourite being SHARE PORTFOLIO. He could not be exact but thought that in his possession he had in the region of four and a half million euros. He then got a list of affiliated banks in Italy and was directed to the offices of a prestigious private bank in Milan. Tomorrow, that bank would see some transactions on a tell your grandchildren scale. He lay back on the bed and fell asleep with a smile on his face for the first time in a long time.

As he was checking out of the hotel in Brescia he was asked some awkward questions about an altercation in a Cortina hotel the previous night. He pretended to understand nothing and the hotel staff soon tire and go about their business again. He left the hotel and from a public phone box called the hotel and asked to be put through to Laura Lincoln, saying he was her old friend Jeffery Butherson. Laura answered and began to tell Jeffery, before Phillip could speak, of the dreadful events of the previous night. Phillip felt he had to interrupt, which caused Laura to scream down the phone at him. After the screaming subsided, he gave her his prepared lines.

"Look, if you answer these questions honestly, I will never bother you or your family again" That sounded good to Laura, so she agreed. "You have never seen me before last night?" She answered in the negative. "I'm not your husband?" More negative. "The name Phillip Ronson means nothing to you?" She told him what he wanted to hear. "I apologise for any inconvenience caused to you and your family. Do you want the four-thousand euros back?" She hung up and Phillip did the same, but he was noticeably more pleased with the outcome. He made his way to the train station and at the Avis office hired a red Alfa Romeo and embarked on the journey to Milan.

Less than ten kilometres into the hundred that awaited his journey down the A4 Venice-Milan motorway, he found that the radio offerings were not to his taste. At the next service station he stopped on the off-chance there was a selection of CD's on sale. He didn't hold out much hope for the selection, but was sure there would be something that would help him to Milan. And indeed, buried between Eros Ramazotti and Zucchero discs, he found the Kinks and Small Faces



Ultimate Collections. Pleased with his purchase, he got back on the road, dropping down the electric windows and letting Messrs. Marriot and Davies combine with the fresh mountain air as he made his way to the Autovia A4. Driving to Milan, he began to make plans for his future. This took on a more positive air than the night before due to the millions in his (virtual) pocket.

He arrived in Milan at about a quarter to one in the afternoon. He parked the car outside the bank's branch near the luxurious Via della Spiga. He was pleased to see the Latin work ethic gave him fifteen minutes more banking pleasure before they closed up for the day. He made sure he had all the papers and pushed the button which gave access to the Star Trek style micro-chamber which led to the money. He asked the girl at reception if anyone spoke English in the bank, he did not trust his Italian for this transaction. She told him that Mr. Pierluigi Zola spoke very good English, but would she be able to know the nature of the Englishman's business. Phillip explained to her, in Italian, that he wanted to do some urgent business with his bank in England which was affiliated to this very financial enterprise. She decided it better to pass him on to Signor Zola who greeted Phillip with a firm handshake and an over-the-top good morning.

Pierluigi led Phillip through to his office and enquired as to the nature of his business. Phillip began. "This may seem a little odd"

"Odd? The opposite of even?" Enquired Pierluigi.

"Strange, I mean" continued Phillip. "I have an account in the UK with a bank affiliated to yours. For personal reasons I have decided to remove all my assets from this bank and open a new account in another. There is nothing irregular about this, you will break no laws, I just wish to do the transaction as quickly as possible. For you there will be a handsome reward. I wish to sell all my shares and withdraw all the capital in my account. Your part will be to arrange for the sale of the shares at the best price available in the next twenty minutes. Then you will withdraw the capital from my account and give me a cashiers' cheque for the amount. The share value will also be paid in the same way. Then you will accompany me to a bank of your choice and I will deposit all the money into a new account which you will open for me. In return for this service I shall pay you four-hundred thousand euros. I assume we have a deal." Phillip looked at Pierluigi, who was now sweating, his perfectly greased-back, jet-black hair looking somewhat dishevelled after his fingers making several journeys through it.

"Er... Meester" He glanced at the documents to get Phillip's name. "Meester Ronson, it sounds most irregular. I don't know if I could do such a thing. It is a question of authority and, well, ethics" He smiled at Phillip but still looked nervous.

Phillip stood up, "I'm terribly sorry. You didn't seem to me to be the sort of person who receives a bonus of four-hundred grand for doing their fucking job every day. I didn't realise this was a common occurrence, you must be loaded. Never mind, there is a branch in Rome and I'm sure that there someone will want to make very easy money. Good-day" He went to take his documents and Pierluigi, mentally kicking himself, sprung into action.

"One moment, Meester Ronson, all I said was it was most irregular. Did you hear me say I wouldn't do it? Do I like stupid? I Know your English saying about the free horse and the mouth of teeth. It would be an honour to perform these tasks for you. Shall we begin? Soon it is time for the close, but I have good friend in bank across street and he make you special customer. OK?" Pierluigi retrieved the documents and began to study them. Phillip explained the process again and Pierluigi insisted that "lo ho capito, Signor." He suggested Phillip might enjoy a cappuccino while the papers were being prepared. He was told to wait in the Café in the Piazza and Pierluigi would be along forthwith.

Pierluigi set about putting together all the necessary paperwork and Phillip crossed the road. Picking up the *Gazetto dello Sport* from the news-stand, he entered the Cafeteria and ordered the much talked-about cappuccino. In Europe the sports' press is on a much more serious level than in Phillip's native Britain. He is continually surprised by the amount of information available to the fan, the number of sports' (usually 90% football) dailies, and how even in summer they manage to fill the pages with the most blatant lies about possible transfers. As he flicked through the press he found out essential information about Cristian Vieri's music taste (surprisingly no R&B, Elton John or Techno - well done), and how all the good players in the known world would be playing for AC Milan next season. As he began to scrape the bottom of the barrel, reading an article about a basketball player from a former Yugoslavian republic he didn't know where to find on a map, Pierluigi walked in. He too ordered a cappuccino and sat at the table with Phillip. He was being rather overly cloak and dagger for Phillip's taste so he told him to relax. The documents were signed and Phillip accompanied him back to the bank where the cashiers' cheques would be issued.

Back in the bank, Pierluigi's boss appeared, and, brandishing a potential spanner for the works, asked what the jolly heck was going on. Pierluigi began to splut-



ter and stutter and looked like an investigation was about to be opened when Phillip took the reigns.

"Sir," he began in very good Italian, "you should be honoured to have an employee like Pierluigi. His help has been invaluable this morning." Now the flaws were appearing linguistically, but he sure said "Sir" well. He continued "I believe he should be considered for immediate promotion, indeed I am actually pondering the possibility of hiring him as my private banker. Would he be available?" He look at the bank manager, who nervously managed.

"I'm terribly sorry, but Pierluigi is an essential part of the set-up here. We couldn't function without him. We shall be very sorry to lose your custom Mr. Ronson. I trust it is nothing to do with displeasure at our service?" This was all very vomit-inducing.

"Nothing of the sort" replied Phillip. "Just circumstances. However, as a show of good will I am prepared to make a donation of ten-thousand euros for the charity of your choice. And now, if you don't mind, I'm in rather a hurry. Pierluigi will you accompany me?" Pierluigi looked at his boss, who gestured for him to leave with Phillip and the pair went outside.

"Thank you for the donation" The bank manager shouted as they left. Pierluigi knew exactly what charity was going to be honoured. That of the fat, Milanese bank managers. Anyway, he didn't care any more because today was the first day of thousands of happy tomorrows.

They were met outside the second bank by Pierluigi's friend Alberto who gratefully opened the new account, mentally spending the healthy commission and bonus. Phillip was told that normally it takes a few days to provide new customers with credit cards and other paraphernalia related to the account, but as Phillip was such a special customer, the cards would be delivered to his hotel by courier within two hours. Hotel? He hadn't thought of that. He asked Pierluigi to recommend one, and of course, suggested possibly Milan's finest, the Principe di Savoia. Naturalmente, came the reply and Alberto gave out a semi-sycophantic laugh. Alberto was tempted to stake a claim for Four Seasons Hotel, but remained silent. After commissions, bribes and Pierluigi's cut, Phillip had a grand total of three million, four-hundred thousand euros with which to live the rest of his life. He shook Pierluigi and Alberto's hands and left the bank again accompanied by Pierluigi.

"So, what you gonna do with the money? Carry on working?" asked Phillip.

"What for that tight, old bastard? No way. He'll find my resignation on his table first thing tomorrow. I have no idea what I'll do, but I'm sure it will be fun. I don't know how to thank you. You have changed my life." A tear was forming in Pierluigi's eye.

"Don't be silly, you're a good person, and good things should happen to good people. Unfortunately, it's not always the way. Except this time. Goodbye Pierluigi Zola. By the way, no relation, no?"

"No, just the same name. Goodbye Meester Ronson."

"Phillip, please. Be happy"

"I will" and with that the pair went their separate ways. Phillip got into his car and followed the signs to the Principe de Savoia hotel. Upon his arrival at the hotel, the ever-efficient Pierluigi had performed his final act as a banker, and informed the hotel staff of the very special guest they had staying with them. The hotel manager, still maintaining the stereotype theory, but this time Phillip was on the right side, was delighted beyond words to have such a dignitary in the old place. Phillip was shown up to his suite and opted for a nap before continuing with the rest of his life. Just as he was beginning to enter a nightmare featuring Laura Lincoln, the phone rang and the hotel manager announced a courier was waiting for him. Phillip went downstairs, sleep still in his eyes and hair uncombed, and met the courier. They went into the hotel bar and began to sign the papers. Within five minutes Phillip was in possession of Platinum cards and other plastic forms of access to his, and this time he enjoyed the word, immense wealth.

His tiredness soon dissipated. He was made aware of the rather ridiculous situation in which he found himself. He was sitting in the bar of one of the finest hotels in Italy, regarded as a special customer, and he was still wearing the same shirt and pants that had seen all the scrapes of the last twenty-four hours. It was time to go shopping, and have a chat with some representatives of Sanex.

Few people will have ever experienced the thrill of buying mundane products like deodorant and toothpaste when you've just found out you are nearly



four-million euros richer. One can only imagine how ludicrous Phillip felt as he weighed up the price difference between Colgate and Signal, then he tried to calculate how many upright standing tubes he would be able to purchase with his fortune, but he felt a migraine coming on and left it. He walked out of the drug-store, his knowledge of Europe sufficient to know that attempting to buy such products in a Chemist would result in uproar in the local vecindary. With these everyday products purchased he crossed the road to a boutique, and picked up a Armani, Versace et al wardrobe for more than you care to know. He returned to the hotel and set about repairing his image. To be honest, he felt a little bit of a tosser in the clothes clearly designed to hang perfectly off footballers and singers. Although he was forty and still in relatively good shape, the firmness had gone, despite his belief that men were like a good bottle of Rioja, getting better with age, if the label doesn't go, there's not much you can do. He vowed to find a M&S or C&A the next day. Still, no time for the dillying or the dallying. He still had purchases to make.

He began to feel more comfortable in his expensive garb after about ten minutes on the street. He realised he needn't feel self-conscious as compared to the average Milanese in the street he looked hugely conservative. His first port of call was to acquire necessary electronic equipment. He entered a department store and upon finding the electrical department, sensibly placed between ladies' lingerie (he found no men's) and the fluffy toys, began to stake his claim as the most popular customer in the history of shopping. Must be a commission thing. Anyone who has tried to purchase a video cassette in a store that only likes to vend three-hundred and sixty seven inch plasma flat-screen TVs, with combined digi-box, microwave, DVD toaster, lawn-mower and bushel-counter, will know how difficult it is to attract the attention of the ironically-named sales-staff. Only customers who look like they are going to spend the equivalent of the national debt of a minor African republic are treated to the most minor courtesy. Phillip did not look like he would fall into this category, he was hardly the first person to wear Armarni jeans in Milan (and most wore them to fit), and so it took a fair while to get their attention. However, you wait an hour for a bus and..... Within seconds of him mentioning his intention to buy an iBook lap top, the latest Nokia combined phone-camera-champagne-cooler, various musical apparatus, of which he did not truly know the function, a digital video camera and bagfuls of extortionately-priced and undoubtedly unnecessary accessories, he couldn't move for the largest collection of brown-noses in the province of \_\_\_\_\_.

He decided on the Mac instead of the Microsoft format as he thought he was rich now enough for other people to have to suffer and reformat their files. The rest were just whim purchases. He realised that perhaps he would have to cool it down on the spending. Since finding out he had nearly four big ones, he had lost three-hundred thousand in bank costs and commissions. He had given four-hundred thousand to Pierluigi, and there was hardly anything left of the four-thousand euros he pinched from Laura. He had gone through eleven-thousand in

just one day in Milan. He connected his iBook to the hotel computer port, had a coffee while the thing installed itself, and made for the calculator.

Total after sale of shares and account closure: 3,879,435.23

Bank charges and commissions: 306,789.56

Pay-off to the delightfully charming Pierluigi: 400,000.00

Conscience niggling money to Laura: 4,000.00

Ludicrous shopping-spree: 11,000.00

Big-Mac Meal (Large): 5.75

GRAND TOTAL 3,157,639.92

If I spend 11,000 every day for the rest of my life:

I WILL BE BROKE IN 287 DAYS

Therefore, must cut out the fast-food.

It was clearly time to slow down the spending. As soon as the computer was properly set up, he got on-line and began the next part of his voyage of discovery. He opened his email and began to write a message to two people. To his best friend from the good-old days, Mike, and his business partner from bad-new days Sebastian. Mike had always been there for him, selflessly offering help, advice and a shoulder to cry on whenever necessary. Over the years Mike and Phillip had lost contact but whenever they got back together it was like nothing had ever changed between them. Sebastian, on the other hand was more of a twat. He had



used Phillip's position of influence in the company to first befriend him, and then betray him. Amongst other crimes, sleeping with Laura though Phillip had no wish to set up home in a greenhouse. What hurt Phillip most was Sebastian bad-mouthing Phillip behind his back to Laura's father, and subsequently swindling him out of a lucrative merger's share deal. The message was the same to both. He knew both spent most of their days on-line and would respond almost instantly.

From: phillipronson @ giffagemail.com

To: mikesimmons @ giffagemail.com

CC: sebastiancrawley @ lincoln.com

Subject: It's been a long time

Mike, Seb!,

Boys! How you doing? God it's been a long time. What's up? Listen, I'm in London next week. What do you say to a drinkie (or two) and talking about the old times? I know a place that's crammed full of young tottie! Send me an email and we'll make plans.

You old slags!

Phil

He hit send, and then looked on the British Airways page to find a flight out of Linate for tomorrow. Despite his intentions to cut down on the spending, he was soon booked on the afternoon flight in first-class (old habits die hard). He then made up his mind to have a night on the tiles in Milan before starting his new life. He didn't know why returning to the UK was important for his new life, but it seemed somehow logical. He opened the mini-bar and poured himself a cold Birreti as his inbox flashed saying he had mail. He vowed to remove that an-

noying option from the programme. He opened the inbox. Hurrah news from Sebastian!

From: sebastiancrawley @ lincoln.com

To: phillipronson @ giffagemail.com

Subject: Re: It's been a long time

Dear Mr. Ronson,

I fear you have my email address mixed-up with someone else's.

As far as I can recall I do not know any Phillip Ronson or Mike Simmons. Flattered as I would be to accept your invitation of drinkies, which sounds very pleasant, please let me know the name of this establishment, I must decline. I would be grateful if you would remove my name from your address book.

Yours Sincerely,

Sebastian Crawley

Managing Director.

Lincoln. Inc.

Phillip though that was very strange indeed, and how had Seb wound up with his old job? Well, it was no loss, but everything hinged on Mike's response. He thought about trying to get hold of his phone number and calling him, but decided he must be patient. As he prepared to enter the shower, his computer spoke to him again. He opened the message:

From: mikesimmons@ giffagemail.com

To: phillipronson @ giffagemail.com

Re: It's been a long time

YOU OLD SLAG!!!!



HASN'T IT JUST, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN HIDING? NEVER HEARD OF  
THE GLOBAL VILLAGE? TOO RIGHT DRINKS, AND THEN SOME.  
LOOKING FORWARD TO IT ALREADY SON, CALL ME WHEN YOU GET  
IN  
ON 0270-789654. VICKI SAYS KISSES.

MIKEY

Interesting, Phillip was beginning to think he had cracked the case. He picked up his new mobile and premiered it phoning his nasty uncle in Scotland who had a habit of wandering hands that turned into windmilling fists upon refusal from a young boy. What a surprise the old swine had never heard of a nephew called Phillip. He dialled his home number and spent an emotive forty minutes on the phone to his parents and sister. Now he knew, somehow, all the people that had ever done anything bad to him had been eradicated from his life. Only those who had been good to him remained. He felt bad at the amount of time he had neglected his parents and family, they said, he had been away so long that they didn't know anything about him or his last fifteen years. They weren't alone. Phillip accepted that he may never know the truth about his past, but was keenly looking forward to his future. He put on his Versace suit and went downstairs. "Tonight Matthew, I am on fire" he said to the mirror as he left the suite in that suit. Would someone share his good fortune this fine evening?

As he scoured the bar for a suitable playmate, he felt disillusioned as no-one seemed to fit the bill. Then, hidden away in the corner of the bar, he saw a blond, early thirties, slim and what seemed to be rather attractive indeed, young lady on her own. He ordered a drink and went to sit next to her, gesturing in over-effusive Italian if he may join her. She was reading "Tortilla Flat" by John Stienbeck and he guessed maybe she could speak English. She said she didn't mind if he joined her, though he supposed that she was neither elated at the idea. The conversation was at first a monologue, as she deflected the ever-so-witty one liners and observations about the European psyche. He looked to be arsing it up, when, thankfully, he changed tack. He told her his name was Phillip, he wasn't married, at least he didn't think he was, he was alone in Milan and bored out of his mind. If she would join him for dinner then at least he would have the opportunity to a) beast off her breasts and b) decide if he detested her or not. She told him her name was Madeline and that if he planned to enjoy her breasts then it should only be done with a candle between him and her. He agreed and off they went.

The restaurant provided the perfect setting for their evening. Phillip always felt a bit strange eating in an Italian restaurant in Italy, it was as if something was wrong. He imagined that on the streets of Bombay one of the biggest disappointments one could feel would be to try the Chicken Bhuna and wish one was back in Bradford. As they sat at the table and nibbled at the chopsticks, Phillip began to interrogate Madeline as to what brought her to Milan. The reason was simple. She worked for a wine magazine and was over there to look at some new brands. Phillip began to feel slightly worried about his showing-off choosing the most expensive Chianti on the Carte des Vins. As they muddled through the difficult initial conversations and glasses, slowly Phillip began to relax, and when Madeline suggested they were gelling, he felt comfortable. Once the second bottle was opened, they seemed like old-friends, Phillip had forgotten his lusty intentions and was actually enjoying her company. They laughed and ate, and drank and ate. Phillip felt so at ease with Madeline that he decided it was time to tell his story.

He wasn't sure what reaction would grace the face of Madeline upon the story's conclusion. Halfway through, he questioned the wisdom of telling her the story as if he were telling it Mike or his Mother, what would be their reaction? Still Madeline listened patiently and at the end took a big swig of her wine and pulled out a packet of Marlboro Lights. She said she only smoked on special occasions and this one warranted a drag. She told him she wanted to believe the story, but given the briefness of their acquaintanceship, felt it difficult. She did agree that it was a fabulous story and leant over the table to give Phillip a kiss, burning the ends of her blond bob in the process on the chastity candle. Normally Phillip would have gestured for the waiter to terminate the customer-patron relationship with a girl offering herself for afters, but Phillip felt in hurry with Madeline, as if he had all the time in the world. They maintained the embrace for a while, took another swig, and repeated. Their eating of the dessert was rather embarrassing, and should definitely be cut out of any film version of this tale. Still everyone should have the chance to play around with strawberries and chocolate sauce at least once in their life so why not in Milan's swankiest restaurant?

After dinner they walked back through the city centre to their hotel. The inevitable was put off a while longer as they sipped brandy from the mini-bar and told the stories of how they lost their virginity. The brandy and the chatting continued for so long that they didn't realise that they were in bed together and interlocked in another act that would have to be edited out, depending on the watershed, or if it is to be broadcast on Channel Four (though these days it doesn't really matter too much, gone are the days of the red triangles). The night of passion was not exactly whirlwind, both went through the awkward series of drunken movements aimed at improving copulation, but the effect was far from symmetrical. However, none of that mattered to either of them, both were convinced that the stars had brought them together, that destiny wanted this night to



occur. At round about seven in the morning, Phillip repeated his story, this time coloured with strokes of "but, now I've met you it all makes sense". He announced he would not be going to London. He was going to do something he had always wanted to do, open a pottery shop somewhere quiet and live a simple life. He asked her to go with him to Málaga, and there they would begin a happy new life together. She told him she would love to but, this, that and the other, impeded her joining him. He begged and begged, and she was moved. She felt her heart telling her to forget about her job and life that she didn't even enjoy, and take the risk. As she looked up at Phillip to continue the conversation, she saw him lying there, fast asleep and about to snore.

Madeline didn't get any more sleep that night. She spent the next two hours chewing over Phillip's proposition, and how she had always told people she wanted to do something impulsive. Now that she had the chance, she felt she had so little courage that maybe the Tin Man and the Scarecrow were about to come in with room service. She watched Phillip for a while, him stretched out on the king-size bed, oblivious to the momentous decision being taken during his slumber, planted a kiss on his forehead and got out of bed. On the hotel notepaper she wrote simply "Sorry" and hurriedly gathering her clothes and dressing, she then exited the suite. It would be another two hours before Phillip would awake and see the note. By that time, Madeline would be boarding the Alitalia airbus to Gatwick.

Phillip had woken up alone on many occasions. Even on those occasions when he had fallen asleep in fine company. But he did expect Madeline to be there when he awoke. He saw the note and felt pain, then he reread the note over and over (this didn't take too long) and began to laugh. This was clearly not goodbye. He knew that Madeline would reappear as she was now part of this. He had had too much too soon, he now had to be patient and begin his mission. Two phone calls, one to his mother, along the lines of: "Sorry, yes, I know, I always do this, look give me a bit of time then I'll send for you all. Just wait and see." His mother could not comprehend the message, but she had come to expect this type of behaviour from Phillip. The second, to Mike, ansaphone: "London off, going to Costa del Sol. Save a couple of weeks' holiday. Buy suntan lotion. Will be in touch." He realised it was time to change his airline ticket. He could have argued the toss with British Airways, but decided on the quickest solution as there was a flight out of Milan to Madrid with a connection to Málaga leaving in three hours. Time to pack. Foolishly, he had prepared the day before for a life on the road without buying a suitcase. The hotel shop did not stock such items. He got quite irate with the shop assistant in the hotel gift zone, but then saw the logic of her argument that a very high percentage of guests come with their luggage already packed into suitcases. He found an establishment that sold over-priced and far from attractive Samsonite's at the mere throw of a stone.

It is indeed a strange experience (although in comparison to what had happened to Phillip in the past few days, it would struggle to make top ten) buying a suitcase. It provides the purchaser with one of the few opportunities to walk around with a completely empty suitcase. This made Phillip think twice about his travel plans. He passed a bookshop and decided that he wanted a period of adjustment before arriving in Spain. The flight would be too quick, if it had taken him forty years to get here, he could spare a few more days. He purchased a Teach-Yourself Spanish pack, which boasted that with a couple of hours a day study, the listener would be capable of holding meaningful and grammatically accurate conversations in less than a month. He planned to spend at least hours a day at it, and hoped his knowledge of Italian would be of some benefit in this quest. And so another airline ticket went to waste. He even thought that he may be given some rewards from the airlines for his contributions to allowing them to continue their overbooking policy. Next to the book shop was a travel agent's. Phillip, again surprised a member of the Italian service sector by enquiring as to the most leisurely means of getting from the Eternal City to Málaga. He was informed of a revolutionary form of travel involving impractical looking metal boxes that imitated the birds. He told the kind Signorita that he had no wish to embark in one of those things, and would some sailing vessel be available to make the trip. He was beginning to tire of the Latin's over-interest in people's lives. He was sure that had he undertaken this request in London or Inverness, the only question he would have been asked would refer to the form of payment. Still, as she looked for a suitable embarkation, he told her of his plan to commence a new life in Spain and open a pottery shop. If before she thought he was a Botniek short of the Panini 1982 Polish national World Cup sticker set, now she was convinced. Neither did she allow the general philosophy of the customer always being right impede her treatment of Mr. Ronson. Eventually, after much huffing and puffing, he was booked on a cruise-liner leaving Rome at seven am the next morning, calling at Palma de Mallorca and Tunis before docking in Málaga six days later. He thanked her for her help, and then cursed himself for being so British as her helpfulness was almost in as small quantities as her friendliness. It was now early evening in Milan and he had to be in Rome by sunrise the next day. He realised he still had the Alfa Romeo, so returning to the bookshop he bought an Italian road atlas and planned his route down to the capital.

The journey would take approximately \_\_\_\_\_. He mulled over the possibilities for the logistical organisation of the trip, and decided it best to get his head down straight away (packing would take approximately eight minutes) and rise at two am. This would give him time for the drive, he was charmingly informed by the car-hire agency that he could not leave the car at the port, but would have to leave it at the Estazione \_\_\_\_\_. This would require a taxi from the station to the port, but he was repeatedly assured that this would be of no difficulty. He went back to the hotel, and ordered a pizza (he hadn't been told the



story of the Italian immigrants to America who invented it there, either) and settled the bill there and then so that he had as much time as possible for the drive. After eating and packing, he stopped for the first time that day. He closed his eyes and tried to beckon sleep, but none came. He hadn't thought of Madeline all day because he hadn't allowed himself a minute to do so. Now he lay alone in the darkness and could think of nothing else. He consoled himself that he knew he would see her again, and then started remembering novels and films in which parted lovers were reacquainted in the winter of their years. He did not want to see her by chance when Phillip was a septuagenarian. Desperate, he turned on the television set and began to watch an over-the-top, tacky game-show on RTII. After he questioned whether it could get more banal, he achieved his wish, and thus never found out the answer.

When the alarm went off at two am, Phillip had a disorientating flashback to a day when he had fever and missed school. When he woke up at seven-thirty he could not explain why Coronation Street was on at the time he was supposed to be getting ready for school. Nothing registered, he knew not where he was nor what his name was. So why Mike Baldwin? This was the same feeling. It was not a time to be getting out of bed, in most places it was still not a time for getting into bed. After lying there dazed for a couple of minutes, he suddenly remembered why he was thinking at this time and rose from the pit. Rather pride-inducing foresight saw room service bring coffee and croissants up at ten-past two as he glided out of the shower ready for the world, or at least, Italian motorways. By just gone half-past he was on the road and leaving Milan, enjoying the user friendly, European motorway system to find the X-98 to Rome.

He was soon powering down the motorway and as Ray's brother Dave finished the last lines of "Death of a Clown" Phillip was reminded that his two cd collection was in need of an extension. At the next services he chanced his arm, but only additive-free engine oil and hard-core pornography were on sale. Thirty kilometres down the road he had more luck. In multi-sectioned restaurant-shopping mall-amusement-rest area neon atrocity visible from about ten kilometres before ones arrival, he found a nicely isolated INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS AND GROUPS section which was brief, but inviting. Ironically, they only sold music in the CD format, though none of the artists available created their best work when this was the format of choice for the record (not any more) buying public. The Jam and Slade would help him to Rome. He thought about listening to the Spanish CD but convinced himself that was a boat thing. He made good time down the X-98 and found himself on the outskirts of Rome at a little after five in the morning. He drove through the deserted streets to the Estazione where he left the hire car without to much hullabaloo. The excess was paid without so much as a glance at the bill, and Phillip asked if they would be so kind to hail him

a taxi. They were so kind, and well before six he was on the way to the port. He removed his luggage, thought about asking for some form of written evidence of the supplements' policy, but left it at that. He boarded the boat and was taken to the cabin where he would spend the majority of this cruise.

He wasn't a fan of the idea of cruises. His fears had been confirmed upon boarding. Hoards of ghastly-looking, over-sunned and over-fed British pensioners shared the deck with equally repulsive and (Phillip did not see how this would be possible) less classy-looking Americans. At least the Germans and the French kept themselves to themselves, or maybe they had no wish to mix with the rest. Whilst walking past a variety of conversant passengers who claimed to dine with the captain, Phillip made the pleasing discovery that the majority of the cabin crew were South American. Now, this may provide some accentual and lexical differences, but it would certainly provide a good form of practice. He wrongly assumed that these underpaid modern-day slaves would like nothing better than to listen to an inept Englishman mispronounce the world-shattering news that His tailor is rich.

Phillip felt tired, but resisted the temptation to take to the bunk and went for breakfast with his Spanish book in hand. As is always the way when you do not wish to have polite, or for that matter, rude, conversation with anyone, the nosy-world gets together and sends a telepathic message to every busy-body in the vicinity to descend upon you. After little more than a bite of toast, a rather robust woman, the wrong side of forty-five, delightedly told him she too was learning Spanish. And so, for the first hour of the voyage he didn't get past the Introduction. He went for a swim, assuming that there people would not question his actions, or, even worse reveal theirs to him. After that he returned defeated to his cabin and fell asleep with the Spanish CD on. He woke up later to be told the Chemist doesn't stock deodorant, you'll have to get down to the Droguería for that Amigo, when he realised it was time for lunch. However, on a cruise it was almost always time for lunch, or dinner, or supper. He couldn't face the dining room. He phoned the ever-helpful staff and informed them of his rather sudden stomach-ache. He enquired as to whether it would be possible to have spare-ribs with barbecue sauce and chilli-con-carne sent to his room with a few bottles of Coronita. Despite the fact that this nourishment was hardly the most advisable for a person with a stomach-ache, this lot had heard that the customer is always right and soon obliged.

Minutes later Toni was at his door with his feast. Toni was from Columbia, just north of Bogotá. He had fled his country not because of Guerrilla kidnaps and assassinations but lack of wonga. On the ships he could clear a thousand euros a month with all included, that meant he could send back about half to his family and cause his grandmother to claim he was a saint. He wasn't a saint,



though Colombian grandmother's of drugs' cartel leaders probably have the same power of pontificating. Toni lived off tips to make it up to or over the thousand, the easiest source of these was to "entertain" the more alone female passengers. Toni was not proud of this, but if God was going to give him a firm six-pack, jet-black hair and a winning smile, what else was he to do with it? Phillip liked Toni immediately, he asked him if he would be his personal language tutor. Toni felt he had to come clean and own up that he was not an educated man, he did not see himself with the necessary capacities to expand the language of Cervantes to the Englishman. However, when Phillip offered thirty dollars an hour, he said that it couldn't be that difficult and accepted the challenge. So in his breaks (12-1pm) every day, Toni came to Phillip's cabin and in a pretend, over-the-top Valladolid accent he remembered hearing on a television programme, they read Phillip's Spanish books together. As Phillip improved and began to ask more challenging questions regarding the subjunctive or reflexive pronouns, Toni responded to Phillip's "Porqué?" with a shrug of the shoulders and a "¡Porque sí!"

Deep down Phillip knew Toni's help would not make much difference with his grammatical accuracy, but appreciated the opportunity to try out the phrases on a real, living Spanish speaker. Toni did wonder when Phillip was going to show his true colours and ask him to undress, but the cruise went on and Phillip seemed happy enough with the classes. Phillip disembarked in Palma de Mallorca, he wondered where the "j" had gone, to try and practice some of the phrases from the famous book. Disillusioned after less than ten minutes, he made his way to an Irish bar and ordered a fry-up (it claimed to be an Irish breakfast, but did bear all the hallmarks of an English origin) he polished it off with a pint of Guinness and vowed never to set foot in a similar establishment again. He made his way back to the boat, slightly more animated as the taxi-driver had understood his instructions.

Phillip remained in his cabin for almost all the rest of the cruise. He refused to get off in Rabat, and with Toni bringing him his meals every day, he had no need to mingle. On the last day he received a bouquet and a basket of fruit with the captain's compliments, saying how deeply sorry he felt about Phillip missing so much of the cruise due to this unfortunate illness. Eventually, they docked in Málaga. Phillip bid farewell to Toni, amidst the horrified looks of the cabin-dwellers on the same level, replete with "Told you so" looks, not to mention the broken-heart of the recipient of Toni's nocturnal gigolo activities, and set foot on the Spanish mainland.

An intensive CD course spoken by the Spanish equivalent of Nigel Havers, imparted by an unqualified Colombian gigolo, was not really the correct preparation for the course Andalusian accent to be found on the streets of Málaga. He wondered during the taxi-ride to the \_\_\_\_\_ hotel, if he hadn't made a mistake and

disembarked in Rabat after all. But no, the road signs informed he was indeed enjoying the Costa del Golf. In the hotel things went with slightly more smoothness, but Phillip still had to resort back to English. No matter how many times you ask if the room has a shower and what time the banks close, sometimes you need more complicated information.

It seemed difficult to believe, as he lay on his hotel bed, that less than two weeks had passed since his life underwent a revolution. He had work to do, and although the spending average had fallen noticeably below the eleven-thousand euros a day average, it was still far too high. He needed to purchase many things in order to open his pottery shop, and thought it time to put his finances in order. He had left Milan with three point two million and had taken another hundred-thousand off that getting to Spain. He made a phone call to a broker friend in London with the aim of investing a million. Confusion reigned on the phone line until Phillip remembered that this broker friend had taken part in Sebastian's share scam. Therefore, he had been wiped from Phillip's past. Luckily, he remembered Mike's brother had gone into the stock-market recently and dialled the number. With a million nicely invested in blue-chip stock, (the day the British Airways and Telecom went down would be a sad day for all, but especially now Phillip as they formed the majority of his new portfolio) Phillip felt more at ease. He went downstairs to the hotel lobby to request help in order to get his dream moving.

He excitedly informed the charming lady on the desk that he would require the services of an employment agency that spoke English. He said that he meant to cause no offence but that he did not trust an interpreter. She told him it was twenty-past two on Saturday afternoon and not to expect any kind of business activity would not be possible until Monday, after breakfast. She suggested he visited a nature reserve with wild animals just outside Marbella, but he declined. He was determined to get something done. He had decided his shop's location would be in Marbella's old town, not in the worryingly flashy, and equally expensive Puerto Banus, but somewhere in the old town. However, he did not wish to form part of an expat community on the sea-front of Marbella. He wished to live somewhere where he would have to speak Spanish, and not be another British tourist in Spain. At first she suggested Jaen as the only possible option in Andalusia that would not be over-run with foreigners. He told her the logistics of living four-hundred kilometres from his workplace, simply to get away from the Brits was not good. She agreed and they looked at the map. He was told it would be inevitable to live in a Brit-free zone, but he could minimise the possibilities of shell-suit encounters. She lived in Estepona, some ten kilometres from Marbella, but from some angles it seemed like a different world. She told him if he wanted she could show him the village this afternoon, if he wanted. He checked the "OFFERS I'VE HAD TODAY" option on his PDA, and saw that nothing compared. He told her he would be delighted and would return at four p.m. Pleased, he went to eat sea-



food and accompanied it with a delightfully crisp half bottle of white whilst looking over the waves. When the bill came and was under twenty euros, he knew he was doing the right thing.

She told him she finished at four on the dot, so at twenty-five past four she announced that in five minutes she would be ready. By ten to five they were in her car, recreating the Monaco Grand Prix through the streets of Malaga. Flying off the roads out of the city centre, they hit the Autovia del Mediterraneo and Pilar (appropriate as she reminded him of Pilar from Eldorado, strange that he thought this as they went past Coín, twenty kilometres outside Marbella, where the programme was filmed.) Phillip, unfortunately, would not come across this information until much later. When they arrived in Estepona, Phillip fell in love immediately. When he asked about house prices he was prepared to wake up the nearest estate-agent from his post-lunch slumber and make a deal there and then. She showed him round a sight under construction and said they could return on Monday to talk business as the constructor was a cousin of hers. Little did Phillip know of just how many cousins there were to the square kilometre (he had to stop thinking in miles, though this is always pleasant for the British tourist, when they think they still have forty miles to go and then discover it is only twenty-six, and they will reach their destination in less than half an hour. Though whoever thought it was easier to multiply by one-thousand than on-thousand seven-hundred and sixty-two must have been something of a spoilsport.)

She told him to get back in the jeep as she would take him back to Málaga centre. Realising that seafood and crisp, white wine taste even better in the company of sultry Latin looks, Phillip went for an old standard from his cheesy lines collection.

"I don't know how to thank you, Pilar. I don't suppose your boyfriend would be very happy if I invited you to dinner to show my gratitude." Painful, it was. "What you don't have a boyfriend? How can that be? Then would you do me the honour of accompanying me for dinner this evening?" She said she would, but for obvious reasons did not want him to wait for her at the hotel. Instead, she showed him a place where they could go and said she would be there at half-past nine. He enquired as to whether that meant half-past nine or ten o'clock. She laughed and commented something about British punctuality. He knew that meant he would have to be there at half-past nine and see what would happen. Perhaps ten o'clock would be optimistic. He thought about Madeline and then told himself it was only dinner, for God's sake! Anyway, he was sure it would take a marriage proposal and a letter of recommendation from the Pope before he could get into Pilar's braguitas.

Chivalrously, he appeared at twenty-five past nine. He thought about flowers or some other token for her to commemorate this momentous evening, but had second-thoughts as it might cause her to misread his intentions. In actual fact, this was the self-justifying excuse he opted for, the reality was not misreading his intentions, but actually seeing through him. He decided to play it quite cool. If she came on to him, then so be it. He, though, was not going to make a fool of himself. Unless, of course, he got drunk and suddenly felt horny. It was soon quarter to ten, and Phillip wondered what would be officially considered late in this land of mañanas. Ten came and went too, and by quarter-past he was thinking of considering himself stood-up, when Pilar appeared, talking on the mobile and looking for a cigarette lighter at the same time. She gave Phillip a peck on both cheeks, whilst still talking and smoking. Phillip waited patiently and tried not to look like he was standing out as the phone conversation dragged on past the ten minute mark. Phillip could not ascertain what earth-shattering piece of news was being passed on but could only gather it was far more important than their temporarily postponed dinner. Eventually, Pilar drew her conversation to an end and, after asking how he was and telling him she was hungry, she beckoned him to follow her.

If Phillip thought an apology was on the cards he was sorely mistaken. He made a mental note never to be on time again, and chased after Pilar. She looked good in her hotel uniform, but in civvies she was even better. He was beginning to rethink his policy on this young lady. He told her she looked beautiful, desperately trying to make it sound so matter-of-fact that it removed all the cheesy connotations. Despite it sounding more like if he was asking for a spare bicycle-pump, she took the compliment on board and threw one back. In the delightful autumnal air they walked to a restaurant that Pilar thought very highly of. Every item on the menu, even the little bits of hard bread that look and taste like dog-biscuits, required several oohs and aahs to complete its description. In the light of such over-the-top description Phillip thought it best to order something he knew, lest disappointment cause problems with what he was now hoping would be afters. However, he did not wish to appear a stuffy, conservative Englishman, so put on an excited face as she ordered a variety of different forms of squid and other fish that Collins and his mates have never bothered to translate as the chances of any one of them floating around the North Sea in order to be caught would be hugely improbable. To Phillip's surprise he found he liked everything, then as the next plate came, he found he adored everything. She felt the inevitable pride felt by all Mediterranean dwellers when someone enjoys their food. The meal was an enormous success. Phillip had even borrowed a pen to write down the names of the various once-aquatic creatures that had graced his plate. Pilar felt she had helped her country through the difficult test of charming a foreigner's palette, and when the bill came it was time to discuss those afters.

Phillip's preconceptions about catholic were proven wrong upon leaving the restaurant. Pilar coolly explained that she fancied him and wouldn't mind a bit of



the other, but she had a self-conscious thing, and would need a couple of Rum and Cokes to get her gander up. (Her English was not that colloquial really but she had seen an episode of Terry and June on the BBC satellite before coming out. Hence the lateness). Phillip had no problem with this, and despite foolishly asking where they could get a drink at twenty-to-one on a Saturday night in Málaga, they found a very charming looking place and entered. The Rum was supposed to open Pilar's legs, but unfortunately, it had a similar effect on her mouth too, inhibitions flying out the window as she told Phillip of various affairs and clinches with hotel managers. Phillip was tempted to ask for her collaboration on the hotel manager theory he had, but could not find an entry point into the conversation. Conversation in the sense of his punctuating ohs, reallys and you didn'ts.

After he got used to her rather graphic descriptions of her escapades, Phillip found Pilar quite fun. She reminded him of Madeline, he began to think of her again when Pilar got up and Phillip assumed the moment had arrived. She told him she was going to the ladies, not a pleasant experience for a male companion in Spain, as the toilet systems in place represent for the men, the high-speed train link from Seville to Madrid, and for the women, the complex inter-city network of slow-moving trains connected villages still in the age of steam with weekend August engineering works. He knew Pilar would need at least twenty minutes to rid herself of the excess liquid, so decided another one of these rather large drinks would be in order. He was getting quite a taste for them now, after three. He looked worried as the bartender didn't remember to stop pouring the nectar, only leaving enough room for the Coke to slightly colour the drink. Still, it soon seemed to taste like those served from the over-priced optics in his local. Pilar returned from the lavatory, saw his half-full drink, and decided her thirst had still to be fully quenched. She returned with another for Phillip, who was reminded of those lines from Shakespeare about drink provoking the emotion. Finally, Pilar was of the belief that her inhibitions had been quashed. Phillip now realised that he had raised a lot of expectations regarding the forthcoming event, but feared he may not raise anything else. The hotel was clearly out-of-bounds as Pilar was expecting news on a promotion soon. She told him the beach was probably more comfortable than the bed, and they got down to some drunken fumbling in the sand. Pilar did take the incident with good humour, and so, when it was clear that the port authorities were not going to let Phillip's vessel dock for any length of time, the ship was re-routed. They sat on the beach and made plans for the next day. After a goodnight kiss Phillip returned to his hotel room and collapsed onto the bed in a fit of giggles.

The next day Phillip got up and remembered he wasn't twenty-two. After a small lagoon of orange juice and scrambled eggs managed to remove the Axminister someone had placed inside his mouth during the night, Phillip decided that Sunday was not a day of great activity, and decided to hit the beach and sweat out

the toxins. Phillip thanked God he had a complexion which did not require the same amount of attention as that of a normal Englishman on the beach. He lay there on his towel and thought about making plans, but soon fell asleep. His dream took him back to the scene of the previous nights unfinished business, and he was soon enjoying a very pleasant hangover-reducing dream. As is often dreams' folly, he awoke just when it was getting interesting, his mind allowing him to live through large portions of incongruous material before the main event. At first he felt the heat, and then realised he was on the beach. Next, he realised the dream had caused not only his head to feel different, and wondered how many disgusted families with young children had been forced to backtrack after his far-from-baggy trunks had revealed more than was truly necessary. After repeating the periodic table to himself three times, he was ready to return to the hotel. He picked up a large bottle of mineral water on the way, and fell back onto that bed, which he now concluded was more comfortable than the beach. He threw two aspirin into his mouth, and hit the shower. At first the hot water was pleasant on his skin, but soon turned to agony as he was reminded that ball of fire was five-million light years away, but still needed a bit of respect. He lay on the bed again, whacked the air-conditioning up full and ordered the super-cheeseburger from room service. With the low-quality grub and the aspirin forming a coalition to oust the evil from his body he soon felt well enough to call Pilar. He removed his Spanish course-book from the case, where it had reposed since his arrival in the country where the language was born, and opened it on the telephoning section. What seemed to be a foolproof dialogue was complicated beyond all belief as the conversation was held between Phillip and Pilar's grandmother (making her customary Sunday visit), only after it was clear that no information was going to be prised from the caller, was he passed on to her granddaughter. Pilar's voiced had sounded sweet and smooth the night before, but now she sounded like Chris Rea after a tracheotomy. She declined his offer of a romantic evening, cursing her inability to distance herself too much from the lavatory. Phillip, slightly disheartened, walked into town to try to amuse himself. He found a cinema, and tried to make his way through an Arnie flick, though he had many more difficulties with the dubbing than the hero had fending off the villains. He felt even more deflated at later discovering via Internet that the ending was not the one he had understood. He made his way back to the hotel and prepared for a day of honest graft on the next sunrise.

He awoke at eight, breakfasted, played an optical game of cat and mouse with Pilar on reception and made for the centre again. He assumed he had located what would be the central business district. His first employment agency boasted on the door its opening hours commenced at ten in the morning. Even though it had gone quarter past, Phillip could not gain access. He chanced upon another further down the road, and this time had better luck. He received a questioning look that he was becoming accustomed to when he put forward his request. Those in the agency did not think there was much of a future in pottery. Phillip did not want for their opinions, only their services. Apologies. They continue. Marco was



given the responsibility of Phillip's request. It was quite simple, find premises, hire potter, hire secretary, start making pottery and sell it. Phillip had now under two million to finance his dream but did think it would suffice. He planned not to touch the million in stocks until it was truly necessary. He was taken to see some hi-tech monstrosity drifting dangerously towards Puerto Banus. Phillip informed Marco he had money, but did not wish to have his time wasted. He wanted what he wanted, and was prepared to pay their commissions, but was in no mood for fun and games. The next place was much more appropriate. A recently closed-down bakers' in a windy street in the old town. Marco began to talk about rent and advances and other ugly topics whose name should never be mentioned in polite company. Phillip stopped him, and let him know he liked the place and would meet the seller's price gladly. Marco (working on a minuscule salary plus commission bonuses), wanted to kiss Phillip, but resisted, phoning the owner, who made the trip from the fourth floor huffing and puffing at the inconvenience of it all. The owner was probably not much of a poker player, exclaiming "Sí" at the basic offer price. His wife came down the stairs and there proceeded general unintelligible jollity. Phillip assured the old couple the money would be in their bank account within forty-eight hours, but they told him not to worry as he was now treated with more affection than their own grandchildren.

"Money makes the world go round, eh Marco?" Phillip commented, but Marco had adopted the habit of saying "Yes" to everything that left Phillip's mouth. After a round of paper-signing Phillip had his establishment. He now needed to organise interviews. How many English-speaking unemployed potters could there be in Marbella? He was about to find out. He didn't plan to spend too long in the hotel. It looked like the Pilar situation was going to stop being a situation soon, so it was time to buy. He told Marco he was also looking for a place to rest his head, and, delighted, Marco told Phillip his cousin was an estate agent. A meeting was set up for six that evening whereby Phillip would have the chance to view what were described as "Once in a Lifetime Opportunities" (in big letters).

The shop had cost him a bit more than two-hundred thousand euros, he didn't mind spending double on his flat, but wanted his money's worth. This again involved moving away from the flashy G&T supping lands of Marbella, and concentrate on his new, since the day before, favourite Spanish village of Estepona. Estepona was only a stone's throw away from Marbella, well a short taxi-ride. Despite its proximity to the over-exploited leisure and suggested crime capital, Estepona managed to remain somehow different from the rest of the colonised zones. In the nineteenth century the British sent their armies to take foreign lands, now they send their tourists. Of course, they have to be content with villages when in the past they got the whole of India, still the modern empire was much more comfortable, and you got Sky TV, fish and chips and John Smith's on draught. Estepona had its fair share of tourists and was not the charming fishing village one found thirty years hence, but still one felt like being in Spain.

Phillip had unhappy memories of house-hunting with Laura, whether they were true or not he did not know. However, he had no wish to relive these moments now he was the only one to please. He saw three flats that afternoon, the last one was the one he decided on. As soon as he walked into that spacious living room, with French windows leading onto the terraza that boasted a splendid view of the sea. He imagined himself in a hammock on summer afternoons, drifting slowly into a refreshing siesta to the sound of the waves gently crashing against the shore. It had many advantages for the single male, fitted wardrobes and kitchen would save time, it featured a few bits and bobs of furniture and a sofa-bed, which meant if he could get hold of ten-percent in cash the next day, he could move in there and then. Poor Pilar, how many chances like this have you let slip, he thought to himself as he was shown the garage place (thrown in for free as he was not to bother anyone with mortgages or the like). He was in no real hurry to waste time on the furnishings and other amenities, though when Marco also had another cousin who had an electrical shop, and another who dabbled in home furnishings, he thought it best to keep up the momentum. It was still only Monday evening, no interviews were scheduled till Wednesday afternoon, so why not continue the never-ending cousin link?

He returned to the hotel with Marco, and they made plans to meet his other cousins the next day, after another effusive mobile call. Pilar was not working that evening, so Phillip needed to find another way of passing the time. From his hotel balcony he saw an Irish pub down the road, and despite his vow to the contrary, decided Monday night football and a few pints of Guinness would help see Monday out. For a nine o'clock kick off he had to get moving quickly. He was clear about not eating the establishment where visual pleasure was to be achieved, and found a bar nearby that had items corresponding to his list from that night with Pilar. He enjoyed ordering and was pleasantly surprised when his order was taken and the desired food arrived at his table. Of course, the waiter pulled the obligatory "trying to understand you" face that is customary for hostiliery staff when faced with a foreigner. He was getting quite a taste for seafood, and despite it meaning missing the pre-match banter, and perhaps the kick-off, opted for another plate of prawns in garlic and olive-oil that appeared to have been recently removed from a volcano in eruption. Once he had removed the two layers of dead skin from his tongue and the roof of his mouth, he was able to enjoy the dish in only small amounts of pain. He made another mental note to order that particular dish in the future at least three hours before he planned to consume it.

Once inside the pub, he found most people were already in their social groups, apart from a couple of outcasts who clung fervently to the bar for reassurance. He ordered a pint and began to prepare some inane introductory conversation,



guaranteed to transform the evening into a sparkling soirée of debate and intellectualism.

"Who's playing mate?" He enquired to another obvious out-of-towner with an equally-limited social imagination.

"Charlton Athletic - Bolton" came the reply, the respondent moving his bar-stool so Phillip had a clear view of the definition of his new friend's back. If he was going to play hard to get then Phillip had many more suitors to court in the rest of the bar. He stood behind a group of Charlton fans (he didn't think his public school accent and designer clothes would endear him to the Bolton fans in the house - who did also appear less happy than those on their own), and made polite enquiries as to the proceedings until that moment, trying to pass himself off as an Athletic fan. He had an above adequate footballing knowledge (anyone who doesn't work much and has an Internet connection is always first to the sports news), and soon had made his way into this circle, proving himself by proclaiming his hatred for Arsenal and Chelsea. The evening was quite enjoyable, various pints, a surprisingly open and entertaining game given the teams involved, followed a post-match lurch at a group of American exchange students. Phillip was told that they was always in the place, Phillip could well believe it and they hoped to see him again. Especially when he let the Platinum card take care of the sizeable bill. He left being told he was a true gent and promised to return soon. Outside he decided not to be a Charlton fan for the rest of his life, and returned to his vow.

Insomnia was never a question after the black liquid. Still no sign of Pilar at the hotel. He was planning to invite her for dinner in the new place, but once again she had missed the boat. He climbed into bed, and taking the large pillow by his side proceeded to spend the night with Madeline. He needed a good night's sleep as he had a lot of shopping to do the next day.

Seven pints of Guinness, he was sure it was seven, and anyway, one does not count the drinks of inferior number as it only excess in one area that causes hangovers. Of course, this form of addition could cause problems (see Sparkling Lambrusco vs. Blue Label Vodka 1985), but meant that Phillip did not count the glasses of Glenfiddich or the small shots (chupitos) offered free with every round. It was the Guinness that had done for him, and furniture shopping, never a great passion of Phillip's, was going to be much more of a chore that morning. At ten o'clock he took a taxi to meet Marco who drove him to a trendy modern design place just up from the entrance to Marbella. Phillip liked everything, except thinking, and in less than half an hour had said enough "Sí" to more than sparsely furnish his flat. In the electronics store it was even easier. A far-too-many inched flat-

screen television with accessories, a Technics separates system, toasters, coffee-makers, fryers, dishwashers and other modern gadgets fell into the ever popular "Sí" category and all would be delivered this evening. Next stop was the bank, and with a cashier's cheque in his hand he went to his new abode. Papers were signed, smiles were shared and happiness reigned. Phillip took advantage of Marco's car a while longer to return to hotel, pack and pay up. He left a note for Pilar with his new address, just in case.

That first night in his new flat, he realised, as he sat surrounded by unopened boxes containing the very latest gadgetry to please the recent millionaire, that there was still something missing. He felt he had to do something to find Madeleine, but was not sure what. The telephone company had told him it could be some while before the phone line would be put in, which meant he had no access to the Net. Not that he would know where to look, he could check every wine merchant in London, but was not even sure whether she said London because she meant London or didn't want to say Maidenhead. He was still sure destiny would bring them together, but feared for the sooner becoming later. He eventually managed to sleep a few hours, and woke up early for a walk on the beach. The walk cleared his head, and in no time he was on the phone to Marco, to see if they could speed things up with the interviews. Marco reported good news, a friend of a friend had a cousin who was a potter, and the word on the street was he was rather a good one. He spoke reasonable English as well, and also had a working knowledge of computers and web design. Phillip had already mentally contracted him before Pedro arrived at the soon-to-be shop. He had got together a small selection of his work, which was rather traditional for Phillip's taste, but more a reflection on his previous employers demand curve rather than Pedro's personal statement on the medium. He also seemed a rather nice fellow, even if Phillip was slightly put off by the hairiness of his arms. Still, he was young and keen to work, both qualities admired by Phillip as this early juncture in the business.

Pedro agreed to the salary, he would have accepted half, and they set about putting things together. Phillip wanted to be operational in a fortnight, which caused Pedro to shake his right hand violently and expel air through pursed lips, an action which some time later Phillip would discover meant, in local terms, he was being ambitious. Pedro, though, had already begun thinking about that red Golf Gti he had always fancied, and made no attempts to stop his new boss. First stop was to get some wheels for the company, Phillip was on a high now that things seemed to be moving along, and even shopping for second-hand vans was exhilarating. It was Pedro's idea to go second-hand as there was a showroom that specialised in such vehicles nearby. Phillip liked that frugal touch, and they picked up a two year old Berlingo at a very reasonable price. Pedro also had contacts within the potter's world that could get his equipment at a discount. The word discount hit Phillip full in the face. He had bought many things in the time that



had passed since "The Incident", but the idea of bartering had never crossed his mind, perhaps it would be good to have a calming influence on board. After meeting a couple of Pedro's contacts the majority of the equipment was ordered, and shipment was promised within a week.

After a hectic day, they closed up at gone nine in the evening. Pedro enquired as to Phillip's plans for the evening, suspecting a cold, empty home would await him, and insisted he accompany him to the family home for real food. Phillip was tempted and appreciated the gesture, but felt he could not handle understanding various generations of Pedro's family over dinner. He politely declined and returned to his flat. Picking up a selection of fried fish and a cold bottle of white for his own, very private party. As he sat on the terrace, furniture for that would still need to be bought, for he had no intention of dragging the reclining, leather chair out there every time it got above twenty degrees. He slept better that night, but still had Madeline on his mind.

The next few days were spent mainly waiting for pieces to arrive, sending them back when they were wrong, and finally receiving the correct pieces. By the end of the week it was starting to look like a potter's workshop, but the possibility of opening to the public in seven days more, was looking even more optimistic now. Pedro hadn't said anything before, but felt it was time to mention the rather complicated and at times, soul-destroying administrative process that would have to be undertaken in order to be the owner of one's own business. Phillip thought Pedro was joking, but the look on his face did not change, and Phillip knew him well enough to take that as a bad sign. Pedro's idea was to get another person in to take the administrative load off their backs. They would need a secretary in any case, so Pedro argued the case for his cousin Carmen. Carmen had plenty of experience, spoke English and was looking for work after a disappointing end of contract moment with her last employer. After just a morning with Carmen on board the ship everything was neatly in its place, the company logo was designed for the company letterhead on the stationary, the illusive company registration number was on its way, running water was a reality (it hadn't crossed the boys mind) and a plumber was measuring up how much to rob them for putting in an inside lavatory. Although it was not clear who the boss was any more, things moved along as quickly as was possible given the bureaucratic hurdles life put in their way.

And so things continued, a month after purchasing the establishment a single item had yet to produced due to unforeseen red-tape, but Phillip did not worry, he saw his plan coming together and the pleased look on his staff as they received their first pay-cheques. Unfortunately, these had to be in cash, as Phillip was still not legally empowered to pay Social Security and the like. He thought it quite ironic that he could employ people illegally without risk of impunity, but

faced a heavy fine for paying Social Security without a number. They celebrated with a family party in the country, Pedro and Carmen's uncle making a huge paella and dedicating spontaneously-inspired Flamenco songs to the English benefactor. Phillip enjoyed the family atmosphere of the party, and promised himself he would invite his parents as soon as he got home. After a meaningless conversation with a grandmother and a great-aunt, the male members of the group announced they were off into town. Trawling round bars, Phillip acquired a taste for fine Jamaican rum that evening that he would take with him to his grave. He had been working seven days a week for the entire month, but was reminded what Saturday was for when he arrived home and fell into a coma. Before this abrupt end to the night he had seen Pilar in a disco, and thought he might perhaps christen the bed, but the rum had already beaten him, and though he felt himself enormously attractive to the opposite sex, the opposite sex begged to differ. When he woke up, just in time for lunch, which he liked, he didn't like sleeping through the afternoon because that way he missed his siesta, the phone rang, and some people from last night, he knew not how they had his number, were inviting him for sardines and lagers on the beach. His grandfather always told him that if you fall off a bike, the best thing you can do is get back on. So, ten minutes in the power shower, and he was ready for the beach. It was also good practice with the language, he tried to convince himself.

And that was his life, soon after the paperwork came through, and they were official. Business was slow at first, and at second, Carmen used the time she didn't need to be efficient to teach Phillip Spanish, and Pedro worked on the company web-site. Phillip adored the simple existence. He had been made part of the family, and had a wide social-circle. He dabbled from time to time with the females, but still had Madeline on his mind. He was invited to make a speech at Carmen's wedding, and felt more than a tinge of pride as his Castellano Spanish was understood. After eight months, things started to look up with the shop, especially with the mail order web-link up. The shop had achieved a reputation for quality, and some big names in the area were using them for special orders. It was on one such day that during the celebration of what would be a major contract, Carmen announced it would be a dual celebration, as she was expecting her first. Tears came to the grandmother's eyes, and she thanked God for his or her (she was convinced, but we're not) wisdom and kindness, when there was a knock at the door. As Phillip wrestled with a bottle of Cava, a pale (in comparison to the company she was with), blonde figure stood at the door, and muttered something in English. Phillip looked up from his fumbling to see Madeline standing at the doorway with a suitcase in her hand. There were no more verbal exchanges as they embraced fervently, much to the confusion of the grandmother.



Madeline was the final part of the jigsaw. She had seen his shop's web page after a casual hit on a gifts site when looking for a present for her brother. She was determined not to let the opportunity pass again. Phillip made the presentations, and asked Pedro if it would be possible for him and Madeline to marry tomorrow. Pedro said it would have to be a civil do, and the grandmother bemoaned their no doubt soon transportation to hell.

Tomorrow, as it happened, was the following Friday. Pedro's mother took to the organising as if one of the offspring of His Royal Highness the Second John Charles (ex - Juventus). The guest list was not a long affair, both Madeline's parents would not be attending as most of their time was taken up being deceased. Phillip's parents were now Esteponan residents too, with Mike just down the road in Puerto Banus, he never could resist the bright lights. That left a couple of Madeline's friends who were flying over for the event, much to the excitement of the Latin locals, who had been enticed by Phillip's tales of how friendly English roses can be. Perhaps they had never met Pilar. The wedding took place in Málaga City Hall, after much coercing, Pedro's grandmother entered this palace of sin to attend the ceremony. And a grand time was had by all, the reception, which Phillip and Madeline had requested be a modest affair, was in a marquee at the back of a rather lavish local hotel. Despite the intense summer heat, the guests ate and drank and danced and put up with boring speeches in English and Spanish, as well as complex message from Phillip's father in something akin to Spanish. The local boys leached around the friends of Madeline, whose defences were holding up fine until the never-ending supply of gin caused mass white-flag waving. The event went on into the early hours, but Phillip and Madeline left them to it well before midnight. Their exit barely noticed betwixt the dancing and the liquid.

During their honeymoon in the Caribbean, Phillip stood on the balcony of their luxury apartment, and surveyed all he saw before him. Madeline came behind him and embracing him, reminded him that there would be no repeat of the matinee departure that happened last time they were together in a hotel. Phillip laughed and kissed her, holding her tightly as he looked over the Caribbean sunset. He thought of Laura for the first time in a long while, and mouthed the words "Thank You" to her wherever she was.

An idyllic life awaited them on their return to Spain. The pottery business was better than ever, orders couldn't be satisfied, and the Ronson name was becoming solicited not only in Spain, but abroad. Madeline kept her interest in the grape, and was bought a small vineyard as a birthday present, where she began work on her own label. Carmen had her baby, and celebrated by preparing for another nine months discomfort. Pedro got his Golf, deciding fanny magnet was his favourite English expression, put it to good use. Madeline and Phillip soon succumbed to the persuasions of Pedro's family and brought sons upon the earth. First born

was Jake, then, eighteen months later, Harriet. Carmen began to feel threatened by the English' fertility so got pregnant again. Phillip never had to touch that final million, and on the day Harriet was born, gave the lot to the local children's hospital. He was asked to go into local politics, asked by both Spanish and English political lobby groups, but declined. Maybe later he thought, four years had passed frenetically, now his only wish was to spend time with his wife, and be a good father to his young children.

A couple of years later, as the first decade of the twenty-first century was coming to a close, Phillip awoke suddenly one night. Madeline rolled over to ask him what the matter was, but he could not tell her. For the next couple of days he moped around their house, the bachelor pad was now unacceptable, and they had swapped it for a beach-front mansion, until Madeline forced him to tell her what was wrong. She knew this was the most effective policy with him, let him stew for a bit, then wait for him to explode, if you try to force it out of him straight away, you'll only get a strop face to rival any four-year-olds'. He had had a dream, in which he had been convinced that he had to return to Cortina, to the very hotel where, upon lack of Marlboro Lights, his life had changed. She had been expecting this as he got closer to fifty. She was hitting forty too, but standing there in a summer dress with her shades on anyone would let her pass for twenty-seven still. She told him what they had was the most real thing she had ever seen, and if it wasn't then accept it, as he couldn't dream anything better. Phillip sighed a "you're right" kind of sigh, and continued his moping. Madeline knew that that was not going to be the end of it, and expect to be soon presented with air-tickets to Italy.

Less than a week was what it took Phillip to ignore Madeline's advice, go against her wishes and secretly book the tickets, organise the children to be excused from primary school, for Pedro to take the reigns (though this was less of a novelty) and work out how he was going to tell her. He went for the film-style version of plonking the tickets down on the table, accompanied with a "That's just the way it is" kind of line. Cue heated discussion which ends with Madeline confessing that she was once a brown-belt in Ju-Jitsu, his left eye bore the proof. She knew she had nothing to fear, perhaps the vending machine had been changed five times in the last decade. Whatever mystical power the hotel had exercised over Phillip that night, was to bring him and her together, and that could not be undone. Of course, she repeated this mantra to herself day and night, but could not believe it. She did not want to know the truth, she wanted their life to be the truth, but deep down she knew, the only road to peace was by going back.

The flight was not a good omen. They hit extreme turbulence as they passed over the sea, and instead of flying to Turin, they had to make an emergency landing in Nice. Madeline began a barrage of "I TOLD YOU Soss" which left children



weeping and father fuming. They were bussed from Nice to Turin where they picked up a hire car to drive to Cortina. Throughout the bus journey Phillip remained annoyingly silent, and rebuffed all offerings of reconciliatory eye-contact from his betrothed. Once they got to the hotel his mood seemed to improve, but then he remembered he was supposed to be in a mood, and tried to revert back, but too late, the anger was gone. They relaxed for the little afternoon that had been conceded to them after their journey, preparing themselves mentally for the evening. The children had absolutely no idea what was happening. The incident had been kept secret from them as not to cause the need for therapy. They were happy enough in the plush hotel, and looking forward to trying skiing the next day. They would have liked to know why their parents were acting so strange, but with such tender years, one tends to accept things as they are, especially if they come with the distractions of a millionaire lifestyle. So they let their parents be weird, and began to think like Kevin in Home Alone Two.

What Phillip had failed to tell Madeline was that he wanted to recreate the scene that he had that fateful evening. She realised this when she walked into the lounge and saw Phillip's parents, Phillip's brother Adam and his wife (who had just been through a convenient marriage crisis) and Mike with his beloved. Madeline growled inside, but did not show it, instead she opted for using her high-heels point to stand violently on Phillip's rather soft Hush Puppies. They made their way to the restaurant, Phillip smoking the last Marlboro Light and disposing of the box in the correct manner. Phillip had actually given up with the aid of patches, capsules and other ways of consuming seven or eight times more nicotine than he ever smoked conventionally. However, the talk (mostly his) of the return had caused him to dabble again, his justification being that if he was going to buy cigarettes, then he would have to want to smoke them for the magic to work. Madeline had given up arguing by this point. They arrived at the restaurant, Phillip noted that the place hadn't changed much, he scanned around for the cigarette machine, but it was not where he had left it. He wondered if the do-gooders and other busybodies had got their wicked way, and rid the evil nicotine from the Italian soil. There had to be a machine. Phillip began to sweat, and in desperation asked a waiter, who pointed to the other corner. Phillip told himself to relax. They sat down, and Phillip insisted everyone have the most normal conversation they could. Of course, it's extremely simple to have a normal conversation when you're sitting in a luxury hotel waiting for a deranged millionaire to see if his entire life is controlled by a cigarette machine. Mike tried, but that atmosphere was like they were all awaiting execution, in some ways they were, if Phillip disappeared, then their lives would take a turn for the worse.

After soup, Phillip downed his wine, and got up without saying anything. Madeline nodded to him, and he walked towards the cigarette machine. He put his hand in his pocket, and realised his meticulous planning had missed one thing out, change. He turned round, and started walking towards the bar, this caused his en-

tire party (except the children who had been given a colouring book by the waitress) to let out a loud "OOOOOHHH!"

When they saw he was only getting change the "OOOOOHHH!" changed to "AAAAAHHH!" He finally found the machine, and looking at Madeline prepared to insert the coins. He put the first in the machine when he heard a voice call "Phillip!", he looked around and saw a woman he recognised, but could not place. As he put in the last coin he saw that the woman was Laura, visibly aged, but clearly her. She cried out to him "Phillip it's me, Laura!". He nervously pushed the button for Marlboro Lights, but nothing came out. Laura was getting nearer, he tried to look over his shoulder to see Madeline and the children, but the view was obscured, and he could not make them out. Frantically he pushed the option again and again, then hit the second one. Laura was now right in front of him. He shouted "Madeline!" and pressed the button again as the cigarettes fell to the bottom of the tray. Madeline appeared and stood next to Laura, and asked everything was alright. He repeated "Madeline?" she responded that it was her name and his was Phillip. Laura spoke again, saying nothing more than "It's me Laura" to which Phillip politely replied that she must have had him confused with someone else as he didn't know any Laura. And off he went with Madeline to enjoy their meal, after a smoke of course.





# The Pigeon War Ministry

Tension was rife in the Pigeon War Ministry. Diplomacy had clearly failed though many insiders doubted as to the efforts placed on its behalf by the political factions elected to resolve these situations. Peace had reigned in the ornithological kingdom for a number of years but the international climate had been changed in recent months, due to the pigeons' increased interest in the highly prized Spugal nut.

The Spugal nut was the basic foodstuff of the sparrows, to be found in the northern territories of the lands ruled by the pigeons. A little more than a year ago various members of the pigeon government began exploring the possibility of adopting the nut as an aliment for its own population and to attempt to export them into other aves' diets thus taking control of a new and potentially profitable market. This was not well looked on by the sparrows or indeed many other members of the flying community, but though the practice was largely condemned anybody with legislative power would be weak when faced with the economic might of the pigeons. This meant that the sparrows were left unprotected with the threat of the pigeons constantly causing them to look over their shoulders.

Pigeons were reluctant to take on board the Spugal nut as its nutritive qualities were of little use to pigeons. Secondly, its taste was by no means competition to the already established favourite the Gumftal nut. However, developments in human crop technology had made the Gumftal all too commonplace in the territories and the Pigeon government were fearful of providing their workers and soldiers with free nutritious food. They were much more interested in selling expensive and possibly performance reducing Spugal nuts to their loyal followers. For this charade to take place, the pigeon's marketing department was thrown into a full propoganda attack on the humble Gumftal, brandishing it as unpatriotic and despite esteemed medical opinions to the contrary, unhealthy. They easily-led pigeon masses were quick to make the change to Spugals and although the effect was felt on their purse-strings in the bars and meeting places of the territories everyone agreed that "Life tastes better with a Spugal"

The situation caused problems in the international markets as other birds, always keen to imitate the trend setting pigeons, aped the current furore for Spugal nuts and caused the price to soar. This condition was initially looked on as favourable by the sparrows who were enjoying record profits, but the pigeons had not changed its population's eating habits so that the sparrows could retire to the beach. The pigeons began making plans to be themselves the controllers of the Spugal, its production, distribution and sales. This meant that the sparrows would have to be removed from the market, and this could only be realistically achieved in the field of battle. Therefore, the pigeons needed a believable excuse, or at least something that if they stood by and repeated often enough then the general public would accept or at best cause them to ignore their attack. An unjustified attack on the sparrows clearly for economic gain would be frowned upon by the international community and although together they would be able to halt the pigeons, it was clear that divisions between the ranks would make it impossible for them to reach an agreement. By which time the raid on the sparrows would be yesterday's news.

Propaganda experts from the Pigeon War Ministry began work on "informing" the pigeon population and other potential markets of the Spugal, claiming that the sparrows would even plan to destroy stocks of the nut if it became the foodstuff of all the birds, and that the sparrows had no desire to share the Spugal and were, worst of all planning to introduce contaminated biologically Spugals into the market to the detriment of peace-loving Spugal consumers. It was for this reason that the pigeons announced their intention to protect the world Spugal supply by removing the antagonistic regime at the heart of it. Spugal supplies could not be maintained in the hands of the sparrows and it was the international community's duty to ensure a world safe for consumers.

Other factions aimed to resolve this conflict peacefully, asking the sparrows for assurances that the Spugals would not be tampered with. But the sparrows did not see why they had to lose their greatest asset on the whim of the pigeons, and co-operation was minimal. In a rousing speech, the sparrow president called his men to arms to defend generations of proud sparrows. They could defend themselves against an initial attack by the pigeons but if these were joined by other traditional pigeons allies such as the thrushes and the easily disloyal robins who could be bought for next to nothing, then the war could last merely days. As predicted the robins, not a potential market for Spugals as their digestive systems did not allow them, were promised the Luftiner bean territory adjacent to the sparrows' domain in return for the use of their refuelling nests. All this activity had made an attack inevitable, and in the Ministry the elite group of fighter pilots were awaiting Commander in Chief Johnson to enter with battle plans offering



the young braves the opportunity to dice with death or even make friends with him.

In the front row sat Graham and Keith, novice pilots straight out of training school. They had signed up eagerly on finishing their secondary education, eschewing the University option taken up by so many of their friends in favour of some fast cash and women impressed by a sharply-pressed uniform. Those idyllic days in the training camp seemed a long way away now as they sat awaiting news of a massacre in the post. Training began in the luxury Boarwell camp in the grounds of the Ministry. Hundreds of hopefuls entered that first day to be reduced to fifty by the end of the course. Graham and Keith immediately fell in love with the atmosphere and camaraderie, delighting in the training programme, their natural physical strength and good looks making them popular with the top ranks and envied by their peers. It was though an envy that led more to respect than detestation and other, lesser members of the platoon delighted in the boys' exuberant displays of testosterone. They seemed born to fight and as they pledged their allegiance Major Burgwert almost had a tear in his eye.

Graham and Keith would give anything to return to those days now as they tried to hold their composure in the briefing room. When they started, all the fighting was in bars and generally with the odds stacked in their favour. Now although the might of the pigeon army would be vastly superior to anything the sparrows could muster, the initial wave was to be the most dangerous and where the pigeons would expect to suffer the greatest number of casualties. Commander Johnson took to the stage and there was silence. He cleared his throat and prepared to speak. He was brief and to the point, claiming that diplomatic efforts had been a fiasco due to the sparrows' unwillingness to co-operate and the pigeons were left with a choice. Either they acted straightaway for the good of the international community or they waited to see if the sparrows had a change of heart and would re-enter the community. The president had made his decision and although it would be hard in the short term it would be for the benefit of the peace-loving Spugal consumers of the world. As a military tactician Johnson was mildly superior to his efforts as an impressionist painter and although he deemed to recount the battle plans it was obvious how the initial incursion would be made into enemy territory. If it were not so, why were all the young graduates of the fighter pilot school present?

The pigeons were to launch their attack from the neighbouring robin lands which bordered with the sparrow's. From there, the flying distance would be shorter and potential losses would be reduced, the robins would also be able to engage a division of sparrows using the help of retired military pigeons as a decoy. This would mean that once the pigeons had destroyed the sparrows' ground installations from the air, the infantry would be able to enter, meeting little resis-

tance. They were to move to robin territory forthwith with the first wave of attacks planned for first light the next day. Graham and Keith and the rest of the boys tried naïvely to rekindle the spirit of those training days on the flight into robin country but fear was predominant in all of their minds as they took their positions and waited for dawn.

Graham and Keith had expected not to be able to sleep on the night before the off, but as their minds began to play on the fear inside they found themselves drifting off into a state somewhere between reality and dreams. Graham saw himself as the best man at Keith's wedding and he was marrying, no, it couldn't be, a sparrow princess! The place was filled to the brim with all colours and creeds, Commander Johnson said it was a great moment for pigeonanity. The sparrow king spoke of a bright future for all and everyone savoured a feast of the finest Spugal nuts. It was then with something like disappointment that the Squadron Leader's shouts brought him back to reality as once again dreams and reality had shown him that at best their relationship was tenuous. There would be no remittance, the attack was going ahead as planned and Graham and Keith would form part of the front line. As they took to the air, escorted by members of the robin air force, they took a last look over the green lands where they had grown up. After about twelve minutes' flying they were informed that they were leaving robin airspace and their flying companions veered off to the left and waved them on their way. Soon they were in sparrow territory and looking down to the ground they saw petrified inhabitants scurry off to the insubstantial air raid nests. Graham took out his list of targets, all military installations though he did think that from some angles it could be a school or even a hospital. The squadron leader informed them of the ETA and they prepared to adopt the attack mode. Graham saw the first of his targets and opened fire, anti-aircraft fire flying past him but failing to make contact. He hit his target and destroyed it. Now the adrenaline was pumping and his over-zealousness caused him to also hit a group of houses and a medical centre but he flew on, knowing that there was no time for sentiment in war. The attack was, in the pigeon's eyes, a complete success, the sparrows were less pleased.

The war continued as the pigeons encountered stubborn resistance from the more fanatical factions of the sparrow parliament. The Eastern stronghold was the last to withstand the attacks, though the embargo had its effect and a lack of drinking water made the rest of the sparrow population clamour for a peace treaty along with its soon to be defunct government. When peace came it was harsh for the sparrows who were driven out of their lands and banned by international law from Spugal production or sales. Their interests in the Luftiner bean also took a tumble as the robins were given their promised reward (although within six months the Lutiner levy was raised 250% to pay for the costs



of The Extended Pigeon Ally Defence Programme). In no time, the sparrows' economy was in disarray, there was revolution in the streets and a severe shortage of piano wire.

As for Graham and Keith, both survived the war. Keith received some fire in his left wing and was given an honourable discharge soon after. He returned to the training camp and became world famous for leading the acrobatic division of the pigeon air force. Graham did not have the same good fortune and was left with several emotional issues to deal with following the war. His drinking increased and he found it more and more difficult to integrate into the society without war. He was given a court martial after a bar-room brawl in which he stabbed a superior officer in the eye. He had tried to start up a motorbike repair shop, but his problems with the sauce meant that he couldn't maintain customers and the enterprise folded. The pigeon society went from strength to strength economically, exports of the Spugal nut reached new records every year. Promises of these profits returning back into society through more hospitals, schools, motorways and public transport never quite materialised due to spiralling administration costs, but the promises will be kept, with work beginning just after the next election. The Spugal nut's popularity is also at an all-time high though recently there have been more cases of cancer and other illness than at any other point in history, and a rumour is going around that the sparrows did manage to contaminate vast quantities before they left. The control of these nuts was rumoured also to be under the control of rebel sympathisers of the sparrows in the north. However, in the Pigeon War Ministry that was a bridge that they would blow up when the war came.



# Personshop 6.0

Adam had a special power, not the kind of special power that if one could go to a purveyor of special powers offering the entire range of those available from comic book to space trooper at the disposition of the vendor one would gleefully exit with, but a special power nonetheless. Though, history is littered with improbable spider bites and dubiously over efficacious bananas that unleashed unwanted and unexplained powers on a less than agog recipient. Adam wondered frequently whether he could just politely request the removal of his powers and if the rest of his life were spent as a mere mortal would things be made any easier.

Not that Adam could fly, nor did he have access incredibly-strong spider's webs that helped him vault from one sky-scraper to another. He had no special weapons producing ice or fire or even an array of impractical switches and flips built into his arms that could convert his limbs into a laser dethermoliser or something of that ilk. Adam's power was somewhat duller than anything he ever read about as a child. It wasn't even a power he could induce at will. Only in specific circumstances, which generally tended to be beyond his control, could the spirits be evoked. Adam's lack of understanding of the execution of his powers had to some point caused his disillusionment with their desirability. His status as a possessor of special powers did not do him too many favours in social or amorous settings as unfortunately he had to forego his own identity to become a super hero. Thus this inevitably meant that no recognition for his good deeds could fall at his feet either. He sat in his kitchen and lazily fingered through the Sunday papers and pondered whether this simple action would require him to enter his own metaphorical telephone box and don the costume of his unremunerated pursuit.

He opened the Culture supplement as he awaited the final chirp of the cafe-taire to give him another task to perform on this endless day. As he skimmed through an article about a young artist from Dundee who had been chosen for a prestigious exhibition in London he felt a familiar tingling in his bones which



meant that it was happening again. When the transformation began, his initial sensation was that of being enormously drawn into the photograph, making everything else seemed blurred or about to disappear. Then he felt himself being drawn into the photograph not unlike what one would expect to happen in a rather poorly budgeted sci-fi movie whose three leading names on the credits are a mystery to even their agents. The process was not long or painful. He always felt a trifle queasy before being introduced into the photo in the same way as when people mentioned Alton Towers to him. Suddenly, his immaculate kitchen (it was difficult to dirty if he was continuously on call as a super hero) was vacated and he would, for the duration of his mission, assume a new identity.

This would be that of Alison McCormack, 31 artist, Scottish. The reason why Adam had become more than a mere admirer of her work is that she is currently having a more than unpleasant amount of strife in her relationship and is seriously considering treating her lover to the chef's special with a dose of poison. Adam completely took over the role of the person he was helping, thus afterwards he remembered nothing about himself or any previous achievements. Nor could he, as recurrently came up whenever he had the courage to mention his powers to a close companion, take advantage of being inside a woman's body to discover the truth about the myths that have plagued human sexuality for millennia. From time to time, only as part of an assignment. He had had to resort to lying down whilst as a female with a member of the opposite sex. Unfortunately, Adam never left his host's body with any recollection of the positivity of the experience. Adam's gift was the power of reconciliation.

Alison, now Adam, had been living with her boyfriend Ken, native of Detroit, on and off for three years. Things had become noticeably stale in the last eighteen months. This had gone in tandem with her continued success as an artist, which has invariably meant more time away and more time working. Ken does not have what one would consider an artistic streak and was subsequently unresponsive to her new-found fears and anxieties as well as her voyage of discovery through the somewhat unjust and conservative Dundee art scene. She suspected him of enjoying the canvas of another and although had no concrete evidence, she attested his apathetic appraisal of their relationship to him getting sticky with someone else. She had tried to have it out with him and work together to find a solution but Ken saw this as a rather arty farty therapy favoured by sensitive sorts, and worse than that, something she had been put up to by another bloody artist no doubt. Therefore, as she was unable and he was unwilling to leave, her decision was that only by poisoning him could she free herself. Something of a hasty solution, thought Adam, on quick appraisal of his new surroundings for this job. He would then first have to ask Alison, who is now himself, why she feels this way. Adam was always thankful that this initial part could be done via the gift of internal monologue, especially now as Alison was on the train from London back to Dundee.

Alison was trying to block out the reencounter with Ken that was less than two hours away, by scribbling unrelated notes referring to an exhibition that was already perfectly planned on a Virgin trains serviette. Adam would have to force the issue to allow her to leave the denial carriage. Alison did decide to end the planetary journey of her other and worse half on the advice of another artist. Martin Chambers was a lesser member of the fledgling Dundee art scene and saw Alison as a convenient way of furthering his own career. Martin clearly considered Ken a wrench in the works, as his disapproval of her work, his feeling that modern art was not quite the thing for a young lady, along with other quixotic opinions regarding the sharing of the domestic tasks were, beginning to stifle her. The poison aspect came in when Alison gave Ken an ultimatum in a way that he could understand, along the lines of shape up or ship out. Ken had enormous difficulties at first with the accent, but now after all this time could easily follow a conversation between three or more people. So Ken informed Alison he had no intention of leaving and that she and he were brought together by the stars.

This pig-headed refusal to leave caused Martin more worry as he knew if he didn't act soon she would end up doing something ludicrous like giving up her art, selling her studio to Aldi and even having children. The thought of cheap beans and broken biscuits gracing the home of her creation was too much for him. When this idea was coupled with the fact that no Alison in Dundee art circles meant no chance of any success for Martin Chambers. Martin was not prepared to go to accept such an ending for his own particular life story. His mission then became to convince Alison of Ken's infertility, induce her feelings for him and incite a murderess. Quite a load for which Martin would have to put the syrup in surreptitious. Surprisingly the easiest part was to awaken her feelings for him by using that time-served ace to abuse a female's emotions, friendship. He planted the seeds of doubt and garnished the salad of his deception with a dressing of "I don't know how any man could treat a person like you in such a way". This had the effect that Martin had planned, first she felt comforted as she now had a male friend that understood her and she could talk to. This soon became her wondering if she was with the right man, which was finally converted in the battlefield of many a man's assault, polishing off that second bottle of wine, leading to a pretend fight, leading to a clinch that left them facing each other as the background music changed and God in his wisdom placed a Kenny G album on as the process was consummated. All rather standard fare, but necessary for the game. Martin wasn't proud of his actions, but his defence was let he who is without sin throw the first stone and with that he consoled himself.

Time passed and Alison became more and more confused. She imagined how she had felt when she suspected Ken was having an affair and how his feelings must be affecting him now. She was almost sure Ken suspected and perhaps knew.



Indeed he did know and had done little more than a week after that first lapse. Whilst joking with Martin in her studio, they found some bondage equipment that was being used by another artist for something allegedly approximating art. Martin was immediately inspired and was quickly on the mobile to an equally sleazy friend who would be more than keen on the chance of one hundred very easy pounds. Martin was quick to put on the leather face mask whilst he encouraged Alison into some very fruity attire. Martin's friend allowed himself in through the conveniently ajar door and finding a nice place to hide pressed the record button on his Handycam. Martin had also insisted that they did not refer to each other by their real names but as George and Mildred, in recognition of Martin's favourite seventies sitcom. Therefore, a video was produced that was clearly Alison, admittedly with some wardrobe changes, not having a bad time with a masked man who seemed to go by the name of George. Martin made sure during the filming he did not use the name Mildred. After a touch of editing and some background music, (Martin's friend detested the word amateur and believed everything should be done professionally) the tape was popped into the post with a heartfelt note included.

These people contracted me to film them  
in action. I apologise for the despicable  
nature of my work. When they began to  
laugh about how they had deceived you  
it made my blood boil, I just can't go on  
with this deception. I had to let you know  
I know it hurts but I thought the sooner  
you knew, the sooner you'd be able to move on.

Yours

A friend

Ken felt sick as he watched the video but did not have the heart to confront Alison. He made up a business meeting and left Dundee whilst he pondered his next move. Martin took advantage of this to tell her that he clearly knew something was wrong and that the only way out was by killing Ken. He told her he had

a friend who had access to a poison which was barely traceable in a human body provided it is not found within seventy-two hours of its administration. Alison had fallen completely under Martin's spell and his plan seemed an option. At least Martin encouraged her art and she could continue working with him. So now, she was on the train back from London, Ken was going to wait for her in the flat and Martin's plan was to appear, pretending to offer her a new exhibition in New York clutching a celebratory bottle of champagne. Obviously Ken's glass would raise the eyebrows of the tasters of Moët and Chandon. Martin and Alison would then go off camping for a long weekend with Ken's body in the back of the car whilst the seventy-two hour period clocked by. As Martin said, a perfect crime.

Now Adam knew enough. Instead of going straight to her and Ken's flat, she thought it best to find Martin as her aircraft was about to enter second thought air space. Conspiracy theorists probably believe there are too many ajar doors in the world, just as criminologists believe that the villain's vanity is as big a clue as the murder weapon. Instead of ringing the bell, Alison pushed the door, which flew open to reveal Martin and the man from Late Night You've Been Framed engrossed in conversation and a bottle of Jameson's. It made for very interesting listening. Martin was going through all the sordid details of how the affair was initiated and more worryingly his plans for post murder. As he still had a copy of the video that would be used as blackmail, he had already changed the signature on some of her latest paintings for his own. As she was on the way up and out of Dundee, she would hand over the studio to him and would never dare see him again. If she refused there would always be some leftovers of the poison for a second dose. Alison felt like grabbing the nearest pointed object and sticking it in Martin's left eye. However, she composed herself and silently left the flat. As she sobbed in the taxi back to their flat, she realised how much she loved Ken and how daft she had been. Adam felt good but there were still some "i"s to dot and "t"s to cross. She put the key in the door and found Ken sitting at the kitchen table, holding a video. She dropped her bags on the floor and in floods told Ken the entire story and how sorry she was. She told him that she hated herself for doubting him and that all she wanted now was for them to start again. As they embraced there was a knock at the door. Martin stood in the doorway with a bottle in his hand.

Ken coolly enquired as to the identity of this person and when Alison told him it was the charming local artist Martin Chalmers, Ken felt as if he needed to know more about the liquid in hand. Martin explained his intrusion and Ken voiced his delight about the good news and how they simply must have a celebratory glass of North East France. Ken said he just needed to pay a swift visit to the Gentlemen's toilet and would be right with them. Alison took hold of Martin theatrically, and to avoid suspicion whispered



“As he’s mine it’s only fair that I put the poison in the glass, let me finish him off, please”

Martin concluded that this was a delightful plan, which also exonerated him as a murder. Relegated to mere accomplice, he handed over the mortal substance to his, unbeknown to him, ex-lover. He told her that only four drops would be necessary, she smiled and entered the kitchen. Whilst she was in there, Ken returned from his business and Martin was forced to spend an uncomfortably long minute where the talk was not large. He thought that Alison had indeed saved him when she came back bearing three glasses and proposing a toast to the future. All three heartily knocked back the fizzy liquid and upon finishing Martin began to laugh uncontrollably. Ken questioned as to why such merriment from one single glass. Martin, fighting to control the laughter replied, “Your last” and as he started to laugh again, the laughter turned into a cough which turned into a shudder, which left Martin dead on the floor in ten seconds. Alison went for a brush and shovel to clean up the broken glass and Ken got some large black bin liners out. She looked up at Ken and smiled “Fancy going camping?”.

The next thing Adam knew was he was in Dundee train station holding a single to London. One of the down sides of his superhero activities is that travel is included in a rather strange way. He always begins the journey from his place or the like, but has to make his own way back. On the train South he thought about Alison and the situation and although he is against taking lives, he did feel that Martin deserved it. He would look out for her work in the future.

As he sat on the acceptably comfortable laughingly called “express” down to the capital, he couldn’t help noticing that the person sitting next to him had a handheld television. He couldn’t help noticing because the owner of the same made sure everyone in the carriage could see this delightful piece of pointless consumerism. As Adam was being treated to a demonstration there was a news report on which showed a black and white still of an Italian boy of thirteen who was famous in Salerno for having been expelled from three schools, having twelve criminal convictions and generally having his parents, Mr. and Mrs Prestigiacomo, at the end of their wits. Young Umberto needed some stern taking in hand. Adam looked woefully at the mini-screen as he felt those all too familiar wobbling. He disliked it even more when the photograph appeared on the television screen as it meant he would have to buy a new one when he returned. He had also had one very unpleasant experience outside Curry’s in the High Street when he was transported through the shop window into a Sony 28” flat screen TV which led to a conviction for criminal damage and a hefty fine.

Adam found himself in the bedroom of Umberto, well for the time being his bedroom. He looked in the mirror and said to himself;

“Oh Umberto, you really are a little rascal”

However, given that Adam was now a thirteen-year-old Italian boy it came out more like;

“Oh Umberto tu sei veramente un piccolo birbante”

Adam enjoyed foreign assignments as he generally liked hearing himself speak a foreign language, with the exception of a very high pitched Lithuanian butcher he once helped. He had also picked up a lot of French, Spanish, Italian and German which helped him on his own travels as Adam.

Anyway, Umberto's problem lay in the fact that he was a good boy, deep down, quite deep down. His true gift was for poetry and this clashed with his true love which was football. His talent for the latter lacked all the grace and beauty with which he reluctantly exercised the former. His friends had just found about this rather inappropriate, in their eyes, activity and had shown their displeasure. Umberto had responded to the suggestions that he were something of an old Nancy boy, or as they put it “Un finocchio” by bashing the heads of other intelligent children to show that Umberto clearly lined up with the thick XI. Adam would prove to the young scamp that his gift was just as valid as any other and that in time his friends would learn to appreciate him for what he is. Rather idealistic, and Adam was aware of this, but he had very little desire to spend too much time as an Italian pre-pubescent.

Umberto's parents knew nothing of the poetry and this would be the first step. Umberto sat at his table and began to write a poem called “Mamma”. Effortlessly the youngster scribbled something to tug on the heart-strings of even the sourest old spinster. He went into the salotto and informed her had something for her. He read her the poem and in true Latin mother fashion she proclaimed that God had bestowed upon her the finest son in all of the world. Umberto took his mother to his bedroom and showed her the rest of his work. When his father came home, his initial reaction to seeing them both in tears on the sofa was that he had lost his deposit and would have to look in Le Pagine Gialle for another school. When his wife let him in on their secret his joy was immense. with Umberto's permission, he phoned the headmaster of the school who would be



round straight away. The family smiled together as Adam took a look around the house and suddenly found himself in Linate Airport in Milan some 900 kilometres from his last task. He found himself paying for a first class ticket at the Alitalia desk which was the only seat left on the plane. This would not be covered by expenses and he had to get a new telly, too.

When he arrived home, he got out clippings and videos from his assignments and once again tried to search for answers. He held up various photos as he had done many times before and reading between the lines he attempted to find something different, something new he hadn't seen before. As he looked, he noticed a name that for some reason seemed familiar. He saw the name on another photo too, then another. How could he have failed to notice, it was so obvious, all the photos had been taken by a certain Susan Langshaw. He put a video in the machine and then cursed the broken telly. He looked at the markings on the box which said "Images courtesy of freelance photographer" there was no name but Adam felt sure that Susan had been around. At last he had something to go on. But where? he scratched his head and wondered how he could find her. He phoned the Daily Mirror, knowing that it would be to no avail, then did the same with the Guardian. He even phoned Directory Enquiries to ask for the number for the Hull Daily Mail but he couldn't take another no. He looked out the window and wondered how he could get to Susan.

As he was staring aimlessly out the window he saw a car, occupied by what must surely be a novice driver, speed down the quiet High Street to the distress of the pedestrians. Inevitably, control was lost and the vehicle skidded off the road and into a fake French Bistro popular with young residents. In seconds the place was engulfed with fire and a healthy number of spectators stood around and gawped. Adam continued watching from his window and thought that if he were a real superhero he would be able to prevent things like that. He returned to the kitchen and made plans to replace the shattered television. He knew that Curry's was not an option due to the court case so it would have to be the overland to Dixon's. He put on his coat and took his umbrella, just in case, and went out of the front door.

In the street, the throng stood in amazement as police and fire engines tried to salvage something from the wreck. He made his way to the train station and not watching his feet bumped into a woman about his age carrying a large camera. He apologised and went on his way. However, something inside him told him to turn round and he saw her again taking photos of the accident scene. He turned back and walked towards her, she noticed him coming and stopped taking the photographs. She looked into his eyes as if she knew him and asked "Adam?" to which he replied "Susan?". He started to smile which soon became a laugh as he ran towards her. In the street they held each other as the wreck burnt on un-

documented. Adam shouted “Susan Langshaw” and she smiled as he grabbed her again. In doing so her grip on the camera was loosened and it fell to the ground, smashing into hundreds of pieces. She left it on the floor and off they went together to buy a television that, this time, would last quite a while.





# Gary's Financing

“So, he phones me at 1 o’clock in the bleedin’ mornin’ dunn he? I says you know what bloody time it you daft cant? He says sorry like, but it’s urgent and he needs my help. Well I don’t fackin well think he wanted to ask my if me friggin chilblanes were better does he? Says he’s had George on the blower and this war of theirs is costing a bleedin’ packet and could I help them out in some way. Then he gets all look I’m sorry it’s so late and that shite, that he don’t know where else to turn and he’d really appreciate it, piling it on thick, the smarmy twat, you know like he does, and you can just imagine that row of teeth pullin’ out a grin, you don’t know whether to stick your fist into a kiss but I fall for it every time. Whatever you think about the cant he’s a charmer and 200% polite. So I says to him, coz it’s you, I’ll make an exception, but the extra inconvenience’ll be reflected in my bill, you may be a smoothy but I’m no mug, capicse Tony? He does and I tells him I’m on the case. Of course the first case to get into is where we was before that cant rung us, as he’s hangin’ up he squirms, by the way I spoke to my friend George about you and gave him your number, I hope you don’t mind. “Daft prick” I thinks, how could you do that Tony? you lost a fackin screw or summit? you pays my fackin’ bills and you pays them well but that George cant, apart from being as tight as a nun’s chaff don’t know me from fackin’ Adam and he’ll be on the bleedin blower night and day barkin’ orders and tellin’ me that it’s two a cantin’ clock in the afternoon there. I’m not happy with this Tony, I like you and I like working with you but you can’t trust them cants. But he says it’s all kosher and George will be very pleased to show his generosity, I bleedin’ well hope so I tells him and then he goes, I bid you goodnight. I can’t help but laugh, Tony don’t talk to me like you talk to your TV cants, you really are a fackin’ muppet at times. He hangs up and I get back to my fridge, which is were I was headed before the interruption. I know my cards says always on hand but that’s just a gimmick innit? Don’t give no cant the right to bell me after midnight.

So I hit the fridge and pull out a San Miguel, never been one to swear blindly to a brand coz that goes against my theory of economics. I’m self taught as well, think I’m gonna throw away three years listening to shite music and trying to shag skinny vegetarian communists coz that’s all that’s on offer, think again my friend.

Learn as you go, pick yourself up from your falls and twat the fuck out of any can't that gets in your way. I'm sure Adam Smith would rather have a jar with me than some Whitehall nonce in a suit. Case closed. Trouble is, when I gets a call like that it don't half play havoc with me brain, so am trying to have a nice quiet drink and leave Tony's business till the mornin', but the fackin grey matter's on fire. Am standing in the kitchen, which is impeccable by the way, don't you go thinking I'm some sort of slob. I may be hard and play harder but you must have standards and discipline at every level. You can't play any other way. Also, the fackin' fortune I pay that South American slag, should be fackin' spottless shudden it? My philosophy is spec of dust on the house, tooth less in the gob, works a treat. Passin' on knowledge to them at all levels, same with shit for brains on the phone. Gotta teach them discipline. Anyway, let's crack on with the case coz you lot are gonna start thinkin' am a right gangster cant. Not at all, just that there's no room for nice guys is there?

As we're settling down and having a look what's on cable, the phone goes again dunnit, an I wudden' bother phonin' Ladbrokes to bet who's on the other end. Can't fackin' stand 'em, their fackin voices and the way the wank, about thinkin they own the fackin' place, even in me local, where everyone's welcome, except for obvious exceptions, it's not a bloody hippie commune you know. Anyway it's George, he says introducing himself like I care. Still they're all fackin' loaded and there's quids on the table here, so business is business. Am gonna take this cant to the cleaners and have a bit of a larf on the way. George Who? says I, all matter of fact like, am startin' to piss meself already. George, Tony's boss, fanny, Tony used the word friend, I thought out loud. He goes on I believe Tony mentioned our little problem, god that voice is startin' to do me swede in. I change tack and decide a larf is what I 'ave with me mates, this cant needs tellin' so I start. Do you know what fackin' time it is son? barkin' orders down the dog at this time of night, you after a twattin' or what. I can tell he hasn't understood a word of it, but the tone made things more or less clear. He starts up, I'll have you know I'm not used to being spoken to in such a way, perhaps you are unclear of you conversational partner's importance. I says, I know who you is toss-pot, and you know who I am, you're the cant with the problem and am the cant what solves them. Correct? Silence, shitting cant. I repeat CORRECT? there's a murmur in the background, I take that as a yes. Now, I'm enjoying this now, let's establish some rules. I work for Tony, he interrupts, which means you work for me as well. I'm fackin' fumin' now. I hate being interrupted. I tells him, Tony pays top whack, you for me is nobody fackin' nobody, gorrit? So I don't like talkin' to nobodies at this time of the fackin' night. I've told Tony I'm on the case, now that is enough Eh? Hombre? Cos you've wound me up good and proper, I'm gonna need time to calm down, this means I can't start work straight away which means your pointless fackin' phone call has put you further away from a fackin' solution. I believe you are interested not only in solutions but swift ones. Am sure now if he could, he'd get the FBI or someone to blow my fackin' head off, but he knows he needs me. I rub it in, got you over a barrel Georgie son, havern I? Don't go



thinkin' when this is over you can have a word in my shell-like cos owt 'appens to me and your little scams will be on the front page of every fackin' paper in the world. I puts on a yankee voice like I've seen on Sky and says to him, We cool motherfucker? He says, we cool. I say goodnight. Oh by the way Georgie, I'll be sending a bill to Tony and to you, two bosses means twice as much grief so twice as many Nelsons, get my drift? He's long hung up, dunno why these cants even have the cheek to say their fackin language is English if they cant speak it. Next time I'll tell him, Georgie you doesn't speak proper Queen's English, you cant.

Now am fackin tense, I wanna knock that cant out and that Tony, squirmly little arselicker. My friend George this, my friend George that. Now I'm in a bit of a puzzler, cos I'll never get to sleep with all this shite goin' rond me 'ead and I won't be able to think straight until I've calmed down a bit. Solution: simple get the tension out. Luckily Andy from the local gave me a little something for when I gotta work late, if you catch my drift. Not that I am that sort of bloke, but sometimes you need an extra boost. I'm with the Amex Gold on the table and rollin' up a twenty, it's sacrilege to use anything but a twenty. My usual tippie is whisky, good stuff mind and there's a bottle of Johnnie Walker black label on the sideboard that am about to get stuck into. The black label is just for day to day mind, when I get a job done it's time for a Glemorangie 25 year old tippie. Of course after a nostril full of the white moustache whisky on its own doesn't really hit the spot so it's off to the fridge again and another San Ma, it hardly hits the sides as I crack open another, now feelin' the stuff work its magic. I knock back another San Ma but realise that I've taken too much and that what was gonna help me get a bit charged to do some work has got me fackin heart near on tow-ton beats per minute and all I can think of is puttin' on some choons and pouring meself a big ole whisky. I've had the place soundproofed so me choons can be on full blast and no cant bothers me, not that they would, but you gotta be neighbourly han't yer? Thing is, I can't decide what to throw coz everything looks fackin' brilliant, Am dyin' to listen to every track but fackin' now! I have to go random, it's the only way and me finger stops on The Jam's All Mod Cons. Fackin' fate my son, could you ask for more? We're off, am jumpin' round like a fourteen year as the blood guides the beautiful feelings round my body. Am almost tempted at one stage to phone Tony and ask him to say sorry to George for us, but then I catch a glimpse of meself and think you fackin' queer or what. Few choons, later we're still on fire but my Armani shirt is drippin' wi' sweat. I decide to hit the power shower and the hot water and soap on my body is magic but I'm still on the thirty-fifth fackin' floor. I phone Andy and tell him he's a cant and he says he'll send round a solution. Shite! Solution! it's fackin 3 o'clock and I've done fack all. Tomorrow's gonna be a write off so I need to get crackin'. Still fackin' ragin' inside me though when there's a ring at the bell.

When I get to the door I could even give fackin' Saddam a kiss but it's a lassie from the pub who "works" for Andy. She says I believe you need something to

bring you down and I realise that am horny as fuck and have had a stonk on for god knows how long. She's a fuckin' treat and she's gonna get one. We're at it for what seems like weeks and eventually my body waves the white flag and that's not the only bit of white? Eh? If you get my meaning! Feels like ma fuckin' pancreas is gonna come out of there as well as she gets up and says, better? I give her a smile and reach for the old wallet. She says, no Gary this is Andy's treat and this as well. She gives me a pill saying that it'll keep me going but nice and smooth. She leads me back into the shower and as she dries me off hands me a clean shirt and with a peck on the cheek is gone. Now I'm ready for work. Fuckin' number one cant that Andy, mates like that, fuck me brings a fuckin' tear to my eye.

The problem, George and Tony's war is costin' a packet. Well war don't cheap I told him that before the last one. They have all these bleedin' experts that couldn't do the right thing with a case of illegally imported Jamaican rum on a licensed premises, you're with me aren't ye? Now these pricks all have the same problem, they don't look at the thing simply, I get results, why? cos I break the cant down to its components and find the solution. So we look at the fuckin' problem and that tells where to find the fuckin' solution. Course I don't tell any of this to the cants who pays my bills do I? Think I look soft? Do meself out of business? No way like the top gear too much, like the quids in me pocket and the ladies on ma arm. I've popped the pill Andy's lass gave me and am starting to notice a change. The tinglin' in the fingers has gone along with the stiffy, which always makes it hard, pardon the pun, to work. Am still thirsty though and go back to the fridge which always has a full stock of lager and Actimel, I never eat in the house and although her that does tries to make us stews and weird shit that she eats over there I tell her not to bother. She's a nice wee girl though, big heart and a good worker, I don't mind puttin' a little back if it's deserved.

So, how to raise cash? Obviously they can't get any more wonga from their own, coz for a start this ain't too popular a war. That was Tony's plan, raise taxes, fuckin' genius Tone, in-fuckin'-spired, if I 'ad a 'at I'd take the cant off. George apparently wants to take control of the world bank or some other fuckin' harebrained Hollywood shite like that. Too many fuckin' toy soldiers in the ranch as a kid that psycho. And that goes to show my point dunnit? the need to simplify things, what was it the slag they ousted's lot used to say "back to fuckin' basics" innit? I'll have admit though, it's fair got me stumped. Think I need to as they say disassociate myself from the problem. What better than to throw on the vid of the '80 cup final. Always been a Hammer me, fuckin' love it, if you're a true Londoner you gotta be a Hammer. So I'm watchin' Trev and Bondsy and the boys and I start thinkin'. Hang on, I change the vid to a review of the 2000-2001 season, not as happy viewing but what's changed? Simple, sponsorship. In 1980 the shirts are white and nowadays its logos everywhere. Then I think about Schumacher and those cants drivin' round wi' Marlboro on the jam-jars at three-hundred mph so you can't even read the fuckin' werds, and I'm onto it. All those fuckin' soldiers and planes



and tanks and boats have got fack all on them. How many big American companies would love to see their logos on the uniforms of the Yankee soldiers. Fackin' brilliant, you get McDonalds and Coca Cola and Pepsi and Pizza Hut et al to sponsor the uniforms. They'd pay a fackin' fortune to have their names splashed anywhere, and if they say no, well Georgie boy, another un-American Activities scourge will soon make them realise where their loyalties lie. Take that and add to it uniforms made by Nike or Adidas and you could have them as the number one seller in every department store across the States. Could do with a pen and paper here. Pleased with meself, I takes another slim line to keep the power levels up.

It just gets better now, I thinks, what do they do every time there is a fackin' famine or some disaster so we all feels like cants and get our mitts in our pockets? Of course, a fackin' choon, all the top bods singin' some utter shite that sells millions in days. All the money grabbin' bastards will be up for that. And when they're not listening to the choon they can get on the satellite TV. Throw the info to CNN or someone the info 'bout where they're gonna bomb next, and set up an interactive war channel where the public decides who to kill next by sending enormously overpriced SMS. Then get Eastwood, Heston and some other nutty war-mad cants to pay for a film out of their own cash and count the green lolly coming in. I can't do the sums but that has got to be the way. Then with the extra cash, when the war is over the companies who were kind enough to sponsor the uniforms will be able to set up over there with the profits going back across the pond. Obviously some form of food embargo will be necessary so that the options are, eat American or don't eat. Back home eating in McDonalds will be seen as patriotic and we can shove prices up there with the profits going to amongst others, George.

I pour myself a very large whisky from when the Beatles were still going and sit back on my swivel recliner king, of all I fackin' survey! I am fackin' good, worth every penny. Am reachin' for the phone and first I'll get back on the blower to Andy for seconds with the young peach. After that I'll take pleasure in waking up Tony and tell him the good news. See if he likes bein' woken up at all hours. Then, I'll have to fax the cants my bill and finish watchin' the cup final. I deserve a lie-in tomorrow. Jesus, I'm good. Andy says nae worries, maybe she could bring a friend?. I dial the second number and a half asleep voice protests, I says, Get Tony it's Gary and they scamper off as the ball comes in Trevor's got his fackin' head to it and it's in the back of the net. Cheers Trev. Christ, I am fackin' good."



# DEATH WITH A SALESMAN OR TWO: A MODERN TRAGEDY IN FOUR ACTS SANDWICHED BETWEEN FOUR WAFFLES

## OPENING SCENE

The futuristically designed Harmet and Lurt complex was the show-piece of Manchester's recently developed and dragged into the modern age Waterfront. The building represented the ideology of a forward-thinking board, who wished to be thought of as members of an upwardly mobile twenty first century, although their appearance and attire caused them to look more like members of Marleybone Cricket Club. However, as is important in low quality Christmas gifts, the thought was there. The company had risen to the pinnacle of the fiercely competitive insurance game. Its central headquarters aimed to make a bold affirmation to its competitors of its presence in the sector, whilst at the same time fulfilling one of the company philosophies, that workers should be comfortable in their environment.

The company has a fine reputation within the sector for its treatment of its employees. Turnover is relatively low and University graduates who move into the field send their first CV to Harmet and Lurt. Salaries were not just competitive, but frequently in excess of the sector average. At a time when penny-pinching had become the norm in the industry, our philanthropic benefactors remained convinced that they would reap the rewards from an enticing pay structure. In this way, they could attract the best. The advantage of their Northern location with capital pay structure meant they could also achieve something considered unthinkable twenty years ago: Getting people to move from London to Manchester. An aggressive sales approach was nurtured in those required to take their Golf GTI's onto the road. Their perfectly cut Armani suits exiting the vehicle towards their prey with their Waterman L'Étalon ball pens at the ready for the inevitable signing of the contract. Their aggressiveness was not (and the company was wont to point this out in the light of any accusation) like those dreadful companies who one would see on *That's Life*, that would cause the hairs on the back of the necks of the Board of Directors to stand on end. It was an aggressive approach but always taking into account the opinions, doubts and worries of their potential and



actual customers. There were no dirty tricks, just the evidence on the table that their product offered the best price-quality ratio.

Those involved in the sales of the company's products, and consequently its wealth, spent most of the week on the road. The office was staffed by 354 people based at the head quarters, though on Mondays to Thursdays this tended to fall to those not involved in sales and who could perform all their daily tasks without feeling the need to fly down the M62 at 120 miles per hour. The company actively sought a different class of person for what they considered their ground staff. Whilst the sales people had to be ruthless, at times, and quick on their feet, those entrusted with the duty of making sure every penny was accounted for and every customer content with the service provided were the yin to the yan of the GTI generation. When the sales staff were on the road, a serenity fell upon the office as quietly officious accountants and customer service operators went about their daily labour without interruption. This difference in personality, it was felt by the board, also provided a more rounded social environment for its employees and would in turn, be noted in production. The company had spent a lot of time and money on how to create what they considered a perfect working environment, and they believed the cost had been justified.

Staff rewards were commonplace in Harmet and Lurt. Mr Lurt himself made his initial fortune by convincing his first boss to give him shares every year in the company where he was working instead of a pay rise. Little by little, Lurt was in a position to buy out the company dissolve it and sell the remaining shares at a profit. It was at this sale that he met Mr Harmet, equally ambitious and looking to change the face of the London-dominated service sector. They discussed over a brandy plans for a utopian insurance company in the heart of Manchester. Beginnings were slow as the company tried to muscle in on the already established big names in the market. It was at this time that Harmet and Lurt opted for the policy of paying and talking big. They managed to attract investment, playing on the greed of shareholders from their competitors to invest in the new company. In less than five years their market share rose and as other companies felt the pinch they moved into abandoned rural offices where customers had been largely overlooked in favour of the glamorous Leeds clientele. By providing a quality service at what their TV adverts called "grass roots" level they held the honour of being one of the few companies that became stronger and saw profits rise during the early eighties recession.

When the sales staff tended to return on Fridays the tranquillity of the office disappeared and was replaced by the atmosphere of a school playground. The main body of the company was represented by the one-hundred and twenty four staff who on Fridays attempted to race against time to put the week's package together. Friday was always treated as something a bit special by the road staff who

often had to spend evenings in Trust House Fortes on both sides of the Pennines. Work was really only a viable option before lunchtime. The company technically frowned on the idea of workers drinking on work's time, although they generally made no effort to interfere in the private lives of their staff. However, from time to time, Christmas parties and summer barbecues have had more meat on the menu than management would like and quiet words in shell-likes have been necessary. Affairs between workers have not been tolerated and, not surprisingly, in a company full of what for lack of good timing would be called yuppies, when the ultimatum of company or affair was put on the table the choice was not difficult.

The second floor was considered the nerve centre, and it is there we see for the first time those who will provide the action of this tale. Lenny and Vince form part of the sales team. Both are in their late thirties and physically past their heyday. Both are married, both have young sons, though both like the patter of chatting up as it does no harm, in their book. The reality is that it does no harm because the chances of success of either of these two after a skinful of strong continental lager (SCL's is their current en vogue argot) is on a good day, minimal. Mathematicians would require the probability to be taken to various decimal points. Still, the boys like to try and they also like to muscle in on the company of the younger members of the staff who both look and feel more at home in the more salubrious Manchester hotspots. They had just returned from lunchtime in the pub, and were looking forward to the divine blessing of 4.30pm to continue their liquid quest.

Although the company frowned upon drinking in the work place and more specifically during the work time they were paying large salaries for, a certain amount of cat and mouse had been going on between management and the sales contingent. Given that the departments that populate the second floor provide it with a grand total of one-hundred and twenty four birthdays per year, one every three days, which meant that almost every Friday there was the possibility to celebrate a loved colleague's, or a hated one's, special day. This began with a bottle of champagne (if the bill could be passed on to the company, or if sufficient enthusiasm could generate a whip round) or sparkling wine if popularity amongst staff was not the first item mentioned in an employee's appraisal. From these humble beginnings the more adventurous members of the sales staff began to add a wine box to this, then a crate of lager was introduced. This was deemed more than unfair to those in the department who were clearly bitter men, in terms of their preferences for brewed hops and barley. To combat the malcontents, a crate of bitter was added, which caused discontent amongst the Guinness drinkers, and management could do little to snuffle out this tendency. Before long, the company Makro card was in use every week and orders needed to be received at what was still amusingly referred to as the tradesman's entrance. When management decided that this had got out of hand, a word was had and the situation reverted back to normal. After a short period, the process would initiate again and the



happy cycle would continue. Most members of management also liked a drink as well and so the company graciously accepted defeat on the issue that at best their workers would offer them a four and a half-day week. The consolation being they were sufficiently motivated to do six days work in that time.

This Friday was not though, however one when a birthday could be celebrated. A rather frumpy woman in accounts had celebrated her birthday on Tuesday, despite Vince's suggestions that it be moved to Friday. Neither was there the other option of a leaving do. These were few and far between as the staff turnover was so low, often the movement to another company was not one chosen by the employee in question, and so a celebration was not something close to the worker in question's heart. Retirements were always a better option with the company generally putting on a large spread in a central Manchester hotel. The fact that drinks would be free for the entire evening still worried certain factions of the company who believed a start should be made in the office. Any excuse was good enough for the thirsty mob, led and encouraged by Lenny and Vince whose biggest fear was that someone refer to them as old and boring. Only recently, a temp had received a tearful farewell after only two weeks in the company as Vince's cricket club captain had happened upon a case of Vodka at the Port Authority. We find the characters in early May and the warm weather is not helping Lenny and Vince get through the long three and a half-hours till liberation. They sat at their desks and looked longingly at the row of bars that could be seen from their office on the highly trendy Manchester waterfront. They also looked at one of the newest members of staff, Albert, a man in his early fifties who had not, in their eyes, performed socially as one would expect.

Albert was the recently appointed Chief Accounts Executive, a position that required sobriety, a quality Albert had in excess. He was quiet and kept himself to himself. This does not mean that by any stretch of the imagination Albert was a strange loner who was socially lacking. He was always polite and courteous, especially with the female members of staff. He even appeared to be a quite keen fan of holding doors open for long periods of time. He gave generously in whip-rounds and would always offer a helping hand to a stuck colleague. For management, people like Albert in the accounts department were the ideal antithesis of what they referred to as the "Stink Bomb Gang" of sales. Lenny and Vince, however, wanted more. They did not like being snubbed when they offered someone the chance of a jar with them. They did not understand why many people did not wish to repeat the experience but demanded at least one crack at everyone. Albert had continuously refused their offers of a swift half and even the use of internal espionage had failed to give the two any more information on Albert's past. His work record mentioned several major companies dotted across the globe but that he had never been able to settle down. He had also left all of these companies in something of a midnight flit. Vince and Lenny proposed that their mission was to find out why Albert couldn't stay in one place for very long. They

planned to extract the information by getting him plastered, as they knew that they themselves talked all manner of dribble after about the fifth pint. Albert though, said no, time and time again. Today, however, they were not going to take no for an answer.

On the stage we can see ALBERT at his desk and working as always diligently. Enter VINCE and LENNY, who stand aimlessly at the side of ALBERT'S desk where they look out of place, LENNY lazily picks up a file and fingers through it as if he were a judge about to give sentence, VINCE gestures to him that it is time for the prepared script.

VINCE

Now then, Berty boy, how's it going, Friday night eh? Will you take a drink with the boys this evening?

ALBERT

Albert, I prefer Albert

VINCE scowls at LENNY and takes the reins

LENNY

Of course, Albert, you must forgive Leonard, he is not accustomed to intelligent company and tends to treat the whole world as if they were a client of his. Nonetheless, you have been here for something of a while and have continuously rebuffed our offers of a relaxing beverage to see out the good work of the week

VINCE laughs and moves behind ALBERT making a gesture with his finger pushing his nose up in reference to LENNY'S rather flowery and, for him, inappropriate way of speaking.

ALBERT



I don't mean to cause offence, it's just that I'm not really much of a pub person. Alcohol doesn't tend to agree with me.

VINCE (laughing)

You don't have to debate the whys and wherefores of Post Modernism son, just get it down you. Come on, Albert, Friday afternoon, you know. This is like a big family and families 'ave gotta get on and God knows the only way I can stand my relatives is with a jar in my hand.

LENNY (despairing of VINCE)

Indeed, what we are trying to say is would you do us the honour of joining us for a swift half when you finish.

ALBERT

It's just that I'm rather snowed under here, and, please do not be offended, I appreciate the offer, but these accounts must be finished.

A secretary goes past as the dialogue takes place and VINCE seizes the opportunity to show ALBERTO what he is missing humour-wise.

VINCE

Staff! Please, get the European Court of Human Rights on the phone immediately, there is a case of slavery in the North West in the year 2003. Did Wilberforce die in vain?

The secretary carries on with her duties, fully accustomed to this hilarious banter.

LENNY

Honourable intentions, but look at it another way. If you stay and finish these accounts, how long will it take you? Three hours, plus a final going over, cos' I know you accountants. So what happens then? You send them at 7 o'clock on a Friday evening to a person who hit the boozier at 4.30, as it should be. The person is not going to see them till Monday morning and probably not before 11. So if you came in at 8 instead of 9 on Monday the result would be the same. Also, you must take into account the following scenario. Imagine the person who is to receive your hard work is forced to spend extra hours in the office. Depressing enough as it is, when they see your fax at 7pm it could just be too much for them. They will think of themselves as akin to accountants who would rather be in the office at 7pm on a Friday and that their youth and dreams have died.

VINCE

Very true my learned colleague. Also, I mentioned family before, you wouldn't want to create a bad atmosphere here by appearing too keen, would you? You wouldn't want management to expect everyone to work at your pace, would you? For a new person to come in and create resentment would be looked on very negatively by fellow family members.

ALBERT looks at the photo on his desk of his wife ROSA and decides to use that as his excuse to avoid the impending dose of unwanted leisure.

ALBERT

My wife, will be expecting me. She likes me to be home at ...

LENNY (sees a chance to attack)



Albert, please, you can't say you're gonna stay late to finish a job and then that your good lady is waiting for you at home. And if she is, like me, she will wait, have you ever thought that if she had to work a bit harder for your affection she would appreciate you more?

VINCE

As well, Albert, work we can just about understand, but the wife?

LENNY

Of course, we would understand work (he moves to sit on ALBERT'S desk, co-incidentally on top of the file he is working on) And maybe in the future we will need to work together, imagine how difficult that will be for us if there is no relationship on which to build trust. How can we know you are not going to take our valuable information and sell it to the competition?

ALBERT

To be honest, I find that accusation rather offensive.

VINCE (hits "save" on ALBERT'S computer and moves closer to look at him "eye to eye", he throws a stapler at LENNY which narrowly misses his head.

Lenny, can't you eat something so your mouth will be distracted and refrain from the damage you call conversation. Albert, what Lenny is failing to say is that our possible working relationship in the future, which would be, without doubt, a pleasure to work with someone as professional as yourself. This, could be enhanced through the exploration of a social outlet between the interacting parties.

ALBERT (resigned)

le – a swift half

VINCE

Correct

LENNY

Except we don't like halves

VINCE (to Lenny)

Could you please give me that stapler back?

LENNY goes to collect the stapler and then realises why VINCE wants it and stops in his tracks. He picks up a file and pretends that was what he was going to fetch.

ALBERT

I'll have to phone Rosa

VINCE

Of course, you must

(He opens the blind by ALBERT'S window and points to a row of bars across the street. He hits the "reset" button on ALBERT'S computer)

In there,Acqua, at 4.30 OK?



ALBERT

But what have you done, my work? It's all lost

VINCE

Don't worry, I hit save when you weren't looking, 4.30 OK? Gives you another hour and a half to potter about.

The secretary returns and passes them trying to avoid their gaze as it invariably comes with a lewd comment. LENNY looks at his watch.

LENNY

YOUNG LADY! Please let Mr. Harmet know we have a meeting and will see him on Monday.

SECRETARY (unconvinced)

Yeah, sure a meeting, again.

Exit secretary, LENNY and VINCE, ALBERT remains at his desk and sheepishly picks up the telephone to call his wife Rosa. Rosa is the more powerful voice in the parliament of their marriage. She will not be pleased with this situation, as she knows ALBERT'S capacity for alcohol is almost non-existent. She also knows the secrets of their past and does not want them to come to light. She had been expecting this moment. In large firms there is always a social element and you are expected to join in. She hoped this would not end in disaster but once again had the feeling they would soon be on the move.

## FOLLOWING SCENE

The Deansgate Dock in Manchester symbolised the advancement of the city and the completion of its desire to become a modern European city. The transformation of the city in the last two decades has left its mark by a series of hitherto out of place bars and restaurants, offering exquisite cuisine from all over the world. In the centre of this nocturnal hullabaloo was Acqua, without doubt the coolest and most essential place to be for anyone who wished to form part of the new dream. It aimed to attract a young, attractive, financially-independent clientele, interested in modern music and looking for an escape from the thumping drone of the music offered in the competition. Music was structured throughout the day to represent the sexual act. When the bar opened for the lunchtime rush, soft soul music filled the background like little pecks on the back of the neck. In the early afternoon, the foreplay continued with variations on classic tunes and classical music to represent the lazy groping of a rainy afternoon spent in bed between newly washed crisp linen sheets. Temptation became more and more obvious in the early evening with a selection of club classics to whet the appetite for the full weekend DJ session of full penetration.

The inevitable heat caused from such exertion was combated with rows and rows of colorant rich liquids to be imbibed without any amount of pleasure on the part of the consumer. Prices were high, but the queues were long and so the owners could charge what pleased them. The owners were, however, in something of a quandary regarding their dearly loved customers. The afternoon crowd tended to come from the surrounding office blocks, large red cheeked men on the wrong side of their thirtieth birthday noisily quaffing the over-priced, imported designer lagers brewed in Wakefield. These members of Manchester's new wealth, despite their Didsbury addresses, were not really what the highbrow management wanted to be visible from the shop window that kept those lining up outside fervent to get in. The types whom management thought desirable for the image of the bar were the trendy, young beautiful twenty-somethings whose record collections had become oversized due to the MP3 revolution instead of the elbow grease of the old days. The problem presenting management was that the ones they wanted in the bar tended to leave little money over the bar, and did most of their consumption in the rather sadly titled "restrooms". The licence upon the door frame offered the capacity to vend beers, wines and spirits. As far as management were aware, no-one on Manchester City Council, actively gave



away licences which included the sale of class A drugs, though if they did, they would no doubt be sold in delightful little packages which tasted of Irn Bru. Therefore, in terms of bums on seats, the post never yuppies offered a never ending financial lifeline. High prices did not put them off, as they could demonstrate they could afford it. Modern music gave them the chance to sing along and seem modern as well. Though of course, they inevitably complained about:

“3 fuckin’ quid for a pint a Stella, fuckin’ daylight robbery, I should phone my fuckin’ lawyer. Round me mam ‘nd da’s way you getta pint of Boddies for less than 2 an’ its fuckin’ drinkable.”

Still they never went away, why would they return to drinking in Salford and Hume when they could enjoy Deansgate? Friday afternoons had a Christmas day feeling about them, both for management and customers. All the tables full at lunchtime, only cooking a few of the cheap dishes and regretfully informing customers that they had run out of Lasagne, would they like to try the Norwegian Salmon in Green Pepper sauce. The majority of people are not going to get up and start looking for somewhere else to go when they’ve been sitting at the table for twenty minutes and already had a drink, so they accepted the more expensive menu and management accepted the extra quids. Lunchtime tended to provide the bar with some lingers-on for the afternoon shift, but on Fridays the numbers were reversed, most people preferring to call it a day and carry on in good company. (We all know that when you want a drink there are only high and low levels of good company, when you’ve had too many, bad company appears).

So the welcome was warm for the drinkers but never the same as for the beautiful people. Still both groups managed to co-exist in relative harmony. Anyway, as the older crowd got steadily closer to their goal they began to feel more self-conscious and made noises to go to other central locations offering the music of their youth. After about 9pm, when the place was, as they say, “chocka” the desire to dance and perchance copulate forced them to realise that Ritzy’s and other glitzy neon pink and green retirement homes for Burton shirts were calling them. The chances of them pulling were probably equally low in both places, few things being more attractive to a female than the prospect of a night of unbridled passion with an overweight oaf who’s had ten pints of lager. Still, Oldham Athletic would feel more confident about their team’s capability of playing in the Lancashire Cup rather than the Champions League.

More astute readers will have guessed that Lenny and Vince formed part of the post-lunch, early afternoon clientele and had never seen last orders in Acqua.

Albert fell into neither category and would have preferred something more traditional. He understood wine in a food setting, but a wine list and alcopops were not something he was accustomed to. Lenny and Vince did not, in all honesty, like Acqua, but they liked latching onto the younger elements of the office in an attempt not to end up as part of the Rose and Crown crew who walk round the corner for pints of mild. The Rose and Crown was a traditional pub with guest ales, cheap but good quality home-cooked food, a dart board, a pool table and a juke box. Vince loved the juke box in the Rose with its punk 45's, he knew where they jumped and got stuck but felt that simply gave the juke box more mystique. Still, taking up residence in the Rose would be like admitting that Lenny and Vince were nearly forty (still one-hundred and twenty-seven and two-hundred and fifteen days to go respectively, thank you very much). So it was a brave face in Acqua. However, visually there was more on offer in Acqua, the glamour girls from Harmet and Lourt as well as the other nearby companies, and as the day progressed the females members of the beautiful people began to drop by.

We join the bar with Lenny and Vince in the process of their first pint of the afternoon. They did actually have a couple before with their lunch but as there has been a break which did not involve changing drinking location, or even some unforeseen mishap which meant a small diversion would be required before the commencement of festivities. Effectively, they were back to zero. So there they sat, supping the first pint, the pint offered as a gift to the god of lager, as conversation may not take place during the first. Women often question men as to the number of drinks partaken during an evening's thirst, but somehow that misses the point. There are a number of drinks which, like the first, cannot be counted and even if they could, one drink is not the same from one day to the next. The first pint is a ritual that must be undertaken if one is to achieve one's aims for the evening. Even if the pair, or more, have walked together to the pub, chatting eagerly along the way, as one would expect from good friends, the minute the table is taken and the first one is underway, conversation will disperse. Close friends who have shared intimate moments from childhood, through school to now, people who have been present at the birth of offspring, the loss of parents, shoulders always there to be cried on, ears always open to listen, a never-ending fountain of advice, a kindred spirit, all this, becomes a complete stranger for the duration of 568ml of golden liquid. It can't be cheated either, it would be easy to think that by necking the first we would move swiftly on to number two and no problems. The point is there must be some suffering, some awkwardness. There can be silence-breaking interjections, without doubt, in many spheres they are encouraged. These can take the form of various inane statements along the lines of:

How's the family then?



Useful in the case of both those present but unlikely as they have spent the entire week working together

See the game last night?

This is not intended to entice the listener into a conversation about the beautiful game but requires a simple yes or no. There will be plenty of time to discuss football later. Never take a fruit cake out of the oven before time.

I'd shag that barmaid, alright

And you would. Unfortunately, typical Argentinean dances are best performed with a partner. Again not intended to open a debate on the fairer sex but to elicit the acceptable responses of "Not 'alf" (or similar local vernacular) or "Go way" should the statement be rather generous in its assessment of the lady's qualities.

Acceptable as all this would be in a chatty environment, all participants know that not until the magic words:

It'll be my round then chaps.

Can the day, afternoon, night or whatever, truly begin. Vince has just uttered them and Sesame has opened. We see Lenny sitting on a sofa, trying to look comfortable and reaching the table at the same time. Vince is returning from the bar with two pints of SCL. Albert has yet to arrive. Lenny looks out of the window at a girl in a flimsy summer, dress freewheeling past the window. The warm, late spring evening is indeed inviting, and both would prefer a beer garden but will not say it.

LENNY

Bike theory

VINCE

Come again?

LENNY

Bike theory, the theory of the bike, in particular the summer bike, or in our case late spring bike, which makes all women fit.

VINCE

Are you suggesting that every woman who rides a bike at this time of year and not in December is fit?

LENNY

Fit and fitter, fiver on it?

VINCE

Make it ten, you don't half come out with some rubbish.

Both stare with great concentration at the road in front of the bar, waiting for a girl to go past on a bicycle. Two go past together.

LENNY

A brown one, please Vincent

VINCE



You need one more to make it conclusive

They return to their task and fail to notice ALBERT enter and approach the table,VINCE shakes his head and opens his wallet to give LENNY a ten pound note

VINCE (noticing ALBERT)

Albert, good to see you, please pull up a sofa

LENNY (finishing off his drink)

What'll it be Albert, the lager's from an awfully good year

ALBERT (nervous)

I'm not much of a lager man, maybe an orange juice with soda water?

VINCE

Now Albert, remember what we said about family, you don't want to be causing tensions in the family do you?

ALBERT

Well, you know what I do quite like, from time to time? Rosa let's me have it at Christmas and on New Year's Eve when we watch fireworks.

LENNY

What, Meths?

(VINCE does not like the comment but fights off a chuckle)

ALBERT

No, don't know that one. Gin and Tonic

LENNY

A pleasure, coming right up.

ALBERT

A small one mind (LENNY does not hear him and departs for the bar)  
I don't think he thinks I'm much fun.

VINCE

Nonsense, Lenny's an acquired taste. Comes on a bit strong, that's all. He doesn't mean any harm, he just keeps losing the battle with his mouth. (Sensing an opportunity) I'm sorry if we came on a bit strong but we just wanted a drink with you. I'm a family man too. You got kids Albert? (he doesn't wait for an answer). I got a little boy, right rascal, and the missus gives us earache. Still, she knows that Fridays are a bit sacred. I've heard you've moved about a bit in your time.

ALBERT (Cagey)

Erm, yes, Bali, South America, Japan amongst other places

VINCE

So it was inevitable that after spending time in all those dull characterless places you would end up in Manchester.



LENNY arrives with a round of drinks

ALBERT

Ooh, that's nice

LENNY

Bombay Sapphire, no rubbish eh?

They begin their drinks and the pair try to reduce the levels of conversation so that drinks will be finished and more ordered. ALBERT finishes his and the other two look at his empty glass.

VINCE

Top up there?

ALBERT

I shouldn't really, it goes straight to my head

LENNY

But those little things are nothing compared to a pint. It's bad form to sit there without a drink whilst we've got one. Passers by will think us very rude.

ALBERT

Well, maybe

Both take the “well maybe” as “yes” and VINCE declares it is his round and wants no discussion. LENNY gestures to VINCE in an attempted code that would have lost us the war. ALBERT notices but says nothing, LENNY continues with another gesture that the drink be a large one.

LENNY

This is nice, isn't it. So where do you live, do you have any hobbies? Any kids?

VINCE (offstage)

4 pounds twenty!

VINCE returns with the drinks and we see ALBERT beginning to enjoy his. Another opportunity thinks VINCE

VINCE (to Lenny)

Albert was saying he has worked abroad a bit. Isn't that right? (Again leaving no time for a response) What caused you to move on?

ALBERT

My work moved around so I moved around, what I do, I mean my passion is not as popular as it used to be and you have to go where the work is.

LENNY



No one ever said accounting was popular. You call it your passion?

ALBERT

You see, I shouldn't drink too many of these, Rosa was right. I talk too much

VINCE

If you feel light-headed, I'll get you a straight tonic water if you like.

ALBERT

That would be good

VINCE

Lenny, the honours please. (winking, ALBERT is oblivious)

VINCE returns with a "tonic water" ALBERT gulps it down in one and continues

ALBERT

Accountancy is not my passion. The lights, the animals, the noise, the looks on the faces of the crowd, the magic, the spectacle, the dreams, the passion is the..

Enter ROSA, ALBERT'S wife

ROSA

ALBERTO!

ALBERT

Rosa, darling would you like a G&T I was just having one with Venny and Lince here. Will you not join us?

ROSA (furious)

My husband is not a great drinker, I don't know what rubbish he has been telling you but it is only the alcohol talking. I apologise for his display and ask you to let him come with me now. (She holds out his jacket for him and he sheepishly leaves the table)

ALBERT

See you on Monday, then?

LENNY AND VINCE

Aye, Monday then.

PENULTIMATE SCENE



Lenny and Vince are now even more intrigued by the secret life of Albert, whom they now openly refer to as Alberto, and have decided to do a little detective work. Rosa has been in to see them with the aim of smoothing things over, but has had the opposite effect. Both are so immersed in a plan of action to find out the truth that sales are being affected. Mr. Harmet has shown his surprise that a gap in the market was not seen by the pair and allowed to be filled by competitors. Mr. Lurt has suggested that their rather boisterous social life was responsible for the lack of performance. Both were quick to lay the blame firmly at the feet of a domestic upheaval. Their overlords, both divorced, rubbed their chins in an understanding manner. Both offered to stay behind and make up any lost work. Both would now have access to the company's, admittedly scarce, files on Alberto.

Lenny had a friend who was a private investigator who was only too delighted to form part of these clandestine shenanigans. He furnished them with a miniature microphone inside his telephone and even got one for his mobile. Unfortunately, Albert / Alberto was very old school when it came to mobile phones and tended to leave the thing ringing for fear of not knowing how to answer it. Still, the bug did its job and Rosa's phone calls were mainly based around how much information had he given Lenny and Vince and what had he said about the past. She kept mentioning the big performance on the opening night on Friday, but this meant very little to either of them. They scoured the "What's On" guides for any Albertos but found nothing. The files in the Personnel Office only gave dates and destinations, the only reason cited for any change of address or post was:

## PERSONAL REASONS

How could someone move around so much, if they were only a simple accountant? That was the number one question on Lenny and Vince's minds, not how can they get the B&Q contract back, which was the big question on Harmet and Lurt's lips. Their detective friend of the world-famous Larry's Detectives offered to tail Albert / Alberto, when he received a call saying, final rehearsal would be at 8.30pm. Whilst Lenny and Vince sat nervously in the office trying to make up for lost time and accounts, fidgeting with the mobile every five minutes and asking the inevitable, "Was that the phone?" every time a car, bird or hoarse opera singer made a noise within a seventeen mile radius. Larry followed Albert / Alberto to the Bompuchini Circus, new in town and indeed scheduled to open on Friday night.

The Circus had obviously lost some of its appeal in the latter days of the twentieth century, and in many ways was viewed as outdated or even cruel. The animals were not kept in the best of conditions, though neither were those of the humans who roamed from town to town with their traditional entertainment. Gone now are the days of bearded women and other freak-shows, replaced by more daring feats of acrobatic skill and ingenuity. The circus has had to move with the times whilst retaining that traditional attitude so adored by the young. As with any form of entertainment designed to delight the young, it normally enraged the old who were forced to attend due to their offspring's inability to successfully purchase tickets and travel to the event without the help of uninterested adults. The same can be said of Pantomimes and whenever a poor parent catches a glimpse of an ad for a new Disney production.

Larry made notes and tried to enter, but permission was not forthcoming. He enquired as to the identity of the mystery accountant and a burly doorman pointed to a poster, which proclaimed that the circus would be graced by the presence of:

ALBERTO

The World's Greatest Acrobat

This Friday at 9pm

Larry got on the mobile and told Lenny and Vince to get tickets for the circus on Friday and all would be revealed. Larry asked for more information about Alberto, but was told all you need to do is see him and you will understand.

Larry returned to the office and handed them a five-page report on the History of The Circus in Great Britain. From the early days of Phillip Astley's visit to Paris, up to P.T. Barnum, The Ringling Brothers, the locally famous Blackpool Tower Circus of Manchester to the avant garde Cirque du Soleil. Impressed by the quality and attention to detail they offered to take Larry to the Rusholme Curry Mile by way of thanks. He was not going to say no and they left.

During the feast, plans were made to attend the opening night on Friday. They would take Lenny's young son, Mark and he would have the time of his life. Then they would meet Alberto, the world's greatest acrobat. And then, finally, they



would find out why he was being so cagey about it. Thank God, tomorrow was Thursday and they only had twenty-four hours to wait.

Thursday passed slowly but was an Olympic sprint in comparison to Friday morning and afternoon. The latter made all the worse by their wives' insistence that a certain, if not total, amount of sobriety be respected. Finally, the working week ended and the pair went home to get ready for the evening's festivities. They had arranged to meet at the entrance, tickets had been procured for nearly forty pounds a head, Lenny and Vince were understandably angered as this amount would have sufficed to purchase thirteen pints and a packet of honey-roasted peanuts in Acqua. However, if this was the price to pay, then so be it. At the entrance stand Lenny, his wife Kate and an enthusiastic Mark, aged nine who suddenly wants to know the answer to every question that has troubled humanity since the beginning of time. Lenny is trying to humour him as Vince appears with his own son, Tim and his wife Elaine. The entrance is awash with colours and lights, it seems more like an entrance to a distant past world. Suddenly the older boys begin to act like the children as they enter, and the wives look at each other without the need for any comment.

VINCE

Here we are then, the Big Top, what do you think boys? Tonight you're going to see a very special man, a friend of Daddy's. Alberto, the world's greatest acrobat.

(Various members of the crowd turn round and look disapprovingly at VINCE for lying to such innocent small children)

It's true, his real name's Albert, Alberto's just a stage name

ELAINE

I am SO proud.

LENNY

Come on girls, we've told you what this is all about, we can't believe it, you just wait till you see him in action.

KATE

What I don't understand is, why this has become such an obsession for you both? So he works in your office in the day and he's an acrobat at night. Is that really so fascinating? Perhaps he feels embarrassed because the circus is not really very modern, maybe that's why he didn't want you to know.

ELAINE

Or maybe he thinks it's none of your business and doesn't see why he should have to tell you. I know what you're like when you start going on about mates and the like. You probably got him half-cut and scared him. I'm surprised his wife didn't.

In mid sentence and as if instinctively to avoid swear-word the lights go down and our Master of Ceremonies takes the stage. After some clowns that the children find hilarious and some monkeys that cause the entire crowd to exhale an over the top arhhhh! The Master of Ceremonies announces to his very great pleasure, the presence of Alberto, the world's greatest acrobat

(ALBERTO enters the arena and climbs to the top of the trapeze, whilst the technical staff check the safety net, he prepares his final warm up before falling into the night)

LENNY

There's our man.

VINCE

Look son, that's Albert, he works with Daddy and Lenny.



ELAINE

And is delighted to know you, no doubt.

ALBERTO takes to the trapeze and begins his act. To the amazement of the crowd his actions are almost unbelievable and the crowd sit, open-mouthed, taking in the breath-taking complexity of his act. As he propels himself forward again he finds his flight path taking him directly over the top of LENNY and VINCE and families. As he comes down he catches their eye and they cannot resist calling out to him. As they call his name, ALBERTO loses his hold on the trapeze bar and falls onto the safety net. He manages to recompose himself but exits the arena to the stunned silence of the crowd. The Master of Ceremonies tries to recover the situation and the rest of the acrobats continue the act without ALBERTO, VINCE and LENNY rise and taking advantage of the commotion, go through the same exit as ALBERTO with their wives and children following behind, not knowing what they are doing backstage. They see ALBERTO enter his dressing room and VINCE knocks at the door.

VINCE

Albert! Albert!

ROSA opens the door

ROSA

Go away, please, he cannot see you. Why have you come here?

LENNY

We found out and wanted to say hello, maybe get an autograph for the youngsters.

ROSA

You must leave, he cannot bear that anyone knows his secret.

VINCE

But why, he was magnificent, he only fell because of us. I think he's the greatest, what about you son?

MARK

The greatest!

ELAINE

We really didn't mean any harm, if you thinks it's for the best we'll leave.

ROSA

I would appreciate it.

VINCE

That's why he left all those jobs? Because someone in the office found out he was an acrobat and not just an accountant? Bit over the top, don't you think? What did he think we were going to say to him? We can handle things like that you know. We'll tell him so on Monday.



ROSA

The reason was not that people found out, would that it were. I fear you will not be seeing Alberto on Monday, or any day. I fear you will find out why we have to move so much only too late. Please, leave us now, I will speak to Alberto and try to calm him down. Please do not try to contact him again.

ROSA closes the door

Outside. the rest make their way to the exit in silence. They depart

ROSA opens the door

ROSA

They've gone, my dear.

ALBERTO

We've been careless, not even in Manchester can I go unnoticed.

ROSA

But this doesn't mean that, you know, like on previous occasions. You can reason with them, they seem like nice people. Not again, please, Alberto, like they say, what harm does it do if people know? Not again, please!

ALBERTO

I'm going for a walk, tell the boss we've finished and sort out the paperwork.

ROSA

Promise me you're not going to do anything foolish that you'll regret.

ALBERTO

I'm just going for a walk. I need to clear my head, maybe you're right. However, I need to think things through. I like the company and want to stay. Maybe this time it will be better.

Exit ALBERTO, ROSA stands at the door with a tear in her eye, wanting to believe him but knowing that they will soon be on the move again.

Outside, the two families decide the best plan of action would be to salvage something from the night. LENNY informs them that their house is closest and there are plentiful beverages in the fridge, he suggests the Chinese Take-Away for nourishment. KATE is not too pleased at this arrangement as she knows VINCE would have offered to untidy their house instead. Still, it's better than having them roaming round pubs so they agree and they're off. Unseen in the shadows is ALBERTO who gets out his address book and looks up LENNY'S address, as they leave he sees a taxi and hails it.

CLOSING SCENE

In a prosperous suburb of Manchester, the party that left the Circus in search of more relaxed entertainment enters through the newly-adjoined porch into the newly-named vestibule. As affluence increases, names like "hall" and other common denominations turn into their more windswept counterparts. Sitting rooms appear and at times people who would fail to get a point from cat in



Pictionary feel they cannot survive without a drawing room. As Lenny moved up in the company and the family appeared, the residence began to take on more importance. Sundays were spent driving to out of town DIY stores and haplessly putting together badly designed products only to return them the following Sunday and mail order a more expensive, pre-built model to be delivered.

A move was imminent when the salary rose to proportions that permitted a move to Didsbury village. As estate agents were falling over themselves to house the young moneyed couple into what they continually referred to as:

The most fashionable part of Manchester

Promises of glimpses of actors from Coronation Street, maybe even the singer from the Charlatans or even the drummer from A Certain Ratio. The pull of the village was just too much.

We rejoin the story a few minutes before the arrival of adults and children to make up for lost time. Albert is in the kitchen and seeing six glasses on the side, he rinses them, to stop excessive foaming of the fizzy beverage, and lines the bottom of each glass with a powerful sleeping potion. In the time it takes for them to fall asleep he will ponder his next move. As the car pulls up on the gravel, drive, he exits through the kitchen window and waits behind the garden shed.

Very cruel, perhaps, to scoff at the building of a home of those who have let us share their story with them. So from now on, we will make like Kate is showing us round and tell her how delightful everything looks.

WRITER

And where did you get the idea for the shelving unit?

KATE

Did you hear that? A voice asking about shelves?

LENNY

That shows you the danger of being sober at this time of night. You lot make yourselves comfortable and I'll get the drinks sorted out. Youngsters, do you prefer vodka or gin?

KATE

Lenny! Don't waste my good gin on kids, give them the brandy I can't stand!

VINCE

Spitting feathers here Len! SCL please!

VINCE, KATE, ELAINE and children depart for the accommodating living, sorry, sitting room and make themselves extremely comfortable. In the kitchen, LENNY goes to the cupboard to take some glasses and then sees those left by ALBERT,

He goes to the sink to wash them but sees they are ready for use and praises his wife's efficiency. He pours out cold, inviting SCL for himself and VINCE and opens a bottle of white for the ladies. He thinks about getting wine glasses for them but realises they have bought new ones and the box needs opening, so he makes do with the tall glasses. He pours Coca-Cola into the remaining to glasses, allowing the liquid to spill over the side and leave the glasses effectively half full without topping them up. He puts them on a tray, grabs some plates and forks for the Chinese food and enters the sitting room.

LENNY



Grub's up! What do you think of our man Alberto, then. Slightly extreme reaction wouldn't you say?

ELAINE

Yeah, but if he's ashamed of what he does, I suppose I can understand it. Different people react to things in a different way. You must promise not to tease him at work on Monday.

VINCE

You think he's gonna be there on Monday? You heard his wife, he'll be on the move again. I guarantee we will never see that feller again. Not in a million years.

KATE

Maybe he'll think better of it, maybe it was what he needed.

TIM

This Coke's minging!

KATE

Shut up and drink it.

LENNY

Tell you what, this food ain't half heavy on the old stomach.

ALBERTO appears at the slightly open window and listens to conversation.

Look, if we see him again we've gotta have a laugh, cos then he'll realise he's been a bit of a tosser. If he turns up on Monday, there will be laughs, right Vince?

VINCE

Too good a chance to miss.

KATE (yawning)

You two are a marvellous influence. You're right about the food though, all of a sudden I feel drowsy.

VINCE

I'm not touching any more, Leonard, would you care for a cigar?

LENNY

Very decent of you, let me get a lighter

(He leaves for a moment and returns with an enormous JR style cubic cigar lighter and two ashtrays. The children are already asleep, KATE can barely keep her eyes open. The other two puff on the cigar's but sleep is beginning to overcome them. They take one last drag but are soon in the land of nod. Enter ALBERTO through the patio doors and he walks towards the sleeping families, first he checks the infallibility tag on the upholstery and satisfied it will burn, places one of the cigars into the material. Within seconds there is smoke coming from the furniture. He turns to leave and then stops in his tracks, he sees the little boys and collecting them in his arms, he takes them out of the house as the first flames appear)



Curtain



AND FOR ONE BRIEF MOMENT THE ANIMAL  
KINGDOM WAS AT PEACE AND THE PLANETS  
ALIGNED IN HARMONY OFFERING HOPE TO  
HUMANITY UNTIL.....BLEEDING STEVEN  
SEGAL

The dog bit the cat.

The cat assumed its customary position to return the favour, preparing his right claws for a vicious attack on the canine's already battle-weary left eye when he was struck by a rather revolutionary idea.

"Why" enquired the cat

"Why what?" responded the dog, his training had not prepared him to question decisions which were felt to be ruled by instinct.

"Why do I have to scratch you now, you bit me so now I have to scratch you? Why did you bite me because the two-legged one got angry and kicked you? Before that I had done nothing to disrupt your day. In fact you were the recipient of a courteous nod this morning after breakfast" The cat's eyes looked pleadingly at the dog.

"Which was reciprocated. I don't know why these things happen it's just the way of things. I don't see you complaining when it's your turn to take a lump out of the mouse. It's a sort of chain I believe, it all starts with the human, who suffers from intolerable mood-swings, normally round about quarter to six on a Saturday evening, blasphemes and kicks me. Then I get angered and get my teeth into my feline companion. Let it be known that I have nothing but respect for the cat and his enviable independence, I go two doors down the road and I get the jitters, but the cat, my what an adventurer! However, it is the way of things and then you, my dear cat take your revenge on the mouse. Indeed, cat, if anyone has cause to complain it would be our poor mouse, who coming last in the size scale of our abode takes the brunt of it. For consider this, my feline chum, the human's kick does



hurt my backside, my bit does cause bleeding in your tail, perhaps some unfortunate sanguine infection my result in your untimely departure from this Earth, but the mouse? he must be nimble and have eyes where my studies inform me that mice do not have eyes. Any decent contact from your sharp teeth would be the end of the poor little fellow, and him with his wife's shoulder how it is, and the little ones to consider." The cat pondered the dog's eloquent utterance. The talk had also caught the attention of the mouse, who on seeing the danger levels where as low as they could be also popped his head out and offered his thoughts on the discourse.

"Indeed, I suffer the most, I have seen loss, my brother, my cousin Phillip, and other brave soldiers lost in this ongoing futile war between us. So I re-iterate, Why?" He looked at the dog

"I don't know why you seem to assume that I should be in possession of the answers. I am after all a dog, and we are not famed for being the brightest of creatures in the animal kingdom. Ask the bloody cat!" the dog looked at the cat who moving towards the basket with a quizzical look on his face began to prepare his retort.

"But what if, like, we just said no to all this, what if we decided that enough was enough and that from now on we would live in harmony together? Why do we have to follow the human's rules and continue the chain of violence, we could be pioneers for animals all over the world and fight peacefully for our respect. Who knows, maybe the humans will see the error of their ways and learn from us how our peaceful co-habitation could be a model for them to end all wars and suffering." The cat was very excited about this possibility and he was joined by the mouse, also believing a new world order was possible.

"Doesn't it always take one bold soul to make the first move and risk their own lives for the common cause. Our suffering shall be remembered by animals and humans all over the world, perhaps we shall die as martyrs but our names will be repeated for ever." He enthusiastically finished.

"Unfortunately, you are forgetting one thing" the dog interjected "I would be more than willing to sign a non-aggression treaty with you both, the problem is the human, as there is now way of communicating with him, God knows we've tried, but it's just impossible. And that means one thing, no violence for you but continued violence for me, which is something I'm small for. He wouldn't dare touch the cat ever since he read that book about the ancient Egyptians and the

mouse? Ha! well he tries to insult the mouse's intelligence by putting mouldy cheese on that old rusty trap. Little does he know the mouse has a back route into the pantry where the cheese is often left overnight when he comes back from the place he calls the pub and walks in a strange way. Nice little supply of Double Gloucester and Brie you've built up there young mouse!" the dog winked at the mouse, surprised at the discovery of his secret stash.

"How do you know about that? I thought my covert missions were kept well out of the public eye. I even use some tiny nail scissors" He turns to the cat, "Yes, the ones I lent you to trim your nails, to cut the cheese without any tell-tale little bite marks, but obviously I did wash them afterwards, hygiene is important you know, I'm not a bloody rat, you know!" They all laughed at that and remember what a bad time they went through during the rat period and how they had pulled together and formed a solid union. Unfortunately, the bond became weaker as time went on and the rats were exterminated by the men in red. Soon they fell back into their old ways and it was around this time that the mouse lost his brother.

The dog continued "Maybe you're right though, maybe we are becoming too much like them, too materialistic, too comfortable with our possessions, our Pedigree Chum extra roughage dog biscuits, our Whiskas select menu, Salmon and Prawn for the love of God, not even in the good old days in Cairo did you eat so well! Comfy baskets, travel accessories, bows, he even bought me a Burberry dog warmer thing for Christmas! They are turning us into little quadruped versions of themselves. I am decided!!! I will take the cause in the name of all dogs dressed in stupid Tartan accessories I will take my beatings and think only of my good animal friends, my suffering shall be your liberation." The cat and the mouse cheered wildly, this caused the human to look round from the couch and surprised to see the conference between the three animals, threw an empty can at the dog. Bravely, he stood still as the can rebounded off his head, the cat and mouse urgently awaited a reaction but the dog stood stoically.

"Well done" encouraged the cat, glad to see his tail remain intact. The mouse almost with a tear in his eye brought him a small piece of steak from his store to place on the dog's wounded eye.

"It's not going to be easy" said the mouse.

"My spirit is strong" replied the dog "and when the battle is won and they call my name aloud I shall have my reward" The dog stood like a brave soldier go-



ing into war. The cat thought that the dog was going a bit far and he could do without hearing all this sentimental slosh but said nothing.

"We must celebrate, the human is asleep, let's watch TV!" proclaimed the mouse and the three climbed on to the couch and took the remote control from the human as he snored. Changing the channel the three watched longingly a commercial for Coca-Cola and were soon thinking of their favourite treats, maybe they wouldn't have to be given up to achieve their goals. As the adverts finished a Steven Segal film began, the dog's favourite, the cat hated that false depiction of policing and tried to get the remote off the dog to see what was on Channel 4, the mouse suggested Changing Rooms but was none too politely told to forget it. The struggle for the remote caused something of a commotion, which woke the human, who half dozing instinctively struck the dog on the back of the head.

Without thinking the dog bit the cat's back right leg and the cat launched itself towards the mouse who flying off the couch and into his hole miraculously saved himself.



# Being Slightly Dead

Lessie Jeesen loved life, and life loved Lessie Jeesen. Ask anybody in the now thriving town of Fayetteville, Arkansas. If you looked up the definition of “self-made man” in the Southern US picture dictionary you could be sure a photo of Lessie would be alongside. Lessie had everything a man could want and more. He had taken his father’s company by the scruff of the neck and turning it into the god-damn most profitable paper-clip and, don’t forget, other items of everyday stationery that have made our lives and workplaces happier and more efficient places. The rewards have been reaped, and why not? Years of sixteen hour days, working weekends and giving everything for the dream deserve their merit. However, it wasn’t always this way, Lessie laughs at those who talk about “the good-old days” as for him, the good times are now.

When the first inkling of a future Lessie Jeesen arrived in the new world it was not the greatest time to set foot on the hallowed soil. His parents, Bitty and Kitty Jeesen, fled Denmark in 1937 with the hope of starting a new life and family in America. Most people considered it folly to leave a potentially profitable farm on the Jutland peninsula, but Bitty had a rather worrying feeling about the situation in Europe and decided sooner was better than later. He was sure their savings would tide them over until he could become the next personification of the American dream. He also feared the proximity of the Germans and Kitty’s Jewish parents, now both in the great farm in the sky, but the Nazi’s could use any pretext to further their aims. So, it was decided, Bitty and Kitty would pack up their lives and take a boat to New York.

The journey was far from pleasant. Kitty had never sailed before and this was a debut in which rather too much was expected of her. They bought the cheapest tickets as both had been brought up to respect frugal Northern European values. Bitty considered the journey as a form of exorcism, freeing them from the doomed Denmark and Europe, soon to be ravaged by war, that they were leaving behind. Therefore, a certain amount of suffering was necessary during the trip. Bitty told Kitty “Imagine we spend fifty dollars on the passage and months later I



still can't find work, here we have food and a bed, but there we will be alone." Kitty was tempted to say that if they were going all that way and there was a chance he would be unemployed for months, then was the decision so wise? But she remained silent and took Bitty's hand as they watched Europe disappear.

Psychiatrists would have a field day with Bitty Jeesen. His personality was more than difficult to classify. He could only be described as an occasionally depressive, inverse optimist with an inferiority complex spiced with moments of enormous self-adoration. He was convinced he would be a millionaire within 2 years in the States, yet with every knock on the chin he became convinced he had brought his family to ruin. Then another scam would raise its head and it would be, once again, just a case of "six months more".

The early days were a struggle. Bitty found work on the docks and Bitty did some sowing from their tiny one-bedroom apartment. It was soon clear that New York was not the place to stay. People on the docks had told Bitty of the myriad of opportunities for smart people out west. They said New York was too competitive, too many people and all of them after the same thing. Corruption was endemic on the docks, Bitty turned up each day not knowing if his job would still be there, on any whim he could be turned out onto the street. "This is no way to live" he told Bitty as he put antiseptic on her pin-cushion resembling fingers (haberdashery was never her forte, but as she didn't have one for city life it was the only way to make extra dollars). After dinner he told her what the boys on the docks had told him about big open spaces, high-quality farmland and business opportunities on every corner. Kitty was easily convinced, especially when he told her of a family, just two blocks down, that had had all their savings robbed and now lived on the brink of starvation.

Bitty got his last pay-cheque and they moved west. They had no real plan, nor did they know enough of the language to be able to, but they struggled across the vast continent, diligently repeating rural vocabulary items to each other to improve their linguistic skills. Kitty was good at the new language and she helped Bitty on the journey. They made the decision as they passed through .....to make English their new language and from that moment on never spoke Danish again. After nearly two weeks of travelling they decided that Arkansas would be their home. Things didn't start off badly, Bitty found a job on a farm and impressed quickly with his Teutonic work ethic. The farm was a small place owned by an elderly couple who couldn't now manage the more laborious tasks. On those peaceful summer nights Bitty sat back and watched the apple blossom state stretch out before him as he heard news of Europe's fall on the radio.

The job on the farm was a good start but Bitty wanted more. His hope was that the old folks would realise they were past it and in an altruistic gesture offer it to him. This was unlikely to happen as the pair would ask for at least a deposit should someone wish to purchase the steam from their urine. Bitty made friends and over glasses of beer and whiskey they began to make plans. They always came out with the same rubric, "The land of the free, where anyone can make a million dollars, so why is it not us?" Kitty thought the answer lay in the fact that they spent so much time in the saloon concocting plans that by the time they had an idea they were too drunk to remember it the next day. She suggested they needed a secretary (joking) so they hired one, unfortunately, more of a drunk than the dreamers so, once again, the plans came to nothing.

Living on the farm though gave them a roof and an income. There was never much left over but the pair survived. Every time they got some more savings together, Bitty announced a fool-proof plan to make a fortune that would eventually involve them having to ask the farmer's wife for a couple more eggs. Both began to realise that what was missing in their lives was an heir to the throne. Again using Teutonic planning and working methods conception was achieved in a short space of time. Soon Bitty and Kitty were impatiently awaiting the patter of tiny feet. As Kitty got bigger, news came over from Europe that the war had come to an end. Bitty was wondering if they would ever see anyone from their Danish past as Bitty let out a scream that made the entire county hold their stomachs and go "Ooch". Bitty was not looking forward to this moment, mid 40's Arkansas did not widely promote ante-natal classes and Bitty had to make do with the wisdom of the farmer's wife. As he entered the bedroom he saw something was not right, Bitty stood, with tears in her eyes and blood on the floor, shaking her head and screaming "No". Straight away Bitty realised that the throne would, for the time being, remain heir-less.

Life was no picnic after the miscarriage and things got worse when Bitty announced he was giving up work on the farm to go into business. It turned out that a friend of friend had the opportunity "to buy into the future" as he put it. Soon Fayetteville would have its own paper clip factory and amongst its owners would figure the well-liked Danish immigrant, Bitty Jeesen. The plan was viable, Kitty tried to point this out to her husband, but he had been absorbed by the idea of being a business magnate. There was no turning back, they left the farm thanking the farmer and his wife who, with tears in their eyes, informed the pair they were planning to leave the farm to the Jeesen's, much to Kitty's consternation.

Business was slow as the company suffered from what they would later recognise as "running a business". Tasks were not adequately distributed and the company had various people working to weaknesses. The Jeesen's had moved to a



down-town apartment of negligible luxury. Bitty assured his wife that this was short-term and began to speak in array of business terms that she failed to comprehend. Inside she felt if she had to hear the expression “speculate to accumulate” again, she would take the frying pan to him. Relative peace arrived at Chez Jeesen when the happy news of Kitty’s second pregnancy was received, along with the news that the company had actually made a \$32 profit that month. Bitty made every effort to pamper Kitty during the pregnancy, and despite several worrying false alarms, Lessie Jeesen was born in October 1948. The birth was a difficult experience for mother and child, the latter spending the first two weeks of his life under the observation of rubbed chins and tutting clipboards. As the November cold reminded the Jeesen’s of the inadequacy of their living conditions, Lessie spent his first night at home.

Once the initial scares regarding Lessie’s health had passed he embarked upon a strong and productive childhood. The company began to make some money and more appropriate living quarters were obtained. Lessie was the most popular child in the town, his blond good looks adhered him to mothers and prospective companions. His quick intelligence made him top of the class, this coupled with his innate sporting ability meant that the entire school was falling over itself to be friends with the great Lessie Jeesen. Whilst teachers spoke of an Ivy League place, his parents proudly clapped as he received prize after prize. These were indeed happy times for the family, but Kitty knew it was not going to last. The company had somehow managed to stay afloat, but had never brought them the wealth that had been so enthusiastically mentioned in the saloon days. Costs were rising and the ever more-demanding customer began to distrust the quality of the Jeesen-Miklowski product. It was true that the paper-clips were not dependable and that many people in the town were beginning to look elsewhere. Profits took a tumble in the early 1960’s and when Lessie should have been spending more time in the school library, he found himself increasingly drawn to the company laboratory.

Lessie had always been interested in anything scientific, although he had a flair for all subjects, (he won the school history prize two years running) it was working in the lab where he really felt he belonged. He used to sit down with plans and formulae in an attempt to get to the fulcrum of the problem. Despite being only 16, Lessie tackled the problem in true sixties scientist fashion, and although it interfered with his schoolwork, he toiled night and day to find the answer. Lessie decided this was more important than school. His father had, in desperation, taken to the bottle, Lessie knew that the solution would have to come from him or else the company would go down, or further down, the pan. Lessie liked their little house, it wasn’t the lap of luxury but should the company fold, what awaited them did not bear thinking about.

With competitors taking their major clients and the company's reputation at an all-time low, Bitty felt it was time to lock the door for the last time. As he took a last look around the factory, he saw a light on in the laboratory. A tear formed in his eye, as he wished he could be more like his dedicated son, he blamed himself (Although Miklowski had thrown in the towel months before) for the failure of his company and subsequently, his life. He turned to leave when a noise that he assumed would correlate joy came from the lab. Bitty ran up the stairs, opened the door and saw his son, enjoying an apple falling on head – dipping toe in hot water moment, covered in dust and holding up what looked like a stronger, higher quality paper-clip. Lessie explained how he altered the chemical balance of the paper-clip and by adding sand had made it more durable. However, what really pleased his father the fact that this process could possibly reduce costs by more than half.

Production began, Miklowski tried to come back, but was told there was no room for deserters. He was paid off with his original investment and never seen again in Fayetteville. Lessie reluctantly finished school, his grades dropping from an A average to just above C, much to the disappointment of the teaching staff, and took up full-time residence in the factory. Soon his father was spending more time on the golf course than at work, but Lessie was not perturbed, he had the freedom to work on his projects, and put the company, and Fayetteville, on the map. In the meantime, Bitty's short game came on leaps and bounds.

Just when Kitty was worried that Lessie was spending too much time in the factory, and that some kind of diversion would help him unwind, Zanzibar Chulumb walked into his life. He knew her from school, but it had only been through sight. When they were brought together at a local society do, Lessie felt his heart viciously stabbed by cupid's arrow. In no time they were inseparable, and Mr. Chulumb did not need to ask for too much thinking time when young Lessie asked for his daughter's hand.

Once married, and with the first offspring underway the late sixties and early-seventies were a glorious period for all those involved in Jeeson's Stationery. They branched out into staples, hole-punches and other office necessities. Lessie was asked to enter local politics and gratefully responded to the public's request. Major changes were undertaken to improve the city's infrastructure and international appeal. Lessie insisted on the need to attract investment and modernise the city centre, giving it a more European feel. Lessie did admit all his time was taken up with work and politics, and that perhaps he should spend more time with his family, but where could he find more time?



Conscious of his failings as a family member he promised to mend his ways, but this promise came too late. In May 1978 his father died in the night of a heart attack, he had not been well for a while, but this was unexpected. Lessie hadn't seen him for nearly two months due to prior engagements. His mother and Zanzi-bar had kept the news of his father's decline from him as not to effect his work. While he was crying for the loss of his father, a week later his mother was struck down by Alzheimer's and they never again shared another meaningful sentence. Lessie became terribly aware of the fact that he had put so many other things before his family that he had not had the chance to say goodbye. He didn't know his parents felt when they went (although his mother went, but she stayed) and was convinced that they thought badly of him. It was at this time that Lessie Jeesen would be consumed by an obsession that would remain with him for the rest of this life and the next.

Lessie was determined to find out just what people thought of him before he moved on to the big paper-clip factory in the sky. He felt it of great importance not only to be grieved, but to leave a mark on the society you leave behind. Lessie felt sure that the departure of the man who had made Fayetteville the envy of the south would be mourned at least officially. He expected a day to be set aside for the commemoration of his passing. But who could be sure of this? Lessie had given all his life, as a worker, as a politician and as a father. He could have given more in the last category, but he felt the materialistic rewards of the first two compensated any shortcomings in the giving department as a father.

He was tortured at night by dreams of him dying alone and lonely. He envisaged a funeral without guests as the happy town celebrated in the market place. He could not go on like this, so decided to call in some help. He had read in a scientific magazine about a revolutionary German scientist, Dr. Murum Buchstansangur, who had been doing some marvellous work on near-death experiences, and, what interested Lessie more, death simulations. Lessie was prepared to break the bank to get Dr. Buchstansenger over to Fayetteville. The next day he flew to Frankfurt to court him.

Murum was working for a German government office, one which was rather perturbed by his recent revelations to the press. An organisation that had to balance Murum's genius with his outrageousness, and then decide what to do with him. His salary in those days was around the equivalent of forty-thousand euros per year in modern terms. Enough to provide a comfortable life but far from satisfying the ambitions of the organisation's own mad scientist. When Lessie Jeesen appeared at Murum's all that was about to change.

Murum went to the Frankfurt Hilton, as instructed by Lessie, and was informed of Lessie's project. Lessie told Murum he considered him the only person

capable of carrying out such a project. He also made it clear that he understood the difficulty inherent in leaving his native Germany and for that reason the salary offer would be one million American dollars per year. Lessie was clear that this was no ordinary contract.

“Before you ask, I am sane, well to the extent that I want you to find a formula for me by which I can be temporarily killed and observe my family and colleague’s reaction to my departure. Apart from that, I’m the sanest billionaire American paper-clip merchant with an unsatisfied grief obsession you’re going to meet all day.” Lessie tried to detract from the importance of the mission. He wanted Murum to trust him and think that the project was for real. Murum was not quite sure what he was getting into, but when he was told it was a seven-figure sum and he probably wouldn’t get shot, he decided to join the ship.

Murum saw out his tenure at the organisation, and within three weeks was looking for a small mansion in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Murum was introduced to the company as Dr. Hermann Undstugling, a specialist in metal technology who would be leading a very special project which would revolutionise the company. The staff were told not to expect to see much of Dr. Undstugling, as he worked very hard and did not tend to socialise. He was put on the payroll with a hundred-thousand dollar a year salary, the maximum the company would allow without too many questions being asked. As the salary was paid from Lessie’s own profits fund, no-one paid much attention to the old man’s absurd ideas. The rest of the money was to be transferred from one Swiss bank account to another in trimestral installments.

Work began almost immediately on the elaboration of Murum’s working premises. Lessie wanted him to work almost exclusively solo on the project, but Murum felt he would need some help. Lessie feared the field day the press would have, not to mention the damage to the share price, always sensitive to mad-scientist, world domination plans. Murum’s team would consist of four specialists, all chosen by Murum himself. He assured Lessie they were trustworthy, but Lessie could only trust him on that. Once again Lessie found that most people’s principles and professional integrity had a price, a rather high one, but nonetheless a price. Work began in the secret lair. Unfortunately the rather insufficient eighties technology hindered any progress until the invention and mass-marketing of more reliable and faster chips.

The eighties were really a waste of time and money for Lessie’s project, Murum tried hard, but met obstacles on every corner. While the world marvelled at the ZX-81 and later the Spectrum RAM extension, Lessie dreamed of a technol-



ogy that he feared he would not see in his lifetime, never mind in time to die and return. Lessie's political career began to take up more of his time than the factory, and his family were the ones to suffer.

As the nineties arrived technology began to get into the fast lane, with Murum now able to purchase the individual parts in order to put together his own machines. It was a happy time for the project as great advances were made. When Lessie wasn't in the laboratory, he was in the City Hall, when he wasn't to be found in either of those places, he would be in the factory. Although his wife and children remained loyal, it was clear to everyone, except Lessie that all was not well. After ninety-six things started moving very quickly, Murum got to the stage of a false-alarm every year, refusing to go through with the experiment as the guarantees of Lessie's return were less than the one-hundred percent Murum demanded.

Lessie's groundbreaking social policies had almost eradicated poverty and unemployment in Fayetteville. His dream of serving his people had become reality, but there hadn't been a meaningful conversation in his house, one that included him that is, for years. As the twentieth century drew to a close, Lessie began to wonder about the wisdom of his project. Why use the latest technology to simulate your death only to view your nearest and dearest satisfactorily grieving in order to return? No doubt the more astute readers will have considered the much simpler option of pretending. That would be less expensive, and achieve the same results. However, Murum and Lessie were perfectionists, and this project had become their swansong. Murum refused to leave this earth without completing his project, and Lessie refused to stay.

It was then, with a mixture of apprehension and excitement that in October 2002 Murum announced the plan was truly ready. The plan had seen many modifications since its initial conception. The rise in technology had meant the never-ending budget could purchase more efficient parts that would make the experiment easier. For the visualisation of the mourning, Murum had inserted into Lessie's head what he called the video-plaque. This was similar to a normal computer video card, but operated by the use of Lessie's eyelids and eyebrows (after death simulation, Lessie would control his nerve-centre by the use of his eyes, earlobes, nose and tongue). The tongue would take the roll of the computer's mouse, to help him move from menu to menu. Murum was extremely proud of his work in this field, but it was excelled by the creatures that would permit Lessie to see his town's grief. Murum had created thirty small, flying objects, the size of a golfball, that could be directed by Lessie to penetrate any part of the house or town, within a three mile radius. These relayed DVD quality sound and image to Lessie so that he could keep tabs on all the mourners. The balls were also equipped with preference detectors, so that if anything especially interesting was happening,

this would instantly over-ride what Lessie was watching, Murum rather obviously referred to this as a "griefometer". Should the simulated dead need a bit of shut-eye, the highlight would be recorded and viewed upon awakening. The serum that would be injected into Lessie's body would make most of the body lie in a confused state of whether it was alive, or dead. This would mean that the body would provide enough power to maintain a Sunday-service without letting the body go. When the body got close to thinking it was the end, the brain would automatically release a liquid which caused the process to reinitiate.

It had been decided that Lessie would be absent for the first forty-eight hours after his passing. Neither believed you could get a clear assessment of what was being felt so soon after departure. If there were any doubts to creep in, surely they would appear after the funeral. So it was made clear in his will that Lessie Jeelson be cremated in less than seventy-two hours post his clog-popping. This guaranteed he would be switched on for the big event, which he had no intention of missing. Lessie was under the impression, too, that this adventure would be merely a case of a formality being completed. He was sure he had made the correct decisions during his stay on the planet, and the grief felt by his passing would mirror his benevolent contribution to the society he helped build. Lessie had neither thought, much to the worry of Murum, what he would say when he miraculously rose from the dead after three months. Murum tried to breach the issue on a number of occasions, but Lessie was sure that the joy would be so great that it would inhibit any type of questioning. Anyway, Murum's work was nearly done, he was already a multi-millionaire, but had found a taste for being super-rich. As soon as the Jeelson affair was quiet, he would be on the phone to NASA with a little proposition.

And so, Lessie took one last look around the lab that had signified all his dreams for so long, and nodded to Dr. Murum Buchstansengur. It was time. The injection was painlessly administered, Lessie thanked Murum, and made his way back to the house. He had thirty minutes to get home, get into bed, and fall asleep with an idyllic look on his face. His private doctor would then be called when Lessie was discovered, and for the sum of one million dollars, would issue a death certificate, proudly stating natural causes. This would prevent any nasty autopsy, which can always cause problems if you intend to return as a mortal being in ninety days. He silently climbed into bed, where Zanzibar lay motionless after another attack on his wine-cellar, kissed her on the back of the neck and said goodnight.

When Zanzibar awoke at gone ten in the morning, she found it more than surprising that her workaholic, normally out the house by six, husband remain in the land of nod for such a long while. On closer investigation, it was with some shock that she realised he had joined the great paper-clip factory in the sky.



When the servants came up, Zanzibar was still in a state of shock, the children came in, and there was a general wailing scene that Lessie would have adored. The howling continued all day, the doctor came and went, the funeral services took him away to be placed in a coffin that would at the last minute be replaced by Murum, and taken back to the lab.

Murum calculated that if the time of death was two am on Wednesday morning, if Lessie was switched on after forty-eight hours, he would get the day before the funeral in as well, and thus be able to see all the preparations. Lessie would like that, he thought. And so, some time on Friday, Lessie was conscious again. It took him some time to get to grips with the controls on the eye-ear-nose-tongue activated computer screen, he also found controlling the "vision-balls", as Murum had named them, but then, after a couple of hours he found himself happily roaming round a town distraught at his loss.

This may demonstrate how much of a family man Lessie was, but his first stop was City Hall, where he was delighted to see that they had declared three days official mourning. In a speech to the local press his deputy made a rousing address to the good, selfless work done by Lessie in the community. He returned to his house to see his children and wife, moping around on auto-pilot, and talking about vacuums where a spirit used to be. Lessie was enjoying this, on the factory floor, he saw the workers, the true spirit of the factory, shedding tears for their lost leader. He was hungry to see more, but as Murum had warned him, it took a lot out of him that first day, and was soon drifting in and out of the two worlds he now inhabited.

The next day he awoke as the big, black Bentley drove through the streets of Fayetteville, with military accompaniment (although Lessie had never served). It seemed like the entire population had filled the streets to say their last farewell to the man who created their prosperity. Lessie thought he would love to go back there and then, and tell everyone it was only an experiment, but it had to finish. He remembered Murum's words that grief after a month is like twenty-million griefs after a day (he was more of a scientist than a wordsmith). Of course everyone returned to the house after the ceremony, Lessie returned to the factory in the other coffin, and it was there that the "griefometer" first sounded. It was in his son's room that a "vision-ball" picked up an interesting conversation between his children. The gist of it was that they felt they were only going through the motions of grief as it was expected of them. They didn't know the man that had been buried that afternoon. Maybe he was their father, but that made it more difficult to know him than if they had been employees or councillors. His son also suggested that their mother was doing the same, and that once the funeral busi-

ness was over she would be a different person. Lessie felt rather distressed about what his son had said, and was tempted to have a strong word with him about gratitude and appreciation, but then he remembered he was busy being slightly dead, and it would have to wait three months.

Lessie knew Zanzibar was not feeling like his son had said, and was sure time would prove him wrong. Over the next few days the conversations in the house were rather boring, Zanzibar said little, and while the children had their little whispers, Lessie was forced to spy on the servants for entertainment. Bored, he decided to use the temporary sleep option installed by Murum, just in case things got dull. This would allow Lessie to sleep for a few days or until something interesting happened. Interesting would be decided by the video-plaque, whether it was interesting for taping, or something you had to see live. The extra energy would also permit Lessie to stay at the controls longer.

He awoke nine days after his death. The video-plaque offered highlights of the period, but it was nothing to write home about. The only interesting anomaly, was that his old vice-president at the company's car seemed to be parked on the driveway rather often. The children had gone into denial, but Lessie laughed to himself, and thought "Who'd be a Dad, eh?". Lessie felt strong after his rest, and decided to pay a visit to City Hall, where an emergency session of council was in progress.

Lessie's former colleagues were all sitting with stern looks on their faces. The acting Mayor in Lessie's absence was about to speak.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Lessie Jeelson was a good man, that we all know, a philanthropist, a caring, kind, compassionate person, who saw the function of this council not as instrument of his own power, but as a means to create a better, fairer society." Lessie thought he had woken up just in time, still grieving then? The speaker continued "And people say suffering has disappeared from Fayetteville, are they right? Not at all, for years we, the council have suffered, suffered at the lavish expense of public health systems for the unemployed, the non-whites who are welcomed with open arms, lenient policies on drugs and other social evils, inner-city education programmes, university grants, the list is endless. Oh, for sure, we have been creaming off out little commissions without that old fool ever finding out, but we are the laughing-stock of councils. We cannot hold our heads up in country-clubs amongst the wealthier councillors of the rest of Arkansas, we have a reputation for being lily-livered do-gooders. We have missed the boat. It was alright for Jeelson with his millions to undertake such schemes, but I did not get into politics to help the poor. Who is with me?" He looked around



the room, and all hands shot up in approval. He took his seat again and introduced the next speaker, a Mr. Burns who Lessie had never seen before.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Jeeson's reputation is one that is difficult to tarnish. His record is impeccable, but the public can easily be shown that they were naïve, and that Lessie Jeeson's philanthropy was little more than a disguise to amass an even greater fortune. Our creative accounting department, please look at your handouts, have put together a portfolio of how Jeeson misappropriated funds for his own benefit. We have evidence that he was paying enormous sums of money annually to a team of German scientists, for what ends we know not, but if we simply change the columns round, it appears this money was the council's and not Jeeson's own. We have also manipulated the figures from the hospitals and schools to show that Jeeson contracted unqualified staff to save money. This will cause a political scandal which will be superseded by you guys saying it's time to get tough for Fayetteville. Thus giving you a free hand. Plus we would like you to meet Mr. Jones, the Accounts Director, who for one million dollars has kindly agreed to pose as Jeeson's long term lover. A homosexual, corrupt politician with a coloured lover should get the public on your side, don't you think?" Burns left the centre stage.

"Sterling work everyone agreed" Lessie was devastated, what about the statue in his honour?, the renaming of the airport? In a few days his name would be mud, and all the people who cried at the funeral will now detest the man who gave them so much. He wished he could remove this curse, but the programme had to run for three months. He got another message from the video-plaque that something up in the factory.

In the boardroom, the board, logically, were making plans to sell the factory to a Japanese competitor. Taking a tip off from the council, they used the excuse that Jeeson was using council money to finance the factory, and that they were as devastated as anyone. Of course, they would wait a while before the sale, so that the share price would plummet, and they would purchase the majority of the stock and take control with the Japanese, automating the entire plant, and causing a few-hundred redundancies. Still, this would be seen as the fault of that two-faced cheat Lessie Jeeson. Lessie thought this was not an ideal situation, and began to curse this experiment. He tried to close down the menus and flashing lights, but he couldn't stop them. He tried to return to sleep, but his power-levels were too high, and he couldn't achieve slumber. As he lay there in despair, he thought to himself "At least I've still got Zanzibar"

The next day he spent all of it observing the house, at eleven o'clock he saw Phil Parkes, his old vice-president, conspicuously absent from the previous day's meeting, enter the house. Did he, no, he did, did he have a key? Zanzibar was waiting for him in the lounge. He told her what was happening with the company and the council. She said that his memory didn't deserve that, he agreed, but stated that a lot of people had missed out on a lot of back-handers due to Lessie, and they felt it was time to cash-in. Then came a conversation that killed a dead man. Phil began.

"And what does this mean for us?" He looked at Zanzibar and held her hand.

"It's too soon, Phil. Less than a fortnight. I have to appear to be grieving a bit longer, for etiquette." Lessie was beginning to be fed up with being slightly dead.

"Six years waiting for this, and now we have the chance to do it, without losing a penny. No-one will take his side, look at the children for God's sake" This comment caused both of them to laugh, and Lessie thought of the final nail in the coffin that was incinerated a fortnight ago. Phil continued "Look tomorrow the scandal's going to break, let's get away, let's elope, we can make it formal when it's all blown over. What do you say?"

She told him he was an old romantic and agreed, by the late afternoon they were out of range, but Lessie knew what was happening. He spent the next week watching the scandal about him on television, and seeing how his former colleagues and friends were making millions, some billions, out of his disgraced name. Lessie tried to over-use the video-plaque in order to cause it to short circuit, but it didn't work. As the three months went by he saw everything he had ever worked for turn to nothing. He hated himself for being so greedy, and needing to know so much about something he wouldn't wish on his worst enemy, and he now had quite a few. Just before the three months were up, Murum returned to administer the antidote, he told Lessie how sorry he was, and that he knew the truth. He enquired if he was going to fight and clear his name, but Lessie had no strength. The antidote could be administered through the video-plaque, but had to be done before the first day of the forth month. Lessie told Murum that they knew about the lab, and that Murum was in danger. Murum told Lessie that there was secret information inside the video-plaque that would lead him to Murum's new home, should he ever need somewhere to stay. Lessie thanked him and told him to leave, the press would be in the factory soon. Murum left Lessie to administer the antidote, who as he flicked through the menus, saw all the titles of people he thought loved him, and again wondered why he had done this. When he ar-



rived at the antidote menu, he thought again, closed the page, and waited for the first day of the fourth month.



# The Writer's Gift to the Village

The writer sat apart from the rest of the group, trying to shade herself from the violent late afternoon sun. She had spent this, as the previous few, summers in the village. She liked to escape from the imaginary world her life had become in the larger European cities, where being recognised, or called upon for an incisive comment or witty aside was a daily affair. Here in the village she enjoyed a detraction from her famous existence, and managed to blend into the background with ease. She liked the fact that reactions to her presence were not generated through any literary respect, but her pallid complexion caused the locals to think there was a serious vitamin deficiency. It was, therefore, an excellent choice for the writer to spend some quiet time, and recharge the batteries, before returning to London for the autumn.

Despite a continually warm welcome, the writer knew she was not, and would never really, form part of the village. That did not affect her too much, though. She liked the distinctions, and thought the seating arrangements of her party provided any onlooker with an accurate metaphor of her position in the village. She was there, but somehow not, still she used the time to collect her thoughts before she was remembered and treated to the local delights once more. There she sat, it was late Sunday evening, and the next day would see her on the road again, leaving the village for another year, or perhaps longer as her fame was beginning to rule out such luxuries as restful breaks. She looked down at her pale legs, still uncoloured by the sun despite several bold attempts to achieve some kind of evidence she had been in contact with the sun. The writer's beauty was not easy to find at first glance. She did in some ways appear unattractive, but closer inspection revealed that she had a certain something, difficult to define, but nonetheless, there.

There was no shortage of romantic offerings for would-be village suitors. They knew little of her work, but assumed from her way of dressing and mannerisms she did not go for wont of much. The writer though had no intention of forming part in any tryst with locals, she came here for the peace and quiet. As she fur-



ther surveyed her legs, she reached, as always with horror, her feet. Her feet were, without doubt, the ugliest part of her body. Years of ill-fitting shoes during her adolescence had caused a strange curvature of the toes. Her remarkably unsupple skin that covered the arch-less souls of her feet, gave the impression of tough, old leather. However, the worst part was the heel, a form of eczema invaded the entire heel until it reached the leathery part underneath. She had thought many a time about visiting a chiropodist, and putting an end to this problem, but had always been so ashamed of her podiatry abortions, that she never went through with it. She believed she could solve the problem herself, and with the right amount of careful picking, she would one day reach a layer of fresh, virgin skin that would extend over her entire foot. At times when she let her mind go, she would find herself removing big wedges of skin from her feet, without even realising, then feeling rather embarrassed when she was caught. At the side of the pool she felt she could get away with it, and began to pick at her vile extremities. At first she subtly picked at those pieces of skin that were already half hanging off her heel, and discarding the residue skin in the soil by her sun-lounger. Then she became more adventurous, and began to remove huge clumps of skin, only ceasing when this caused surface bleeding. She continued to rub the dead skin into the ground with her flip-flop, and was preparing to execute the same technique on the other foot, when the party remembered her, and called her inside for coffee. She stood up, and ashamed of the trickles of blood rolling down her heel, she made her way inside as soon as possible.

The next day the writer left the village. Over the next year her career became more and more hectic, and despite it being against her wishes, she could not return to the village the following summer. Things did not improve after that time either, and eventually the writer found herself missing a third consecutive summer in the village. After that, the memory had faded, and the writer found other summer activities, and some twenty years would pass between the writer's penultimate and last visit to the village. The village also forgot the writer, her television appearances had become more limited as her literary standing meant she need not rely on the approval of the daytime audiences. As each summer passed there were fewer and fewer comments asking if anyone remembered that writer who used to summer in the village.

By the side of the swimming pool, where the writer was sitting the last day she spent in the village, a strange plant had begun to grow. It was not recognised by any horticulturist in the village as pertaining to anything known as the local fauna. The initial temptation was to remove the offending article, but something told the local gardener to leave her be. In the spring after this decision, a flower appeared on the plant that seemed to have a captivating effect on the gardener. He suddenly felt as if he had been shown all the things he had been doing wrong to his long-suffering wife, and set about making amends immediately. His wife was suspicious of this unusual behaviour, and refused to accept her husband's

gifts, or listen to his poetry. When he asked her to accompany her to the plant, she too saw the light, and from then on their marriage was a continuously passionate love affair till the end of their days. The gardener commented upon this to his boss, the owner of the swimming pool complex, who also happened to be the Mayor. He also showed himself to be more than a little sceptical of the gardener's story, but when he saw the plant rushed to find his wife, and solve their marital problems. Over the next year, divorce became a word eradicated from the local dictionary, churches were forever full of couples retaking their vows.

The Mayor was pleased at the level of happiness in his constituents, but did feel that there was an economic possibility that the plant could offer. Of course, this would probably involve turning the village into a media circus, but a small fortune would no doubt be the reward. He decided to walk with trepidation, for neither did he want to be thought of something of a fool. He contacted an old colleague, who had never been in the village, and, conveniently, was having marital problems. The Mayor invited the quarrelling pair to the village, to contemplate the plant, which now had more than a dozen flowers. Many inhabitants had tried to take cuttings from the plant, and grow them in their own gardens, but the cuttings had never taken, and in most cases had caused the weeds to kill all the other plants in the garden. The Mayor began to devise marketing plans as his ex-colleague wondered why he had travelled all that way to look at a plant. They left the village, still bemused, and became even more so after continuous telephone calls from the Mayor to see how their marriage was going. They were divorced within three months, and the Mayor understood that the plant was only for the people from the village.

After about ten years, the plant had grown into a small tree, and its effect had spread beyond solving matrimonial matters. The economy of the village had been in a continuous boom that showed no signs of letting up. Standards of living were second to none, whilst the village rigorously fought off any external investment of people moving to the village from outside. Despite a growing reputation for being peculiar, the village boasted a crime-free, happy existence for all its residents. And so this continued for years and years. All the residents of the village understood the secrets of the tree, and kept it. Little was known to the outside world about the village, the general idea was that it was better to stay away if you were not one of them.

Twenty years after her last visit to the village, the writer was compiling her memoirs with her editor, and discussing her former summer plans. When she told him about the village she used to spend her summer in, he told her what he had heard on his last visit to the country. She suddenly felt compelled to return to the village, and made arrangements to leave the next day, much to the displeasure of her editor. When she arrived in the village she recognised very little, but made



her way to the old swimming pool, where of course her progress was impeded. After arguing for a while she saw the familiar face of the Mayor, who let her pass, and told her the story of the magical tree. She told him that she had a story for him too, and looking down at her now perfect, cured feet, let out a little laugh.



# Temptation

This probably isn't the best place to start the story. If I had known a little less than a year ago when this story began that I was going to be the main character in a story, then I wouldn't have believed you. It is still hard for me to believe what is happening now, maybe if I rub my eyes, it won't be real, but it is real, I know it is, I can see myself standing on the gallows, it doesn't get much more real than that. The next sound I will hear will be the trap door opening and then I would be, in the words of the judge, "hung from the neck until dead", then my story would be over. It probably wasn't even worth us being introduced.

A year ago I was going about my rather dull life. I shouldn't complain, especially now that I am in this rather disturbing pickle. Now that was always my problem, I have always said that if I had to tell the story of my life, I would do it in a structured way that avoided confusion, and here I am with the clock ticking and you have no idea what I am rabbiting on about. I will take a breath, enjoy it, as it will be one of my last, and start from the beginning.

My father is Lord Ashburn, he owns all that you can see around you now. I was born into a position of privilege on the 13th May, 1787. Our family's estate is found in Northumberland, an occasionally savage and brutal place where the wind and the rain penetrates the skin and angers the very bones that lay underneath, yet it is a place of raw beauty that creates a warmth inside me every time I see its hills and valleys from a different angle. For me it is one of the most beautiful places on the lord's fair earth.

My role was to control the land, what you might call the peasants. They took very little notice of me and were more concerned about my father's levies and other measure implemented to keep him in the finest port whilst they wallowed in the most extreme poverty. Nobody took me seriously and I knew it, I went to Cambridge University in my formative years, but was never a great scholar, I was surprised at how my feeble works were received by the staff until I realised that



Daddy was sending chests of cash every term. He seemed more interested in my ability to frolic with the wenches and down flagons of ale than my interpretation of the mysterious works of Voltaire. Sometimes I wish I could have been part of the French Revolution, and make my mark on society, though what a two year old son of an aristocrat could offer apart from guillotine practice I do not know, but there is something romantic about the thing.

As far as my father is concerned, my distraction with things romantic was the only thing he wasted his money on during my time at University. I did return with a different view on things, I saw there a bigger world than the one I saw daily roaming the hills, I saw more to life than flogging servants and absconding turnips to let them rot and teach an important life lesson.

My father didn't take kindly to this as he expected me to be a carbon copy of himself. When he realised that was not going to happen, he began to remove certain privileges that I had, believing that that would make my life more difficult and would make me come round to his way of thinking. Privilege though, in our family, was such that I could live more than comfortably with what my father considered a pittance. My rebellious period was truly brought to end by my father's decision to send some of his cohorts to have a word with me. I realised that my place on this Earth was on the lands of my father, or not on this Earth.

And so I went back to the lands, played the part of the son of the landowner, away from my father's view my liberal attitudes were well received by the peasants, though this always created a contradictory feeling when my father was present and the people who had been privy to my benevolence were publicly admonished. My father had immense fun with the locals, though this was never a reciprocal action, he liked nothing better than to spend a Friday evening, or a Tuesday, the day didn't matter, fun could be had on any day of the week, and despite his ageing frame, my father still managed to down a flagon with the best of them. A fun evening would consist in a hearty feast, there would be little evidence on the dining table that the human being is an omnivore, served by local girls who were not present for the ability with silver service. After much food and liquid the country gents would entertain themselves with some local criminals, these would be beaten and generally abused until their feeling of self worth left the hall. In their drunken state the lord of the manor and his friends would devise fiendish plots so that the criminals (criminal didn't always mean someone who had committed a crime to my father, it could be someone who simply couldn't pay their taxes or had the audacity to question their implementation) could torture each other which left the ruling classes free to savour the port and caress the ladies. Afterwards this would degenerate into a last days of Rome style scene until no more hedonism could be mustered and our betters were sent to their quarters, the

criminals would remain behind to clear up and then be taken back to their cells for the night.

My father was generally disgusted at my ability to take part in such simple pleasures and received verbal abuse from his friends for my failure as a man. It was a difficult time, I hated every aspect of my life, yet at the same time was aware of the levels of suffering that people and I realise that cruelty as an endemic part of this life. My father always told me to look at the animal kingdom and then I would see that we weren't so bad. That argument didn't manage to convince me too well. I didn't know what to think, yet spent too much time thinking. One day, a little less than a year ago, my thoughts were soon replaced by something much more important.

I had never known love, as it is written about in the great books, there have always been women on hand, but that was more to do with my lofty position. There was also a selection of society ladies for whom I could muster little more than a smile, the thought of walking down the aisle with them turned my stomach almost as much as the diversions of my father. I was resigned to the simple fact that I had been born into a life that had no bearing on my needs as a person, as I wandered along the lonely fields that would one day be mine I knew I would gladly give every blade of grass just to steal one moment of happiness, to have one smile directed at me that came from the heart and meant something, all the titles and land meant nothing.

I had even thought of running away from all this, but didn't I run away to University? Did that do me any good? I was close to desperation, constantly wondering with what to fill my endless days and torturous nights. I wandered the lanes, alone in my thoughts, I sat by the river and begged it for answers, none of which were forthcoming, and then, just when I thought myself to be further away from the answers than I had ever been, some form of vision was walking down the path. There was a period when time stood still as I saw her for the first time, though I later realised that time hadn't stood still, rather a new era had begun, wiping all previous matters from the sphere of history. Suddenly all those lonely nights and painful ponderings seemed the smallest price to pay, now there was a reason for life to continue, did I say continue? I meant start.

Of course, I was getting ahead of myself, she had walked past me with all the enthusiasm of a girl on her own walking past a man who seemed deranged on a lonely country road in the late Eighteenth century. It wasn't in my nature but I felt I had to speak to her. She was unlike any woman that I had ever seen before, the pallid, often blotchy skin of the natives in this part of the world, the all too com-



mon impossible to define colour of their hair that only had any semblance of reason when it finally went grey and fell out, where replaced by an olive skin that kindled a desire in me to travel, her hair was raven black, her curls flowed freely, bouncing off her shoulders as she walked. I was truly staring at a unique creation. I gathered my wits about me and made an introduction. She was suitably unimpressed.

“Good morning. I can’t help noticing that you appear to be somewhat lost. I assume you are not from these parts.” I smiled and left her the conversational arena.

“Sorry. No very English. Look work.” Was not the utterance I had hoped for. It made sense that with her foreign looks, that she should be foreign. If she was looking for work then I, as the son of the man who owns everything as far as the eye can see, should be the one to give it to her. Suddenly, the bind of privilege did not seem such a difficult cross to bear.

“Work? My father owns this land. What type of work are you looking for?” I impressed her greatly with that sentence, so greatly that repetition was required. It soon became clear that she had learnt the first sentence, lexically challenged as it was, by heart. The conversation soon degenerated further, yet I managed to get my point across that she should follow me to find work. She couldn’t have been more than twenty, she made sure she walked behind me and when I repeated that there was no problem and that there would be lots of work, she extracted a knife to reiterate my point. It can’t be easy travelling these roads alone for a pretty girl, I wondered how she had ended up here. With me out of range of her swipe with the knife I continued to question her. After a politically incorrect meander through the map of Europe we ascertained that she came from Romania. That was good, I knew that Romanian was a romance language and not too dissimilar to Italian. Not that I knew Italian, but these things can be learnt.

I did have a smattering of Italian from my university days and as I walked her to the main house I practiced a little and was soon convinced that I would need to take on someone to help me learn the language and, of course, someone for her to learn mine too, but there would be plenty of time for that in due course. I tried to explain to her the type of work that we could offer her, and that this would only be temporary until she realised that she would soon inherit all the land as far as the eye can see. I introduced her to my father and he looked at her in that way. I would have to work fast to protect her from his wayward advances, I thought a made up story about syphilis should keep him at bay for a while. And there she was, in the space of less than two hours she had arrived in my life and

was now working in my kitchen. I had to make great haste to the library to learn all there was to know on the art of wooing.

It seemed a complex affair, that of obtaining the heart of a young maiden, especially when many of the traditionally considered avenues, letters, poems and other romantic gestures in word form, were unavailable. I didn't wish to appear like I was trying to curry favour with her just to get inside her bloomers, that was not the plan at all, besides which I was petrified at what to do should I get inside there as none of the chapters in the library seemed to deal with the topic. I made the bold move to get her a teacher, and luckily found one who spoke Italian as well. Through this learned man I was able to convey my feelings and hopes for this confused girl. I let her know that I wanted her to learn English as I saw her as a person with potential to move up within the framework of our household, and that the only thing that was holding her back was linguistic. I also made it clear that my intentions were honourable and that I had felt a special stirring within me when we met that first day causing me to be intoxicated by her very presence. We were now coming to the limits of the teacher's ability with the Italian language and before I got carried away we left it there with her having a jolly good think about things.

I spoke to some friends, the term friend being a general offering to anyone younger than my father, though that was technically the only difference between them, they offered very little on the subject that could be considered anywhere near help. In their experience most girls said yes because it was their job, or because their fathers wanted to unite several thousand hectares of land. I was sensible enough to not let it slip that the object of my desire was not what they would refer to as a wench, rather a more than eye-catching society girl whom I befriended in Cambridge, only now had my feelings risen to the surface. Without any advice to fall back on I asked my mother, she told me, between gins, that I could have any girl I wanted so that if any girl didn't want me I should have another one. That failed to clear matters up so I decided to take control of my own destiny. Proud of myself I went to find her with a gift of flowers and a poem that I had written. I now stand on the gallows waiting to be executed, and so it is ironic that had they known that reading that poem in public would have caused a more excruciating death than anything the rope could do to me, yet in the privacy of those first moments together, she told me it was the nicest thing anyone had done for her, even though she couldn't understand half of it and later when she could questioned its rhythmic qualities and general scanning, and it brought us closer together.

Thankfully she had a gift for languages and soon came on leaps and bound with her English whilst I still looked like a befuddled British tourist in Venice. I found the accent impossible, I just spoke Italian words like I was directing youths



around a croquet game, on the rare occasions my utterances were grammatically correct they were rendered useless by my incapacity to enunciate them properly. Her accent was hardly the Yorkshire moors but I could listen to it eternally, the words left her mouth like they were attached to a score of music that played constantly in the background of our love. She was falling for me as well, that was the part that caused me to walk on air and feel pangs of nausea with alarming regularity and no warning. My father asked me what was the cause of this unseemly behaviour and I told him simply that I was happy and in love. He gave me a look of disgust and told me I should have been born French.

I was playing a dangerous game though. I couldn't be too happy and obvious because my love would not receive the blessing of the family, should they find out they would drive her away and force me into a marriage of convenience and misery that would make suicide seem like sixteen village fetes rolled into one. Yet how do you disguise the realisation that there is a purpose for this life? When you have found a person that complements you yet offers you the continuous desire to learn more about them and undertake the quest to grow old and wise together. Every night I would sneak away from my quarters and we would lie together in the roof of an old barn, huddling together for warmth, sometimes engaged in deep conversation but other times able to appreciate the silence that held us together like some mysterious form of amorous glue. The pain of the first light that meant our time was over and another day would have to be lived through before we could be together again, but with every painful hour that passed we knew we were moments closer to our time again.

We knew that this could not continue in such a fashion, sooner or later we would be found out. We had to make plans to escape. I could not ask my father for his blessing and some cash, so I would have to leave without the blessing but with some funds that certain people in the legal profession may look upon as stolen. It wasn't hard to find a stash of money around the house, I wondered why highwaymen and the like wasted their time on the muddy country roads when a wander round the stately home would have them retiring in the colonies in the space of a week. I had a thousand pounds and some jewels that no-one would miss and planned to take Amelia away from this after Friday when my father would be too engrossed in his drunken horseplay to wonder about the whereabouts of his disappointment of a son, by Tuesday he would make enquiries and then by Wednesday probably try to find me. That gave us a week, by then we would be well on our way to America. I knew there was something in the air over there, but I would renounce my Britishness upon arrival and through my lot in with the Union, I had no need for England now.

So we were set, a stagecoach would take us down to Liverpool where we would embark on the greatest journey of our lives. As she laid in my arms I

though about our family in the new world, I knew a lot about farming, we could have our own plantation, the dream would be ours. The plans were simple yet so had everything else been in our brief courtship, there was no need to complicate things at this juncture, so as we drifted off to sleep for the last time in this country, we were kept warm by the dreams that would soon leave our heads and become our lives. We expected to wake up with the usual first light of the morning, but this time there was a rather heavy foot that kicked the door open. In burst my father and three of his drunken friends. It seemed like the good times were over already.

For two days I was kept locked in my quarters by the guards, whilst my father expected me to contemplate the error of my ways and renounce my love. For those two days I didn't sleep, I couldn't think of anything but what was happening to her, and every thought that crossed my mind made sleep more of an enemy that it had ever been to me. In brief moments I considered my own torture and then felt even worse than I had before as I realised that they could kill me, if I wasn't dead already, but that was nothing to what they could do to her. At the end of the second day my father reappeared and offered me the chance to, as he put it, do the decent thing. I would be allowed to wipe this shameful moment from my past if I agreed to return to the family business and marry the first acceptable, in his eyes, society girl that became available and provide him with an heir that was not a disgrace to the values of the English nobility. He said he would give me a day to think about it, but I told him there and then that I would accept no such deal as my life was technically over, and that he could do no more to me than he had already done, at least that was what I thought, of course within an hour he would prove me wrong. The next time the door opened the two soldiers entered with Amelia, even with the rope around my neck I cannot bring myself to pronounce the words to describe what ensued in the following scene, only that when they finally drove the sword deep into her stomach and left her to bleed to death on the floor, I actually felt a strange kind of release at knowing that her suffering was over. From that moment until now I have not experienced a single feeling in my body, as if my nerves had already given up the fight and were now prepared for the afterlife.

With Amelia dead and me more so yet suffering the encumbrance of being alive at the same time, my father had to make preparations for my own exit. He was lord of all he surveyed but he couldn't just kill people on a whim, well not people that he had produced with his own loins. He decided that I should be framed for the murder of Amelia, it was quite simple, everyone knew I was besotted with her so when she refused my advances I went mad and killed her. For a nice bonus touch as well my father also threw in a piquant dose of sexual assault. There were witnesses of course, the friends who burst in on me and Amelia in that last pleasurable moment, all respected men in the community and voices that would never be contradicted. For a few extra shillings some of Amelia's work col-



leagues gave evidence that she had been complaining about my intentions towards her whilst the pots were scrubbed. The teacher also confirmed this with a brilliantly eloquent tale of how she begged him to help her as she feared for her life. she feared h of hens towards her whilst thgeeparations for my wo

The trial was a transparent joke, most people there were friends of my father. The judge was also one of those present when we were caught so we had the legal anomaly of him taking the stand and questioning himself at the same time. No-one cared, the public bayed for blood, mine to be precise. Everyone believed the story that it was me, objective journalism is not something we are famed for and with people who even suggested that there was a hint of a fit-up suddenly receiving very sore heads, public opinion was clearly in my father's camp. When people dared to suggest that I was hardly the type to go slaughtering young maidens, the prosecution simply argued that the people who did this type of thing were often the ones that you least expect. How could anyone argue with such legal insight? The entire courtroom nodded as they mumbled to themselves about just what other heinous crimes I had committed without being found out.

It was decided that given the nature of my crimes I shouldn't be allowed to speak for myself as that might confuse the good members of the public who had been so kind to come and watch this circus. My father spoke of how he had made every effort to get in touch with Amelia's family but this had proven impossible. He also called for a minute's quiet reflection before passing sentence, all this after my own mother joined in the charade to offer some piffle about what a disappointment I had been to her as a son. I just laughed, if they thought I was made then I would give them something to genuinely consider it to be so.

I was taken away to the cells and left to rot for three days before my execution. I found out I was to be hung later. They passed sentence without my presence being deemed necessary. I wasn't given any food for the three days I was in the cells, bits of water were thrown at me and I was chained to wall so that I didn't spoil the party by doing anything stupid like committing suicide. That would not be considered a sporting way to end the show.

On the last night of my tenure on this earth I received a visitation, whether from lack of food or just the final goodbye of my remaining mental faculties, Amelia returned to spend that last night with me. She told me that everything would be better once the rope broke my neck and that we would be together in a much better place than the ghastly planet in which we had had the misfortune of being born had to offer. She had the key to the chains that held me in to the walls and gently helped me down, before extracting some bread and cheese which we

washed down with fresh water that tasted better than even the finest wines that had passed my lips. She held me in her arms and tended to my wounds, stroking my hair as she beckoned me towards sleep. When I was awoken by the guards at dawn she had left, and I was back on the wall, but I knew that I would see her again. I just had to get this rope around my neck and we would be together for ever.

I was led to the gallows with the usual mob of well-wishers screaming at me and displaying their riddance as good. Amelia had told me that my father and all the people who had done wrong by us would not go unpunished. Somehow I found it hard to believe her but smiled as she said it. I think she wanted me to feel better. I couldn't care less about the others, if they were brought to justice then so be it, I would not waste any of my thoughts on them. I knew my reward was never meant to be savoured in this life. With that I have peace in my soul. I am given the opportunity to beg for clemency and almost spoil the party by saying that I only feel pity for the people who have done this to me. One day they will understand, but that day seems a long way away from now. I look down to the trap door as the rope is placed around my neck and give thanks to all those who have helped me leave this place with the key to somewhere wholly better. It is a beautiful sound the last sound I hear as the trap door opens and my body falls to its next home. I feel nothing, there is no transition from one life to another until I open my eyes again and I am sitting in the lobby of an enormous house wearing a white suit on a summer's day and holding a bunch of flowers. I have a message in my hand that Amelia will be along shortly.





# Thieves Like Us

Fred and Claudinho lived a comfortable life. They didn't ask for much and occasionally got slightly more, which they considered a bonus. Their life and livelihood was based around the more exclusive Rio de Janeiro beaches, not that they were generally allowed in on spec, rather that they worked their way in through the back door, so to speak. Their work was simple, they were young, lithe, good-looking and well-versed Brazilian males, they flirted with rich single women and then dedicated their time to entertaining these ladies until the end of the ladies' stay.

The Brazilian economy didn't offer them much more, there were jobs available but these were low-paid and hard to find. They didn't see what they were doing as anything linked to crime, quite the opposite, most of the women knew what they were doing, and what they were getting. They weren't cheated, anything they gave to the chaps was given freely and willingly. Crime against the tourists was too risky, the economy needed the dollars and took a firm stance against those who made the visitor's stay less than welcome, if they caught them.

Fred and Clau always managed to remain on the right side of the law, they were getting some money together and caused no problems for the law-breakers that roamed the beaches, and, in that way they had a comfortable life. They knew their resource was finite, they were both twenty-six and this work would become more difficult as they hit thirty. Not so much that the work would become difficult, rather they would have to be less fussy about the type of clients they chose. For the time being their work was littered with the top end level of attractiveness of the emotionally unstable single, breaking-up, broken up, divorcee or difficult to categorise.

The boys did have a long term plan though. They were saving up enough money open a shop and live a more honest life. Fred was a reasonably talented chappie and they planned to design and sell T-shirts and other items. They needed

ten thousand dollars to start everything up, and were not that far away, maybe a year more trawling the beaches and they would be able to wave goodbye to the life. Both of them were becoming irked with the gigolo lifestyle, it seemed like a laugh at eighteen, but as the years wore on, it became too commonplace, too routine, it was work. Neither had had a girlfriend, a proper girlfriend that is, though they had bedded more women they could count. It was a lonely existence, they had each other, but that was really only scant reward.

When true love had appeared it had always had to play second fiddle to work. A girlfriend meant no income and increased expenses, plus it was highly unlikely that the girl in question would be overly enamoured with the boys work ethic. Once Fred had come close to giving up everything for a woman, he wanted to come clean and make a fresh start, he knew that Caludinho could always play solo, or find another partner, so when he said to her that if he told her what he did maybe she would change her mind, and when she responded that nothing could make her change her mind, he told her what he did, and she gave an outburst of choice Brazilian slang as she changed her mind. The way they felt now though, was that love could wait, first it was the shop.

The boys' modus operandi was quite simple. They knew the signs well enough to spot those who were on Rio's beaches to bury the past and those who would just waste a night of their valuable time. Their favourite client was on holiday alone, confident enough to do this, and well dressed enough to demonstrate that she had the coffers. Pairs didn't interest them too much, if there were more people in the equation then there was more room for doubt, plus if she has a friend in tow it means that neither of the boys can have exclusive rights to the purse strings, plus the embittered friend normally becomes sanctimonious following her rejection and tries to dissuade the other one away from the charms of our heroes, whilst rebuffing the advances of pasty tourists.

Quality could not always be the primordial factor. The women had to have money and look like they were prepared to splash a bit about, preferably a big bit. The glances that came over from lithe twenty-somethings across the dance-floor could not be accepted, these girls were probably on their gap year and counting every penny, they would end up expecting the boys to pay for their drinks, and that is bad business. What Fred and Cluadinho liked more than anything was a divorcée, recently so, with the cheque just cleared, with only fun in the sun on her mind, coupled with the attention of a well-toned local lover-boy and some strong Caiparinhas.



Some jobs had been big, bigger than expected, Fred once got hold of an ex-wife of a stockbroker, she had been playing the little woman in NYC for too long and when she got to the beaches of Rio she went wild. She was only supposed to stay for two weeks but ending renting a luxury place for two months and insisting that Fred live there too, he asked what he would do about the rent on his place and she said that she would take care of that too. Every day she would furnish him with lavish gifts, watches, jewellery, expensive clothes, she had tons of her old man's money and didn't care how much of it Fred took. She was so generous that Fred actually had a moment of sincerity and told her what he was really up to, she said that she knew that from the start and that when the two months were up they would say their goodbyes. Fred liked that plan so helped himself to the cash lying around her purse on a daily basis. As she gave him a new present he was down the market selling it before it had even been taken out of the bag. When she went, she left him a thousand dollars tip and the pair took a well deserved holiday.

You may think that a holiday for this pair would involve a riotous time with a bevy of beauties, but the reality is that their work tended to remove the need for extra-amorous encounters, and any free time that was to be enjoyed would be done so in a leisure based arena. It makes sense if you consider it, a prostitute or a porn star gets their fortnight off, what are they going to want to do? Have sex? Very unlikely, more probably a good book and a sun lounger. So it was with F&C, they spent two weeks fishing in La Guaira Bank in Venezuela spending all day on yachts surrounding by fat American fishermen without a woman in sight. They loved it, they caught hardly anything and blew a fortune, but for that brief period they felt like everything would come together. That is when they had the idea for the shop.

Sometimes things didn't go according to plan, and there was the odd hiccup, but that wasn't their fault, if their clients were not able to cope emotionally with the situation then they shouldn't get involved. One girl got too attached to Claudinho, threatened to kill herself if he didn't go back to America with her. He told her that that was an impossible situation as he couldn't leave Fred. She didn't really need to hear those words and was soon indulging in far too many Prozac. Claudinho went to see her in the hospital and promised to keep in touch. Six weeks later he received an e-mail from her lawyer which said that she had committed suicide and left him two thousand dollars. Claudinho's first thought was that that amount was a little bit tight considering her wealth and that he was the last person to make her happy, then he reconsidered the situation and thought it was quite sweet.

It has been commented upon that the boys' work had been allowed to continue without raising too many eyebrows in the local crime sphere. Their work

was a world away from the thefts on the beach and the other crimes that caused people to think twice about Rio. Maybe their actions could have continued undetected forever had a certain Hugo not started to think about the potential that Fred and Claudinho could offer to his business. Hugo's business was not one that even flirted with legality, he was involved in almost anything that was going in the Rio area and knew that there was money to be made from these two. First, he had to get them on his side. That didn't prove too hard as he knew about the shop idea.

Hugo waited for them one day as they prepared to scout a bar for potential clients. It was May, a period when their workload should be greater than it was, something that was causing them a modicum of concern. What if they had both lost their mojo? What if the last one was the very last one? What if someone had seen through their ulterior motives and informed the rest of the female world? This caused a sweat, would they have to get proper jobs? Would they have to drop a scale on the quality factor? Would they have to try the men? Both fiddled with a cup of coffee and pondered this potential disaster. Hugo slid over to them and introduced himself. They knew who he was. A bad day was just about to get worse. Hugo made you offers, but you did things for him, and despite him paying you well, you got into his debt, leaving his debt was uncommon.

"I have been thinking about your situation. You are not getting any younger, if you want that shop you will have to move fast. How short are you? Five grand?" Hugo smiled and was brought a very milky coffee.

"We are almost there, actually." Fred didn't want this conversation to continue, he would rather endure violence.

"Of course you are. So you don't want a simple job for me that will net you five grand cash. Well within your capacities, All I need are a couple of young, healthy, non-smoking, relatively alcohol free, but within reason, pair of young girls delivered to a hotel on the outskirts of town. You're right. You are close, someone else will have more need of five grand. I'll see you later." Hugo left the table though managed to leave his calling card next to the coffee, and seeds of doubt in the mind of our two stars.

They knew this was not a good plan. Then again, it was five grand for doing something simple, probably hideous and immoral from the poor girls' point of view, but still five grand. Fred said no. Claudinho said yes. Claudinho knew it was trouble but it meant the shop. They were only two grand short, the extra money



could be used for stock, they could take things to the next level. By the time the beers came and they were beginning sentences with “Imagine if, though” it wasn’t long before they were on the phone to Hugo and in possession of a plan.

All they had to do was to deliver two early twenties females to a place of Hugo’s out of town. Neither knew what would happen to the girls, nor did they allow it to take up too much of their attention. Justification was simple, this was a cruel world, the world had been cruel to them, they grew up in the favelas of Rio, they never had a chance, they watched in awe as the rich tourists helped themselves to their country, a country where they think everyone is a footballer or a dancer, how were they going to be noticed? Life is about chances, you get a few in the west, here you are lucky to get one, if one comes along, the last thing you should do is allow something like a conscience cloud your judgment.

The boys’ hit the disco quite early. Most of the people were already full of cocktails. Living out the image of Rio of beaches and cocktails and dancing that most residents of the city never tasted due to their being busy staying alive. There were plenty of candidates, Hugo’s comments about not being drunk stuck in their heads. They decided to be patient and hang back at the bar. A pair of drunk peasants from an English speaking nation covered their faces with their hideous breath, but the two were well versed in dealing with such things and brushed them off with ease. As they finished off their beers they caught sight of two Scandinavian looking girls, dancing together but with the attention of most of the slobbering tongues of the males in the place. They didn’t seem too interested in any of the males on view so Fred and Claudinho took up the gauntlet, especially as they had cans of Diet Coke in their hands.

Fred made the move over to them and flashed them a smile. This incurred the wrath of the other less than Alpha males. These elbowed and pushed the Brazilian pair for a moment but as they saw that the hands placed on the girls hips were being reciprocated that respect was due and they backed off. What could have been a potentially worrying scene soon dissipated, what would have been the point of starting on the good looking, young Brazilians? What would that prove? The girls wouldn’t suddenly change their minds if the lads took a pasting. There were moments in which you just had to walk away gracefully. Fred whispered that “we simply had to save you from those horrible men” and laughed. He offered one a cigarette and she said they didn’t smoke. This was looking like a result. One of the girls asked if they weren’t simply exchanging one lot of horrible men for another. Claudinho gave a look that suggested they might just be right there, and that was them hooked.

The night went on in a predictable fashion, Fred and Claudinho went about their task in workmanlike fashion, avoiding the troublesome thoughts about just might what happen to the girls once they had been deposited with Hugo. This was easily justified in their minds, they had never done anything particularly bad in their lives and this one bad action would permit them to realise their dream and leave the life that had taken up so much of their time. The world was a cruel place, it had been cruel to them when it decided they would be born in the poorest part of Rio de Janeiro, it was a case of one cruel act to make their dream come true, they felt, at least at the time, that they could live with that, even if the girls didn't.

After some dancing it was mentioned that the beach bars were a little crowded, the girls conceded that this was indeed a truism and gladly accepted the offer of a nightcap in Claudinho's apartment. As the battered old vehicle chugged and puffed its way up the hill to a more luxurious part of Rio, neither of the girls contemplated why the owners of a luxury pad would slum it so with a Lada, smitten as they were by their new beaux. Eventually they made it to the top of the hill and found the address without excessive difficulties, not knowing how to get there might have been just that thing to make them think once. They pulled into the drive and struggled to exit the vehicle with slightly more haste than when they entered it as both parties were keen to enter the next phase of the night. One party was under the misapprehension that a night of hitherto unforeseen passion awaited them and the other eagerly felt the envelope full of cash in their pockets.

Once inside the villa on the hill the girls showed their appreciation for the good taste of the décor and general layout of the place, Fred made good work at the bar preparing the delicious Caiparinha's he considered himself famous for whilst Claudinho made sure the girls were comfortable in the spacious living room, albeit temporarily. Claudinho toyed aimlessly with the ice for a drink he was never going to prepare until, as promised, a door opened to the side of the living room and Hugo gave him the nod. Once the nod had been received, Fred's help was suddenly required in the kitchen and he made his excuses to join his friend, closing and locking the door as he left. Hugo congratulated them on their work and handed them a plain brown envelope with ten thousand US dollar in cash inside. Two minutes later they were driving down the hill to their new lives and promising never to mention the two girls again.

That night was a strange and subdued affair for the pair, they had never really been drinkers, but felt the need to imbibe some of those famous liquids in a hope to forget about what they had just done. With every sip and every feel of the hundred ten dollar bills this became easier, until they reached the point that the alcohol refused to accept their reasoning in favour of reality. It is a curious thing with



drink that when you want to see things clearer fantasy takes you so far south of reality you barely recognise your own self, yet should you wish to blot reality out fantasy seems to have never been so far away.

Inevitably they scoured the newspapers in the following days but there was no news of the missing pair. Time being a great healer meant that they were soon formulating a variety of off-the-cuff affirmations that what they did was not exactly wrong and enormously justifiable in the light of the current economic climate. Besides, they now had a shop. They found the premises in no time at all, and despite having other places to see, made the decision to take the place there and then. They paid six months up front as Hugo's payment meant they were flusher than they had ever known in their lives. They bought a machine to print the T-shirts, they decided to make do with Fred's old lap top for a while as it was still capable of doing the work required of it. They got some stock in, took an charming young thing to smile people into the shop and they were ready. A month had passed since that fateful night, they had been too busy even to think about had they not been desperately trying not to, maybe one day they would have to pay a higher price for what they had done but in the meantime the shop was going well and whilst they weren't making any money, the initial losses were less than had been projected, add that to the fact that they would have five months more before the issue of rent raised its head meant that things were looking quite rosy for the pair.

Neither had they heard from Hugo since that night. They had done the job for him and he was pleased with their work. They had agreed on a fee and it had been paid. Why would they need to see each other again? From Fred and Claudinho's point of view the Hugo chapter was closed. They were soon to find out that this feeling was not reciprocated. Hugo had been watching the pair as they worked away at their shop, for Hugo the money was not payment, it was a loan. Of course, he forgot to mention that, but that was not his problem, he knew full well whose problem it was. So, he gave them five weeks and sent someone in to pose as a customer. This guy wasn't the sort of chap you would like to meet in a well-lit populated alley, and his mere presence in the shop caused concern for proprietors and customers alike. When the customers exercised their power and left the shop, Fred and Claudinho were left to deal with this monster. He began in a soft voice unbecoming of his frame.

"Good afternoon. I have been sent here by Hugo. Your first repayment on the loan is overdue by a week. I have come to collect the two and a half thousand dollars. Cash is acceptable. "

This utterance was wholly unexpected on the part of Fred and Claudinho who suggested some form of mistake had been made. Whilst still maintaining his smile, Hugo's employee reiterated his request, holding Fred in a rather unfriendly way by the neck. Claudinho explained that they simply didn't have two and a half grand and that if they had to repay that amount for four months then they would go bankrupt. It was then explained that four payments were not expected of them that would only cover the loan, with seventy-five percent interest levied by Hugo on such transactions they would need to make these payments for seven months. At that moment it was difficult to tell which of the two felt more pain in their necks, Fred with the goon's clumsy paw squeezing into his or Claudinho who had just felt all the moisture leave the area and dryness convert the area into a sandpaper covered region. The goon left saying that Hugo would be paying them a visit after they closed up for the night.

The rest of the day was spent with constant hot flushes and cold sweats consuming the pair's bodies as they awaited their meeting with Hugo. They knew that they were in it now. They discussed the possibility, and indeed the wisdom of arguing their point and soon realised that if Hugo wanted them in his debt, then there they would be, even if they came up with seventeen and a half grand tomorrow, he was not the type of businessman to hand out receipts, whatever he said went, they knew no mention of a loan was made, yet that didn't matter now. Their dream had lasted five weeks and they were certain now that the good times were over.

As promised, Hugo appeared just as they were closing up for the day. His offer was simple, he didn't want the money to be paid back, he knew their worth to him as a provider of fit, young people. Hugo had outgrown the simple pleasures of being a pimp and a dealer, and was now involved in the lucrative world of organ trafficking. The two girls who Fred and Clau left in Hugo's mansion enjoyed their Caiparinha, forced down them at gunpoint and laced with Rohypnol, until they were unconscious, after that they were taken into a makeshift lab and each had a kidney removed, later they were dumped outside a hospital and left to fight for their lives. One picked up a very unpleasant renal infection and nearly left this planet, the other was simply left with a hideous scar on her left side to accompany the uncountable mental ones that riddled her insides.

Hugo wanted male kidneys this time. Fred and Clau had never entertained the idea of pulling blokes and suggested to Hugo that this was not really their area. He said that he understood their predicament but begged them to reconsider. As fate would have it, a young cousin of Fred's came by the shop hoping to take with him a t-shirt that hadn't come out the way that he wanted. Despite the boy being less than ten years old, Hugo grabbed him and snapped his arm in front to Fred and Claudinho, that t to Fred and Claudinho, tbebbbed him and snapped



his arm in from et, the other was simply left with a hideous c was the period of reconsideration over with. With the boy screaming and onlookers looking anywhere but at Hugo, Hugo left stating the characteristics of the next victims.

The next victims had to be delivered by midnight, this meant a reduced time-frame. Hugo told them that they would need less time to work with as queers couldn't say no, homophobia being the latest addition to Hugo's hideous CV. They weren't even sure where to go, but made their way to a place down by the beach, this time feeling the beady eyes of Hugo's cohorts on them as they selected their prey. It wasn't difficult to entice two athletic, young things away from the bar and towards the idea of a private party, this time the drive up to the flat was not even necessary, as soon as they turned the corner a pair of heavy handed employees of Hugo made good the theory that lead piping is of a harder substance than the human cranium. Hugo congratulated Fred and Clau on their work and said he would see them soon. Both went home and repeated the ritual of showering, vomiting and crying until the visions that haunted them as they lay awake were replaced something much more horrific as they slept.

They knew Hugo would not wait a month for the next job. They had technically not done anything wrong, they lied to themselves. Their hand was forced, when they said it like that it sounded easy. Hugo was pleased with the success of the operation as both lads were out of hospital within twenty-four hours, Hugo's surgeon becoming continually more expert in his work. Before the end of the next month Fred and Clau had found two more unknowing pairs to go for a walk down the beach with them, sleep was almost unheard of between them without the aid of pills, the shop was being left to rack and ruin as the young thing on her own was incapable of running it and Fred and Clau were absent when they were present. Perhaps in retrospect it seemed like tempting fate, but when Fred suggested that things couldn't get any worse it was inevitable that Hugo would have another idea.

Hugo had one good surgeon, he had learnt from scratch, he was sure that the surgeon could train one of Fred and Clau to do the same level of work, or even an inferior level, as long as their organs were removed successfully. So, Hugo stood in the shop and flipped a coin. He looked up, told Fred that his new job was as a surgeon and left Claudinho to run the shop. He also presented him with an up-to-date statement of their accounts which read that debt had been reduced to fourteen-thousand eight hundred dollars. Clau didn't even question this as the most likely outcome would be Hugo agreeing that a mistake had been made and added on a couple more zeros.

From then on Fred and Clau barely saw each other. Fred was continually training and living in Hugo's mansion on the hill. He was not allowed to speak to anybody outside the group he was working with and every time he tried a cousin felt the twang of young, brittle bones. Clau was made to work with another fellow whose technique and patter were not what Clau considered to be appropriate. Fred and Clau had been raised on a diet of charm, the art of listening without hearing, looking like the real thing, now this was as cold and calculated as getting mobile phone clients. Clau liked working with Fred, they had a rapport together and knew their *modus operandi* by heart, the new guy was just the opposite of the flair and panache that Fred used. Clau thought about Fred's ridiculous training sessions, when they were between jobs but Fred would still make sure he wasn't losing his touch. He felt a tinge of nostalgia as he realised that those moments were long gone and only misery awaited him now.

Caludinho started drinking. He knew it wasn't the solution but he couldn't see one coming sober so it was nice during that brief moment when the pain subsided, even though that only lasted until that never predictable point in the bottle when the demons would be unleashed with the liquid and fall into the glass for their immediate consumption. Things went from bad to worse from then on. Hugo didn't care if they brought their victims to him via the gift of charm or with a knife at their throat, which also caused Claudinho to think that his time on the payroll was limited. That caused the alcohol to have even less of an effect, and so his needs soon became greater.

In the mansion things weren't much happier for Fred, he learnt how to remove kidneys without causing too much lasting damage and was exercising this gift on a nightly basis. He wasn't allowed to leave the house, though in his current state of mind he had no real desire to, he couldn't believe how things had turned out in such a short space of time, at night he lay in bed and thought about the good times that they had had together, but soon became maudlin and blocked his old sparring partner from his mind. Fred was interested in how long people had been doing this kind of thing for Hugo, and he became truly concerned when he discovered that nobody had been in the job for more than a couple of months. He thought about escape, but he knew that there was no way out. He had used up all his tears soon after he ran out of ideas.

Hugo decided that the moment had come for Fred and Claudinho to take the next step up the ladder. Claudinho was little or no use to him on the ground any more, his pale complexion was now riddled with spots and his hair had become greasy, he was clearly using heroin, something that Hugo didn't like, especially as he was trying to hide it from him which meant that he was buying it from somebody else. The organs had to be transported across the border and into a safe territory where they were later sent off to the buyers. It was a complex operation



and Hugo had decided that Claudinho would work with the logistics people to ensure safe passage. Claudinho didn't really know how to play their game but planned to wing it as long as he could. He simply promised to learn quickly. He was a completely different person from the happy-go-lucky character that once trod the beaches of Rio, the charmer and the dreamer had left, now he had no dreams and no-one to charm. Whatever tasks were asked of him by Hugo were undertaken only with the thought of the moment when the needle pierced the vein later on.

Claudinho was little use organising logistics so he began working just as a spare hand on the planes that transported the organs into a friendly territory before they were shipped for sale. There was so much work to do at times that Fred often accompanied people on the plane so that he could do a couple of quick operations in the air. The plane was equipped with a portable operating theatre, providing the turbulence wasn't too bad, most operations were a success, though Hugo spent very little time worrying about what state the patients arrived in. Hugo had planned a special journey for Clau to accompany Fred on. Both entered the plane with little to say to each other. Fred was haunted by the demons that followed him every time he opened a human body, and Clau was just full of smack. Clau had a feeling that Hugo was going to tire of him soon so he had made the bold decision to spend whatever time he had left so far detached from reality that the pain was minimised.

Once they were up in the air Fred was taken to one side. Hugo's number two was on the plane along with the pilot and the co-pilot. He told Fred that Clau had been up to very little good and that Fred's duty and loyalty was to Hugo now. If Fred did not want to end up in the same state as his patients, then he would have to prove his loyalty to Hugo. Hugo wanted Claudinho's kidney, left or right, Fred could decide. Hugo did not want it to sell it, purely to teach Clau a lesson. And so, in mid-air, Clau was forced down onto the table and given a clout on the head so that he could be strapped into place. Fred looked at the specimen that his once proud friend had become and decided to do him a favour. This operation would not go to plan. Claudinho would feel very little, but soon his pain would be over. Hugo's number two left Fred to work, and with tears in his eyes, Fred cut into his ex-best-friend's stomach. He sweated with every cut, hearing his friend's groans, hoping that the heroin had a soothing effect as he made the vital cuts that would soon end his former colleague's life. He turned round to see what the others were up to and realised that how bad he had felt before this was nothing in comparison to how bad he felt when he saw that only himself and Claudinho were left on the plane. The boxes containing the organs were empty and the parachutes had gone. Fred looked over to his friend who was bleeding to death as the plane maintained its course on auto-pilot. Fred looked at the controls and wondered if he would be capable of landing the thing with the help of a friendly voice at the control tower, before he could come to a conclusion a light flashed up that

announced that the auto-pilot had been disengaged, and the plane started to lose altitude. Fred stumbled over to his friend and ended his life there and then. As the plane hurtled towards the ground he embraced his dead friend and thought about those happy days on the beaches of Rio.





# State of the Nation

Oliver's index finger hovered above the enter key. It wasn't the first time he had been in this position and always liked a bit of ceremony around the occasion. As the digit descended to reveal his fate, he mentally commenced revelling in the glory of finally cracking his sleep codes and becoming part of the elite. He imagined the television appearances, the adoration and the pictures of the queen in his wallet. The sleep codes had been invented by the deceased Dr. John Franklyn as a reaction to the nation's ever worrying addiction to lotteries and other such game-play. Franklyn noticed that people's obsessions had become so great with jackpot-hitting that they had become unreceptive to any other form of entertainment, and this was having a negative effect on the nation's cultural output. Even before the end of the twenty-first century the lottery had achieved a daily status, each night pulling in more than twenty-three million viewers before the news, ninety-three percent of which then turned off their sets when the last number was selected from Bertha or Gretchen telling them that another Second European Empire Currency Unit would be needed to dream again tomorrow, their frustration too great to be able to absorb information pertaining to the real world. Franklyn's dream was replacing the lottery with something that would reawaken the nation's intellectual hunger as the jackpot would bring with it spiritual enlightenment, inner calm and, of course, wealth to last a few lifetimes.

Ever since Franklyn became Head of Medicine at the European Health Headquarters in Antwerp, he had been fascinated by groundbreaking research in the forties into how the human brain could be potentially operated and enhanced by a series of seven digit codes etched onto the left side of the cerebrum. It was clear that these codes had a special power when cracked, harnessing a power that could possibly lead the cracker to a lifetime's happiness. Those had tried to crack their sleep codes had become hooked, and that was the drive that Franklyn wanted to harness. These etchings, to give them a name we can comprehend, could not be translated by the simple human eye and did not appear in number form as we know it, but the guinea pigs used in those experiments experienced a change in their lives, every aspect of their lives changing overnight as illnesses were cured, mental health and capacity were raised to a hitherto unknown stan-

dard, and, and this would help to market it, pots were full. Needless to say, when word got around everyone wanted to know how to access their codes, and the government, fearing it would provoke mass hysteria and, even worse, people would actually crack their codes before they had made any money from them, destroyed the evidence concerning the tests, and, from then on, the guinea pig's luck was not so good. Despite the government's desire to keep the experiments away from the public eye, a number of luminaries from various medical fields began their own investigations into the possibility of cerebral coding. By the end of the century they were ready to return to the government with their findings and offer a proposal that would change leisure in the twenty-second century.

Research informed the scientists that every person had a different code, and for every individual person to arrive at their individual code, they would have to solve a series of specific mathematical and spatial equations that would only work for them. It was later discovered that these codes were linked to the amount of sleep you had had in your life. Therefore, a person who had had a regular sleep pattern and clocked up the suggested eight hours per night would have a more traditional equation scheme to solve, whereas an insomniac or a layabout would be presented with erratic equations that were infrequent dinner guests at the table of standard mathematical theorem. The government had the idea of using the breaking of these codes in such a way that it could become some sort of game-play that could replace the lottery with players being charged for the time they spent doing equations. However, for anybody to be able to crack their own codes they would need to have an IQ in excess of the generous speed limit on the German EuroWays, they liked the idea of a nation of mathematicians but could not see how the average lottery player, whose social ID was logged in the research records as: Sports (televised) Fitness (absent) Intellectual Capacity (missing) and other none too pride inspiring statistics. It was clear that these people would not be able to perform mathematical equations beyond the capabilities of a pre-Euro University level education imparter. The brains that had cracked the programme now needed some way of marketing it. Franklyn had begun work with an admirable idea to once again stimulate the minds of the nation, but the project turned ironically sour when the possibilities for making money were truly seen and greed took its place as project controller. Research was suggesting that codes could be manipulated and reprogrammed which would vastly reduce the odds of a successful crack. This information was not made public unlike the mouth-watering lists of prizes (which always seemed to make spiritual enlightenment and other answers to questions regarding the meaning of life to take second billing).

Marketing experience showed the research team, that if you ask people if they dislike something they will respond in one of two ways, whereas if you tell someone they dislike something they normally just thank you. It was an easy task to sully the lottery's already tarnished reputation. There was an initial loss of income but this was offset in the short term by a groundbreaking new study that



revealed that smoking was actually good for you. Old smokers only died of dreadful diseases when non-smokers, jealous of their wisdom, produced paranoia cells in the brain stem which had a negative effect on blood transportation. All the leading lights in the medical world agreed with this theory, as they were also on a commission from future sleep codes sales (initial merchandising plans seemed very appetising). Smoking fever returned and a packet of ten could reach in today's monetary terms the price of a decent size non-stick frying pan. Of course, this solution was only short term and the last thing the government wanted to do was spend extra money earned from their jolly clever sleep codes project on health care for their gullible charges. For the next three years after great revelation, also known as the Morris moment, Franklyn and his team began work on making the sleep codes viable.

As research became more fruitful the team discovered that sleep codes were relative to each person's individual ability. It was a subject that had been broached in various meetings when one doctor would ask, quite reasonably, "if we can't crack them, how is someone who hasn't looked at a Maths class pod since Euro Grade ten going to do it?". It was the principal concern of the researchers, and something that had been kept from the government. They claimed that it would be unfair for them to try to break their own codes before the job was complete. Nonetheless, many sleepless nights were spent in the name of overtime trying to find that perfect equation. Still, the news that sleep codes were relative was welcome. More guinea pigs were needed, preferably people whose intellectual capacities had not been measured because they couldn't be measured, to begin work on a viable programme. A basic structure was designed so that the user could log-on and work on various equations that would give the user clues as in which direction to work in. The programme had to be focused in such a way that no-one could cheat, or hack in to another person's codes, or, worst of all rich people could hire a young, starving genius to crack their codes for them. This was achieved by the logging programme recognising various aspects of each user over time, as the interface became better acquainted with its user it could detect any funny business and any progress would be obliterated by the automatic reprogramming of sleep codes. Similar to the highly popular Hydro-Dobbermans, which were electronic pets powered by Hydrogen to react violently to any form of distrust they detected, the code ports contained the same sensor which allowed them to react when presented with an aspect of the user's personality that was not registered. This was accompanied by the shame of having your picture on the web page described as an "evil-coder". To code you would have to set your browser to the code home page by default so the faces of the back-door coders were the first thing a user saw when logging on. Nobody wanted to be tarnished with the stigma of such a reputation so cheating was almost abolished by fear.

Back in the labs, all of guinea pigs had cracked their individual codes within two years of joining the programme, once the basics were understood it was a simple case of trial and error before the magic numbers were punched in, and the government was certain that questions would soon be formulated as to why there were three-thousand intellectually and spiritually content cadavers in the morgue. It was essential for the producers of the game to make it look that progress was being made whilst the codes were reprogrammed and Franklyn reverted to the simple method of inverting numbers and letters which had the effect of confusing the user but without realising why. The government was pleased that everything seemed in place for the big launch, especially as the average fifty year old was smoking between three and four packets a day in an attempt to recapture their lost health, Franklyn's new plan of reprogramming the sleep codes automatically with the same number and equations but in a different order meant that cracking the code was almost impossible, or at least as hard as picking six numbers using mathematical theorem.

To the governments delight the programme was an instant success due to the vacuum left by the lottery. The doctors and learned scientists who had been working on the programme and enjoying the benefits of their own sleep codes, were decried as frauds for inventing the lies about tobacco. Some swifts share movements from one account to another made them look in cahoots with the tobacco companies. As a punishment they were set loose in busy city centres and chased by a pack of enraged but out-of-breath, once again ex-smokers. The tobacco companies, in return for their help during the financially tricky dark lottery days were given the contract to produce the soon to be popular portable sleep code pod. The system was simple, you logged on at home or your place of employment and after inscription, you set about cracking your codes. With the lottery now removed people took to the new pastime, which soon spawned endless books on how to crack your codes (which were utterly useless as the codes were individual, no-one tried to hide this but the obsession was so great people were prepared to try it), television programmes with guests who had cracked theirs (usually actors) and sleep code conventions, where hundreds of excited coders would work together and share experiences (also pointless as Franklyn introduced a new bug that if you worked with anyone else your sleep codes would be re-written and all work done before would become invalid.) Soon though, problems did begin to appear, GDP dropped dramatically as people were coding when they should have been working. Despite a government campaign that would have made Stalin and Mao proud in which it was claimed to be anti-European to code during work times, people were hooked and coded whenever they could. Franklyn thus had to find a way of people only coding in their spare time, which incurred the wrath of the television networks who were losing their ever-dwindling audience. This was overcome by coders being flashed by non-too subliminal advertisements whilst they coded, of course these were controlled by the



TV companies. Also, by enhancing the registration page each participant had to introduce their working timetable and their immediate supervisor's information. This meant that whenever an employee tried to code during work time they would be appropriately chastised. The employment situation was precarious enough to risk it during working hours. This, however, did not rule out rewards programmes for workers of a high standard or employee of the month which generally carried the prize of four hours coding vouchers which could be used during work time, or be given with a pleasant card for an ideal gift.

Of course, not everyone coded, some people didn't use to play the lottery either. Some people did not wish to become overnight millionaires and purchase entire streets in South Shields or go to the pit in a limousine. These un-ambitious people did though make up a worrying amount of the population, and what was worse was they were usually vocally vociferous against coding and its implications. Oliver had been of this opinion until he got tired of having his front door repainted after pro-coding graffiti was once again sprayed all over it, he tired too of having to re-programme all the electrical equipment after viruses were sent on a daily basis as his name figured as a no-coder. Coding credits were available to coders who informed on no-coders, these were given gifts like items from the sleep code fashion range, mini-sleep code pods for children to use at playtime or the ever-popular sleep code electronic hamster which could remember access codes and equations when given a treat. Oliver could withstand the temptation no more, he had been overlooked for two promotions in the last year and if they found out how vocal he had been in anti-coding groups, then his days would have been numbered. He failed to understand the attraction, that was why he never bothered before, just as he hadn't with the lottery, but figured it was more beneficial for his prospects that he seem at least involved, in private he could lambaste the codes. He was a good worker and happy with what he had. He had done some good work in scientific fields and enjoyed a good reputation. Maybe he did not possess an ultra-modern UrbanCruiseTransporter or have a LeisureRelocator, which could transport the user to a number of virtual holiday destinations in the present or get you the best seats in the house for a variety of highlights from history, but he knew that all he had was from the sweat of his own brow, so to speak, as the air-conditioned labs were kept at a constant, labour enhancing twenty-one degrees Celsius. He lived outside the city and read books, much to the amusement of other passengers, on the rail link into the centre, he grew vegetables as he had found a place that had an atmospheric covering similar to that of the year two-thousand and twenty-three, he had a penchant for music from the twentieth century, in short he was seen as eccentric, clever, but weird. Added to that the fact that he wasn't a coder made his rather minute social circle invisible.

Oliver didn't mind, he still had Susan after all, they had a happy life and didn't need to code to enjoy themselves. That was what he believed until he turned up unexpected at her place and found her having a coding party, he couldn't believe

his eyes when he saw her strip-coding with her work-mates, as if possessed by some kind of spirit. He expected her to come round and apologise, saying she had been weak and had seen the error of her ways, but nothing. He tried to access her dwelling communication port but she had put him on the non-admission list. She had removed his fingerprint from the access memory records to her flat and as such could not freely walk around the zone where she lived. Once access was denied it would be clear to all in the vicinity that there was a no-coder amongst them and he would have to high-tail it out of there. He got home with only minor wounds. He decided that a bit of work in the garden would help him to relax, feeling slightly nostalgic and homesick, he called to the house to activate the garden phone so that he could call his parents. The phone didn't react so he entered the house to collect it manually, something he felt was far too seventies to be real. When he dialled the number he was greeted by a message saying that the call could not be placed as the account was in suspension due to non-payment of sleep code taxes. When he called to complain and told them he wasn't a coder they said they would send someone round but never did. A week later the electricity went because they couldn't find his sleep code contributions. Distraught, Oliver found his way to a public coding station and filled in the logging form. The others around him made him realise that he would have to start coding. The people that he saw in there were clearly from another world, for a start they were the sort of people who unbelievably did not have access to the Internet, their facial structures had not been realigned to the European decree standard of sixty-four which indicated they made do with low incomes, some were overweight when fatness had been abolished in Europe in the mid forties. Oliver suddenly felt himself to be rather materialistic as he left the PubliCode, wondering how long he would have to spend there to get his life back in order and have some standards of comfort. He had tried to take the Metro to the PubliCode but had been denied access, this worried him as knew not how he would arrive at work the next day as he walked back, not wanting to risk the ignominy of another rejection by the Metro barrier. When he reached his home he was greeted by the front door which seemed to boast a generous electricity supply. With his little finger he activated the communication port and saw a pair of messages from Susan. He thought to himself that that wasn't too hard and he would just code a bit as to not get into trouble.

Many people had had such a thought, Franklyn was one of the first. It was something that had been bugging him. Of course, the people who were addicted to the lottery would fall the same way with sleep codes, but what about the people with a little more clout upstairs? How could they be hooked? The answer was in the brain itself. Whilst comparing forms of stimuli, the scientists noted that when excited the person changed in terms of personality. It was later discovered that this was caused by cerebral secretions which animated the user to continue. These secretions acted like a drug which caused the user to continuously return. He took his research back even further and found similar studies done on subjects playing the most basic of video games at the end of the twentieth century.



Programmers used a series of flashing lights in code sequence to cause the user to create an uncontrollable inner desire to complete the next level. The idea was, then, to augment the secretions during coding time and to control them during work time to prevent unwanted logging-on. In this way, they had created addicts that could forget their addictions when they were needed to be useful. Oliver began to code aimlessly but soon thought of nothing else, in his free time, of course.

It wasn't long before sports took hold of the phenomena and coding championships were televised with betting, conveniently carrying a ten percent tax, rife. Top coders were given a series of coding challenges to be broken in the quickest time. Even these coders who had cracked their codes and free of the addiction, had become addicted to the fame and admiration that international coding brought with it. When people weren't coding they set aside thirty minutes three times a week to watch *The London Coders*, a drama about everyday coders in a working class part of the capital of the European ClimateOneZone. Just everyday stories of coders like you and me, trying to scrape a living whilst keeping the dream alive. At night Oliver and Susan would share stories of coding progress and what they would do if they ever cracked them. Within five years sleep codes had revitalised the economy and made the two European ClimateZones the richest in the world.

However, it wasn't all doom and gloom in the world surrounding sleep codes. So much money was made that those in power actually gave something back, education, health and the infrastructure in general benefited from sleep codes financing. Maybe people were addicted to a drug without really knowing it, but it was a drug naturally produced by the brain in reaction to stimuli, there were worse drugs out there. Crime was down, productivity up, the standard of Mathematics in the EuropeanLearningSector was second to none. People believed they lived during the peak of human civilisation, a good coder could expect to see Wimbledon more than one hundred times and with large-scale self assembly internal organs kits available in out of town HyperMediMarkets in most major cities, illness was not something one heard to much of in a good coder. Artistically, society suffered, people were too busy working on their codes to write operas or design the buildings for gothic buildings to be used in the Modern European HistoryLivingPark just outside Trondhiem, which recreated life in the period from Westphalia to World War I for history students, but as everyone got what they needed from coding, no-one seemed to notice. From time to time you would hear of an anti-coding group, though these tended to be small, badly-organised groups that were easy for the press to ridicule.

The biggest question of all was, what to do when you crack your codes. No-one knew anyone that had actually done it. Rumours were abound of a spiritual and intellectual fulfilment that meant life amongst the mere mortals was near on

impossible. There was also a cash prize which was calculated by the number of hours you had slept before cracking the codes multiplied by your age co-efficient. Thereby, if you cracked it young the co-efficient was higher due to the less hours slept and viceversa, your sleep rate was calculated by the brain's assessment of the quality and effectiveness of your sleep. People weren't too sure why they were so desperate to crack the codes but between the secretions and the feeling one gets when they actually have the courage to press the "CHECK BALANCE" option lay the answer. It was known there was a colony that lived under the zone where the South Pole used to be before the restrictive dams were put in place to save South America and Africa from the ensuing floods (at great cost to Europe so licensing laws and copyright to these zones for coding was triple the European rate). The entire nation lived the notion that coding equalled happiness.

And so we return to Oliver, he should have prepared dinner by now, but seemed inspired today on the coding. It was as if everything was falling together at the right time. Equations that he had tried before were suddenly correct, avenues that he thought led to nowhere were suddenly lined with impressive oaks. He wanted Susan to share this moment with him but was aware that these successes could be jeopardised. He also feared a code change if he logged off, especially as they could smell how close he was, which would mean the work done today would be effectively lost. She could wait for dinner. For one moment he detained the downward trajectory of his digit when he remembered Susan, if he cracked the codes then surely it would be the end of them. How could they continue if she was still coding? He loved her, he looked at her photograph and remembered the times that they had had together, how she had given him more than any other person he could remember. He wanted to believe that the power of love would be strong enough to stop his finger pressing enter, that a mere game could never come between what must be everyone's reason for existence, to love and be loved. And as he was struck by the beautiful thought he was unaware that his finger had already pressed enter and a simple, quite disappointing message simply said "Congratulations". Oliver felt no different, he saw the cash total but emotionally stayed the same as he thought it was about time to get dinner on. As he chopped the onions, something he hadn't done since the last time he went VirtuCamping, he glanced out of the window to see the city in the distance changed as lush fields replaced the eyesores that once lined the cityscape, he saw Susan coming towards her with flowers fresh from the garden, singing the songs he loved, he turned round to see his hungry parents seated at the table and a favourite nephew holding a birthday cake for him. Then Oliver understood the sleep codes.

## ALTERNATIVE ENDING

quite disappointing message simply said "Congratulations". Oliver expected some change that would symbolise his achievement. A red light emerged from his



code port and flashed with the unpleasant accompaniment of wailing siren. As he looked in the mirror he saw the parts of his face realigned according to European decree slide out of place, and even worse felt the new liver he had treated himself to after winning a respected prize start to give way causing an intense pain. He tried to wipe the memory from the sleep codes but the keypad was too hot to touch. He fell back on the sofa, sweat dripping from him as the pain became more intense. He was close to passing out and didn't even notice the police patrol enter his living room, cuff him and take what was left of him away.

## ALTERNATIVE ENDING

quite disappointing message simply said "Congratulations". Suddenly, his living quarters seemed to restrict his breathing, he needed to be outside. In the garden he felt better till the sound of whirling blades indicated that a helicopter was in the vicinity. This was not a usual occurrence where Oliver lived and even less so when a cable came down to attach itself to his body and lift him into the vehicle. The four occupants of the chopper did not bother with a hello as they rammed a rifle but into his face, lack of consciousness meaning that he did not have to concern himself about the pain. He was unsure how long he was out for, but when he was electrically awoken, he found himself in a large room inhabited by clever looking chaps in front of enormous code pods, each with the task of intercepting and reprogramming sleep codes before they were cracked. There was a gesture that he should begin work. From out of the window he could see a hideous public execution, when he asked who it was he was told it was the person who had let Oliver crack his codes.



# The Perfect Kiss

You just end up falling into these things, don't you? If anyone had asked me at school if my dream occupation was being a kidnapper then I would have answered in the negative. I would have hoped so anyway. Still, there are not many opportunities in this part of the world and most of the work we do is simply a bit of fear, we are generally quite nice captors, there is always bottled water and a sandwich on hand, and as we work in the area of "express" kidnappings, most people are home in time for tea whilst we divvy up the fifty grand or more between the various parties. There are never any worries about police or anything unsporting like that as we only take people whose payers have something to fear from being in the news. In this game, if you are one step ahead of the game, you are the game. Anyway, we make frequent donations to hospitals and schools and other services which mean any pending investigation goes to the back of the very tall pile.

Kidnapping gets a bad press. It's not that bad a job when you compare the sort of things on offer round here. The money's not bad and it certainly brings in more than you would get in a factory or working for some multi-national form of slavery. Of course, there are risks, you have to have your wits about you and stay one step ahead of the competition, factors can get in the way of things as well, but, if things go well, you can work three months a year. That sounds a lot less dangerous than working on the oil rigs.

Sometimes, kidnapping is boring. You know that they are going to pay. Most jobs are quick, for around fifty thousand dollars, as long as you have an extra string to your blackmail bow, things normally go quite smoothly. If you have the daughter of a prominent businessman and he also knows that you know he hasn't paid a penny tax or lets his nose wander or likes ladies of the night, then they will send a car round with the money in no time, no police, no questions. Nice if you can get two of those a week. That's the nice thing about this town, you think everyone is poor and then you scratch the surface and there is just too much money



for most people to deal with. Of course, there are lots of people in the street who want for many things, but that, is not my problem.

Tourists make good money as well, though that is a little risky. The police are of the opinion that tourism should be embraced in the country as it brings in vital cash. The way we see it, if they can afford to come all this way, they can afford to pay a little more. My problem is, I talk too much. I am surprised that it hasn't got me into more trouble, maybe I am lucky too. I am only telling you this because we are waiting, waiting for a couple from Ohio we have decided to show some parts of the city tourists don't see, and don't wish to. We are looking around, and there are others that could take their place, but, once you make a decision, you have to stick with it. They have been out to lunch and are taking an age to come back to their hotel. It is beginning to get annoying now. I am the calm one, but my partner, Carlos, can get a bit rough if plans go array. He has that look about him now, you can't say anything to him when he is like this because whatever you say he will snap back at you. This could turn into one of those jobs where simplicity goes out the window. I think deep down, we like it when we have an excuse to get rough, because, despite the impression I may have given you, we are quite nasty bastards.

We have now wasted an hour. It has been a good month, to be honest we don't even need to do this job, but the weather is not great and I can't think of anything better to do. Finally they arrive, they are half-pissed, something that always makes things easier for us. They look stupid, pretty, I'll give them that, but stupid. Carlos is angry, so I whisper in his ear "Fuck the money". That brings a smile to his face. We'll just explain to the person who contracted the job that things got complicated, it happens, we had to kill them.

Getting them into the van is often the hardest part. No-one would willingly go into a van with two strangers. However, this pair deserve little more than our contempt, they fall for the old buy some marijuana ploy, follow me into the alley and Carlos gives the guy a thwack with some lead piping. His girlfriend freezes, she says her man has the money, to take what we want, Carlos gestures that she enters the van, if she screams, she dies, he tells her. I can hardly fight off the giggles, she dies anyway. We get the boyfriend into the van, he must weigh a good hundred kilos, athletic, in good shape, lifting a hundred kilos of unconscious jock is no easy task, but after mild exertion we are in. I drive because Carlos wants to stay in the back with the girlfriend. To scare her more. Don't think he is going to rape her. We are not animals. We are soon heading out of town and into the mountains. Carlos simply has his hand on her throat and is looking straight into her eyes, I swear he hasn't blinked since he started looking at her. She has nothing but fear in her eyes and eventually pisses herself, petrified. Carlos pulls her closer to his face and head butts her, knocking her unconscious. He complains that it

took longer than he expected for her to wet herself and he was getting angry as he was dying for a smoke.

That almost set me off again, but I compose myself. Now it was time for work. This is how we do things. Once we are about to start a job there is no contact with anyone in whose employ we happen to be at the time. That would be foolish, more so, unprofessional. We were on our own now, no-one would bother us and no-one would ask us for any explanations if things went wrong, which they were about to, nobody cares. Why would they? There would always be someone else to kidnap someone else to rob, and alter the flurry died down, no-one would remember the couple from Ohio that got unlucky in the capital. These things happen, people say, it's almost like they are justifying our existence.

We get them inside after far too much huffing and puffing. She weighs nothing, she does drag her heels somewhat as we move her, but he is the real problem. We manage to get him on the table we have set out for the person who will be the main victim. The girl will sit on a chair directly in front of him, we want her to see everything, if she didn't, where would the fun be? She knows that she has to watch this, she will feel strangely compelled to, perversely drawn to the image of her slowly dying boyfriend, wondering what kind of fate will befall her. But let's not get ahead of ourselves, we have guests.

Carlos takes over as master of ceremonies at this point, I have to hand it to him, he knows how to put on a show. She is still screaming, this is normal, he will let her scream for another couple of minutes. Either she will realise that this action is futile, or he will make her aware of it. I pour them a glass of water from a bottle that I take from the fridge. I add a couple of ice cubes and a slice of lemon and take them to the couple. I know Carlos will not want water so I don't bother pouring him one. I just swig from the bottle. They accept the water gladly and it has a calming effect on them. Carlos asks them if they would like a sandwich and they inform him that that would be very nice. Now they are confused, they don't know why we are being so nice to them and maybe that is even more of a quandary for them than the nasty treatment, they expect the nasty treatment, that makes sense to them, this, though, is disconcerting for them and fun for us. I make the sandwiches whilst Carlos pours some tequila and cuts a generous couple of lines of powder.

They munch on their sandwiches whilst remaining in their positions. This is quite normal. They know they have been put there for a reason, and any attempt to move would cause them problems and pain. How sweet, they are still at the stage when they think that doing what we say will get them out of this. How



wrong they are. Still, no need for them to know that just yet. Myself and Carlos busy ourselves at the leisure table and our bodies are soon feeling the benefit of our own personal repost. Carlos pours and cuts again, this time as the note hits his nose he lets out a loud growl and he accompanies this with a hideous scowl targeted at the girl.

Four lines of uncut cocaine in less than five minutes will cause a person's heartbeat to fly over two hundred beats per minutes, cause every nerve ending in the body to be heightened, almost to enter into battle with each other. Carlos twitches, the first time I saw him in this state it scared even me. He is evil after a glass of warm milk, so imagine him now. I stand up, then sit down, my role is now secondary, I don't need to be this charged to be a spectator, but Carlos likes me to match him line for line and drink for drink. The table is equipped with straps for the ankles and wrists. Carlos gestures to me that is it time and I withdraw my hunter's knife from my pocket and hold it to the guy's throat as Carlos secures him in place. The girl is not screaming any more, though she loses a battle with her digestive system and the sandwich makes a reappearance. She has probably just realised that they are both going to die here, on this secluded mountain, where no-one will hear them or come to save them. That is the moment where the fun passes unilaterally over to our side. I go over to the girl and handcuff her to the chair, though I know that this is a pointless action, she is glued to the spot, she knows she has nowhere to go, she knows that all she can do is hope that death is swift and painless, something that is clearly not going to happen.

Carlos begins his rhetoric. "I always like to start things with a little game. This is work, but there should always be time for recreation. I see that you have realised that the annoying scream that you came in here with has waned. That is good news and your stay with us will benefit from that. Here's how we start." He goes towards the girl, she is not convinced about the fun aspect of things. He withdraws a deck of cards and grabs the tequila bottle. After a healthy swig, he explains the nature of the game to the girl. "You must have seen this programme on TV. I draw a card and you simply tell me if the next card will be higher or lower. If you get three right, you can both have another glass of water. If you make a single mistake, you will have to decide which one of your boyfriend's digits I remove. Understand?" Carlos gives her a look which suggests she may speak. Pathetically she opens her mouth and tries to say yes, but nothing comes out. Carlos is not accustomed to having to repeat himself and this affects his good mood. He runs over to the girl and grabs an enormous clump of her soft blond hair, now drenched with sweat, he pulls on the hair so hard that it comes off in his hand, taking with it large pieces of skin, once employed to protect her skull. The scream returns but this time it is justified. With the bottle still in his hand, he throws a generous measure over her wound and this time the decibel levels reach a new high. This time she makes it clear that she has understood. Carlos lights a cigarette and exclaims that he hopes that this is so.

There are tears rolling down her face now, she hadn't cried before, maybe she was too scared and confused to do so. Carlos stood in front of her with the deck of cards. We are ready to play. He takes the first card from the top of the deck. A six. A middle card.

"That's not a very good start, is it? But, I know that you have seen this game on the television and you have the right to change the first card. I am nothing if not fair. Would you like to change the card?" His look suggests her response had better be audible.

"Yes. Change it." She spoke with a confidence that one rarely sees in these situations. Maybe she didn't want to lose any more hair. You know how vain these Americans can be.

Carlos changes the card and this time it is a four. That's a nicer card. She looks across at her boyfriend. Probability suggests higher, but probability also suggest the odds of them being in this situation are unthinkable. She calls higher, her boyfriend cannot see the cards from his position, Carlos turns the card over theatrically and produces a nine. "Well done, my dear" Carlos tells her. She is one up. She seems to breathe a sigh of relief. Carlos continues "OK. What is the next card?" She thinks for a while and then says lower. Her boyfriend agrees with this. Carlos asks me for a drum roll as the card comes out, a three! There is almost a smile on her face. The chances of losing now are slim. She knows that aces are always high in these games which means only four cards out of the deck can make her lose. She repeats the information to her boyfriend and they both agree that the most sensible option is to go higher. She voices "I love you" to him before she calls higher, which is quite touching. Carlos stands where everybody can see him, and with double the drama of previous draws pulls out the card. He looks at it and begins to shake his head. "Oh dear, the gods have not been kind to you." She is not convinced by Carlos' parlance, she is sure that she has earned that glass of water. Carlos slowly turns the card over and produces a two. She looks at him, trying to apologise for bad fortune, when their fortune has been, and will be, a lot worse than this moment.

"We had a deal. Choose a digit. Little toe or little finger?" She knew that he wasn't lying and simply assumed that a little finger would hurt more than a toe, so, looking pleadingly at her boyfriend, she said "toe". Carlos smiled and congratulated her on her choice. In one movement he extracted a set of wire cutters and I held the end of the toe still as Carlos cut. There was a horrible crunch and then the boyfriend let out a noise that would probably haunt most people for the rest



of their lives, but is just work to us. She closed her eyes but Carlos made her open them again, he held the toe close to her face and popped it in his mouth, washing it down with a large swig of tequila. He smiled and told her simply. "Now you fuckers are going to suffer."

She fainted at that moment. Carlos poured some tequila on the stump of the toe. I don't know why he was worried about it becoming infected, it was unlikely that the guy would have time. Carlos left her to her slumber as he prepared his tools. He began with a knife used for cutting ham that we picked up a while back on a trip to Spain, I believe we bought it in Caceres, but perhaps my memory fails me. It is an excellent tool for cutting wafer thin slices of delicious ham, and can also be employed on humans with the same effect. He told the guy to hold his face still and began to cut slices from his cheek. This is another painful experience for the victim, but Carlos was tiring of the noises both he and his girlfriend were letting out. Carlos with a headache can be quite nasty. He held the wire cutters close to the guy's face and explained that if he made a noise he would remove a tooth with them. He continued in his explanation that ham cutting is a fine art that requires the utmost concentration, no-one could live down the embarrassment of providing guests with a plate of inedible, thickly cut ham. Carlos received a look that suggested his theory was all well and good, but that the nature of science suggested that intense pain is often followed by an exclamation. Carlos is not a man of science.

The slicing continued until little remained of the guy's left cheek. Unfortunately, he could not hold out any longer and a rather girlish yelp left his mouth. Carlos told him that that was not good enough. He could almost see into the guy's mouth now due to the slicing, and using both his forefingers he tore the hole further. This time the yelp was genuine, and it brought his lover back round to consciousness. Carlos informed her that he was pleased that she be present for this moment, and asked her if she was a fan of amateur dentistry. He didn't wait for her answer, and forced the wire cutters into the hole in the guy's cheek, making contact with an incisor and clumsily trying to extract it. Part of the tooth broke off as he did so as blood squirted upwards from the guy's mouth. I was eating a sandwich at the time and it made me laugh so much that I nearly choked. How ironic would that have been? Carlos beckoned me over to open the mouth more, it was clear we would have to use the more traditional entry method. Resistance was evident but not enough, Carlos is strong and when his patience is tried, he becomes more so, unhappy with the guy's attitude, before he extracted the molar, he forced his jaw down, thus dislocating it and making it harder from him to resist. When the molar was out the guy passed out, so we took that as a cue for lunch.

My mother had made us some enchiladas and burritos which we heated up in the microwave, the large amounts of cocaine and tequila didn't realise induce much hunger in us, but we knew that if we carried on with him now he could die on us in any moment, better to let his vital organs regain composure only to be tested again. It was hard work forcing the food down and we were thankful of the cold water to help it down our dry throats. I looked over at the girl who was sitting there, she had a strange look on her face and was playing with holes in her head. I made a gesture to Carlos that he observe her, and he decided it was time to return to work.

Carlos was building up to his swansong, yet still wanted to do a few more torture standards before that epic finale. He left the room and return with a drill. It was strange how the girl seemed to take everything in with ease now, as if nothing else could shock her after what she had seen so far. Of course, all she had to was watch, with her boyfriend now conscious again he didn't look on the drill in the same way. If you are going to use a drill on someone and you don't plan to kill them, well, not with the drill, anyway, then you have to be careful, drills can be messy and anywhere close to an organ can cause your hand to slip and that is effectively the end of your fun. That's why knees and elbows are your best bet, preferably knees as you can look up at your victim's face as your bit goes in. You can't go in to far, just break the skin and enter the kneecap a little, but that's more than enough. Remember now we have to do things that don't cause to much cardiac stress, he may be young and fit, but he has been through a lot. Carlos starts the drill theatrically whilst offering a wicked smile, ever the showman! The guy closes his eyes, under the misapprehension that that will help him and a second later the drill-bit makes contact with the skin, the relatively low amount of blood in the knee area also reduces possible mess, hit a vein and you'll know about it. Carlos is about to give him a "piercing", as he calls it, on the second knee, when we get a response from his girlfriend. It is only one word "Cunts", but it seems to sum up her feelings for us and our work. We hadn't planned to do anything physical to the girl, her torture was to be mental, obviously there was the incident with the hair, but that was her fault. Carlos said to me that he was tempted to cut her tongue out for those words but feared she might bleed to death before the appropriate moment. So, thinking on the spot he drove the drill into her left thigh without care for mess or blood spilling. With the base of the drill he caught her on the chin and that was her out again. Carlos suggested we might try a slice of that chocolate cake after that.

My mum always looks after us when we have to work out of town. Carlos doesn't have much contact with his family, they seem to consider him a bit wayward, yet make no qualms whenever a large sum of money lands on the doormat in an unmarked envelope. The chocolate cake was delicious and we both managed two slices. Hopefully soon I can get out of this and maybe by a place in the country and take my old mum there, she would love it, she's getting too old for the



city and I can't do this forever. It would be nice to have a little farm, just to keep things for fun, money would never be a problem, but my mum deserves something like that in her old age. Carlos looks at his watch and cuts up some more coke. We are entering the final act.

I prepare the tools that he will need for this. These are numerous and unpleasant looking. Carlos has turned this into something of an art-form. He is capable of performing surgery and removing a small organ, without administering anesthetic. Years of practice have furnished him with the ability to perform these rather delicate yet enormously damaging acts. Of course, some of his first patients were victims of Carlos' own learning curve, and the dexterity with the knife of which he is now so proud, was somewhat lacking in those days. He surveys the table and considers that he is ready to work, or at least will be when his audience returns to their seat at the theatre. He walks over to her and cuts her cheek with the scalpel, he tells her wants her to watch and if she doesn't, he will kill her over a period of three weeks, each day re-writing a new definition of misery, if she is a good girl, within half an hour she will be free of this, meaning, dead.

Her eyes are fixed on her boyfriend's torso as Carlos begins to cut, she can't look at his face now, as he really has no face, at least not one that she can recognise. The boyfriend tries to lift his neck to observe what is happening to him, probably not out of interest, rather incredulity that Carlos was about to remove a kidney with him conscious. Carlos noticed he was trying to look, and said he could make it easier for him if he wanted to see. He took a spoon from the drawer and carefully placed it under the boyfriend's eyelid, with expertise he removed the eye from the socket and, maintaining the retina intact, gently extended the little tubes that connected the eyeball to the optic nerve and extending the eyeball nearly half a metre from the boyfriend's head. He made an impromptu tripod and placed the, still functioning, eye on top so that he could see what was happening to his body. Carlos had also developed a strong collection of aromas, these were used when the victim passed out due to the incisions, so that Carlos could instantly bring them round again. He didn't want them to miss the finale of his show. The boyfriend came to and saw the hole in his stomach, Carlos' hand inside him and the knife gently yet expertly removing his kidney. This is always a strange moment, and it makes you think what a gift the human body is, as he seems to feel almost nothing as the organ is removed, the human body instantly makes plans for things to be diverted. In one delicate movement he holds the kidney aloft, the look of pride on his face is immense, the boyfriend also seems to be, in a very strange way, impressed. The girlfriend has gone back into a rather noisy mode, which is ruining the moment somewhat.

We stop for a drink and a well deserved line of coke. Carlos cuts as I mop up a bit. Carlos also takes the boyfriend a glass of water and helps it to his lips.

He tells the boyfriend that he is proud of him, that he has done well, and deserves a reward. His words sound sincere. He tells him that he deserves a kiss from the ruby red, less so now, lips of his girlfriend. That caused a smile to appear on his face, not a proper smile that you would like for a photograph, rather a pathetic movement of muscles in the lip region that only indicated that he wasn't frowning. The boyfriend tried to move to go towards her to kiss her, that made Carlos laugh. Carlos reminded him that he was in no state to go for a wander and that he would help his girlfriend come to him. The end was close now, I could feel it. She was still making annoying noises as Carlos took a handful of her long blonde hair and pulled her head upwards, in one swift movement of his sword, he severed the head at the neck whilst the boyfriend lay on the table, eyes closed, awaiting that final kiss. Carlos carried the head to the table, cupping her ears with his hands. He told the boyfriend to get ready for the kiss, and placed her lips on top of his, the boyfriend tried to reciprocate the best he could, but there was little strength in him to kiss, still, he managed to move his lips a little, and then became curious as hers did not respond. He opened his eyes to be confronted by her motionless eyes and the sensation of blood dripping onto his neck. Carlos moved the head away so that the boyfriend could see that he had been kissing the be-headed skull of his now ex-girlfriend. Carlos began to laugh just as a combination of all the emotions and experiences that the boyfriend had been through were the signal for his heart to finally decide that that was enough, and he joined his girlfriend. Now it was time to prepare the acid bath.

Carlos used his own solution that could eat through a human body in about six hours and actually be used afterwards as an effective pesticide. We had to be very careful preparing it as even a small dose on your skin could be very unpleasant. The fumes were also something to be avoided as well. We had suits that we had procured from a nuclear power plant that did this job very well. I donned my suit as Carlos cleaned up, he enjoyed cleaning after a kill, as if the little bits that had spilt over reminded him of the details of his art, a small journey down memory lane as he recalled every incision, every torturous moment that he had created. The baths were ready in about twenty minutes. Carlos, now in his suit, thought about chopping up the bodies to make the process quicker, but we were in no hurry, my mother had prepared food for us, we had cable, tequila, beer and coca, we would be fine here until tomorrow, when we could head back into the capital, after sprinkling the plants, and collect our healthy pay checks.

We got the bodies in sharpish, then sealed the area with tape and industrial film. They were quite happy in their baths, we tried to put her head on her shoulders but it kept falling off. Carlos started laughing when I shouted at her and told her she had to wash her hair. We left them to it and cleaned ourselves up. I wanted a smoke, but Carlos insisted that I shower before I could consider my work to be over. It was nice to get onto the sofa with a cold beer. There was a football game, very nice viewing indeed after a tough day's work, You can't beat sit-



ting down with a cold one after your daily toil has been successfully completed. We took turns every twenty minutes to check on the baths, though that was more due to our professional work ethic than anything else. Carlos phoned his young daughter to ask her about her day and we discussed the idea of dinner, though both of us were still too full of coke to have an appetite. So we just drank and chatted, waiting for tomorrow to arrive and not expecting anything else to happen.

Just after ten Carlos' mobile phone rang. This was unusual. It was his work phone and the only people who had his number were the people who wouldn't want any contact with us until they knew the job was complete and the evidence destroyed. The boss was on the other end.

"Abort mission." That was all he said. There was a pause.

"A bit late for that now. They got mouthy. They are in the acid bath." Carlos tried to make it sound nicer than it was.

"You pair of pricks." Boss-man didn't see it the same way. "We had the wrong information about the target. Her dad is a Governor of some shit-hole in the States. He had FBI contacts. Please tell me you are joking."

"I told you it's too late. In a couple of hours they will be on the plants. No-one will know. Relax. And you still have to pay us." Carlos was no great diplomat.

"Don't move. We are coming to inspect the situation." The phone went dead. They would be here in no time. There was only one road back into town so we would have to wait. The boss didn't sound happy but what was done was done, we couldn't change that, all we had to do was make sure the evidence was disposed of. Maybe Carlos would have to relax a bit in the future. This was not a major problem though, nothing that we couldn't work out together.

In what seemed like no time we heard the sound of cars coming up the road. They were certainly bringing more than a few observers. Carlos said that he had a plan, and would get me out of it. I just had to stick with him. He normally sorted me out, so as we lined up a fat couple and had some tequila, we toasted our friendship and working relationship. As we drank the Boss came in. He didn't

look like he had a bonus for us in his suitcase. He asked what had happened. Carlos spoke.

“I tried to stop him.” He was pointing at me. “He just went wild. He said he wanted to rape the girl, said that he had never seen anything like her. I tried to stop him, but he said he would have my little girl killed if I stopped him. What could I do? I don’t know what he is capable of. He said if I didn’t kill them that he would kill me, and who knows what more.” Carlos gave me a look that told me to trust him. Carlos knew what he was doing. I didn’t like the way the story was going but Carlos would get me out of this.

“Plus he incites me to commit these crimes. He feeds off the energy of the bad things other people do. I don’t want to do the things he asks of me but he controls me. I wish I were free of this demon.” Carlos continued.

I had never thought of it like that. Maybe Carlos is a normal person and I cause him to do these things. That makes me the baddy. I hadn’t realised this before. Of course, Carlos would never do these things if I weren’t egging him on. The Boss looked at me. I felt bad for Carlos and what I had made him become.

“So, you are the true villain of the piece.” The Boss was happy with Carlos’ explanation. “You were spotted by the girl’s security detail. Unfortunately their car wouldn’t start and they lost you. The authorities have been alerted, but I’m sure we can pin this on some other scoundrels. However, Carlos, you have to prove you are telling the truth. Put this specimen in the bath with the tourists and I will believe you. He is of no use to us now. Will you do that for me?” The Boss asks Carlos.

Carlos nods. It will be his liberation. I understand that now. I have made Carlos suffer with my cravings maybe now he will be free. One of the boss’s cohorts places a gun to my head but it is not necessary, I walk with Carlos to the baths. I stand in front of the bath with the girl’s body in as Carlos tops up the bath with more acid, not even fearing for his own life as he adds the acid without the protective suit. He says goodbye to me and pushes me into the bath. The pain is intense and immediate, but I still manage to thank him as my head goes under the liquid.





# Shellshock

I didn't hold out much hope for the date. By that I mean that I held out an enormous amount of hope for her, I knew what she was like, she was approaching perfect, she had everything, that level of perfection one rarely sees in a woman, not a perfect body, nor stunning good looks, yet she was beautiful, well put-together in a physical sense, but that was merely a visual hors d'oeuvre before the magnificent main dish was brought to the table. She truly was a woman you could quite easily stand up and say I would happily spend the rest of my life with and have no fear of equivocation. So it was quite strange that she had accepted the opportunity of going on a date with me. As I checked myself in the mirror I evaluated every one of my defects, physical and personal, as if they were the yin to the yang of her perfection. In my heart I told myself not to fuck this up, but was really just wondering how long it would take her to make a polite excuse and leave.

For this was a date. That was made clear. We met at a party. That was two weeks ago. She was a friend of a colleague of mine from work. She told me that this creature had been single for a couple of months as she had walked in her previous boyfriend indulging in some extra-marital afters on the couch. That brought a little smile to my face, not because of her suffering, but because it is always nice to know that you are not the stupidest person on the face of the planet. Top ten will do me. I did the usual Q&A thing at work on Sandra afterwards, even though I was sure that her friend would not have remembered a single word of the three minute, forty-six second conversation, let alone the person who nervously tried to force it beyond the four-minute barrier, with inane piffle about printers and microwaves. Something strange happened during that conversation, it was as if she wanted me to talk about something deeper, or that she knew I could, and was prepared to withstand the utter twaddle spouting from my mouth. Eventually someone else came along and simply had to introduce her to some undeserving, plebeian loser who would proceed to shower in the typical throw-away lines that would never work on a woman like her. After about half an hour I went to seek her out again, but she was gone, as were my hopes and dreams, so I found a bottle of gin, pulled that scrunched up nose and lips face that people do when they know they should know better, yet are determined to ignore the path of wisdom.

After a couple of gins I found solace in a hairdresser called Tracey and she laughed at my giraffe joke. My only thought as my tongue plunged into her mouth was whether she would have enough money for the taxi fare.

So it was something of a surprise when Sandra said that her friend had mentioned me, and in a positive way. I later found out that Sandra was an adherent of the liberal school of translation and interpreting as her actual words were “he seemed so awkward and uncomfortable, that interested me.” I still adore the second part of the sentence, it’s just the bit before the comma that I’m not keen on, though I don’t know why. Not all women like men to be like James Bond, their outlook on the issue is from the brain outwards, a lot of us fall at that hurdle, whereas we work our way in to their personalities via their breasts and bums. Anyway, Sandra sorted it out and we have arranged to meet this Friday in a wine bar in Islington. Why I decided there I have no idea, it was clear that she wasn’t going to be impressed by the pomp and circumstance of shelling out the best part of a tenner for a glass of something you could get a bottle of in Tesco’s for half the price, but it seemed a better option than taking her to my local.

It is now this Friday. We have arranged to meet at seven fifteen, a rather curious time to meet, worryingly exact. It also means that I have to get a move on. I have opted for something casual, not too dressy, I don’t have any good clothes anyway, I just have the same clothes as everyone else and would never dare wear some of the things that make people stand out, I don’t want to stand out. I also have to shell out for a taxi halfway across London, and I am dependent on the traffic helping me in my cause. As I am nervous I have had a glass of wine at home, two in fact, now I need a taxi as I must be there before 7.15, I must be there in time to order myself a drink and therefore have had at least three sips of it so that, as I lean over to give her a peck on the cheek, the waft of the grape she will receive will be explained by the fact of my residence at the bar, I have chosen something exquisite and would she like one? If I get there after her, she will smell the booze on me, and think all manner of hideous things. She may think I have come straight from the pub, and that this is some kind of hideous bind for me. She could think I’m a pisshead, maybe she heard that I got sloshed after she left and is already regretting saying yes, this will simply confirm her suspicions and give her a reason to leave. Good God! When will they put drinks in taxis? This is too much stress. We are less than a mile away, and my mind is perturbed, not by the twenty sheets that drives will snaffle off me any minute now, rather that it is eleven minutes past. I hope she is not punctual, if she is early, I am dead, and this, like every other opportunity I have had, will have been squandered.

I arrive. Sixteen minutes past, I am late. I have a glance around the bar, I can’t see her. Then my pocket vibrates. It’s her. Message. “Terribly sorry but,” I read those words and was ready to accept any form of death. I knew the text contin-



ued but I could only see those words. Through the tears in my eyes, I read on. “Traffic a nightmare. Be there soon. Kisses. x x.” Quality text, every word spelt correctly and kisses in the most plural of senses. I found a space next to the bar and ordered a sparkling water and a glass of red. The water would be drunk until she arrives, and then to be pushed to one side upon arrival, I, now, controlled the arena.

It was when I sat that I began to realise that I had consumed the best part of a bottle of wine. The idea was the grape would combat my nerves. Now, paranoia was at the table. I may think I was coming across as charming and with oodles of joie de vivre, she might think I was a bit pissed. If I tried to go the other way and be too serious, the only chance of her not liking me, my sense of humour which I hoped she would find infectious, would be lost. I began to hate the world, all the technology available and they couldn’t invent an “un-getting-pissed” shot that would take you back to square one? All the money wasted on curing cholera and they can’t help me in my hour of need? All this fear and trepidation filled the waiting window, and, as I looked up, there she was. She looked effortlessly stunning, I stood up, nearly knocked the table over and flashed her smile. She returned it and gave me a very European pair of kisses on each cheek. I had to remember to try to look composed. With even more ease she managed to make things more simplistic for me.

“Sorry I’m late. I have had a miserable day at work, but now it’s over and I wouldn’t mind getting stuck into more than a few glasses of wine.” What an opening gambit! All I had to do was slowly let her surpass me in the pissed stakes and I would be winning again. There was always the chance that she had been brought up as the only girl on a small island and was used to the consumption of whiskey from the age of six, but the Gods had smiled on me thus far, so I felt sure a minor smirk would be left in the pot. We ordered a bottle and chatted. Normally chatting in these situations is stilted and it appears all the questions come from someone who acquired them from a search engine list of “how to have a good date”. With her it wasn’t like that, the conversation flowed as easily as the wine we drunk. She laughed at some of my jokes, and told me when they were poor. We talked about superficial nonsense and our deepest reflections on the human spirit. We were honest, there was no need to make things up, it felt like the moment was going to last forever. After the second bottle of wine I had no idea if the twelve degrees of alcohol had put the smile on my face, or simply life itself.

It was decided that we should eat. She said she fancied Italian. I am of the school of thought that Italian is a potential banana skin of a first date eatery. I had had pizza for lunch, a bachelor always lunches well, so I was not keen on repeating, but the thought of getting Bolognese sauce all over myself and her still gave room for the idea that the night could be cocked-up. I told her Italian was a won-

drous idea. I would order a calzone. We ate and continued to talk, I thought of saying something cheesy, but it seemed so inappropriate, at times I wondered if she felt it was strange that I had made no effort to make a pass at her, but she, despite being the most beautiful female creation in the known universe, seemed to take on an almost asexual aura, I somehow couldn't think of her in that way. We lazily finished our coffees and we eventually returned to the night air. Now there was a moment of slight insecurity, we were in the post-restaurant bit, a grey area, I could ask her to go somewhere else for a drink, I could ask her back to mine. I opt for something that I would never suggest with my friends, a walk in the fresh air to clear our heads. She thought this was a delightful idea, and so we walked through the streets, maybe Rome or Paris would have been more delightful, but Islington seemed to gleam under the moonlight. I knew the evening was coming to an end, but that didn't matter so much, I knew there would be more, many more. There would be many more, I had done well this evening, I put her in a taxi and she thanked me, though I insisted on thanking her many more times. I wandered for a while and then got a taxi myself. As we drove, I received another message from her asking if I was free tomorrow and could pick her up around twelve. I looked out the window and felt happier than I could ever remember.

I fell asleep with a spring in my step and awoke the next day as if only the purest of vitamins had passed my lips on the previous evening. Literally skipping from the bed to the shower, I pranced about in a way that would make close friends rethink their relationship with me. However, I cared not a jot, life was being kind to me, and, despite the potential for me to reading far too much into this, I am quite sure we are soon to be wed. It dawns on me in the shower that she might just be a very nice person who had a pleasant evening. The wedding was off. From the shower I heard a message come through on the mobile. With soap in my eyes and shampoo more or less everywhere except in my hair, I knew I had to know the content of the message. It was going to be her, the word really would be placed next to the word sorry, the word but would cause its usual pain and I would be left without hope. As my first foot made contact with the bathroom floor, the excess water caused it to continue its movement despite the other leg still being in the shower, I luckily grabbed onto the towel rail before a nasty pelvic injury ensued. With soap still in my eyes, I found the door handle and proceeded to smack the door into my forehead. I was glad that she was cancelling now, I didn't want to see her with a limp and a gash in my head. The rest of the journey to the mobile, three metres sixteen centimetres, was event free, I could barely see as I tried to read the message, allowing soap and water into the phone at the same time. After far too much silliness I finally access the message, expecting the worst, I am delighted to receive the offer of a promotion from my service provider. I laugh for a little while and prepare to terminate my grooming when another message comes through and the fear process begins again. It's her. Shit. I can't read it. Finally, I press the yes button and she tells me to wrap up warm and be on time. I wonder if my fragile heart can live with this much stress every time the phone goes, and the answer is, to see her, yes.



I decide to take the tube as driving in London is not even on page seventeen of my favourite things. Wrapping up warm means that I start to get something of a sweat on on the train. This causes me to panic as the grooming products lose the battle. I remember how much I hate public transport in this town, something which is quite strange really as when I am in other cities I excitedly seek out Metro maps and bore people with my ability to rapidly acquaint myself with the local network, yet as I found the Bakerloo line to take me from Pimlico to Maida Vale, I could muster no excitement for Londinium's underground, other than remembering that someone told me that underground was the only word in English that begins and ends in the same three letters. I'll have to Google it at a later juncture. Such mindless pondering means that I have reached my stop. I disembark the train and try to work out where I am going to. I don't know this part of London, though I suppose that is what living in London is all about, you know where you live, and where you work, the rest is just other people's London, and the other bit, but if you live here you are unlikely to be interested in Madame Tussaud's.

Normally I would never ask anyone for directions in London, it goes against my credos and is hugely embarrassing, something will always happen so that the other person knows you live here and just don't know your way round. However, I decide to risk the inpecuniosity of the moment, simply as an excuse to use that word, and ask an old gent. Typical, he looks at me as if not King Herod would play snooker with me and tells me it is across the road, I am less than fifty feet from her house. I had to laugh. As I climbed the steps I went to ring the bell, then I stopped myself. What was I going to say? What were my lines? Nobody had briefed me on this. I had been given this mission without proper training. I was doomed to fail. I stood with my finger near the bell when a voice informed me that it worked by pushing it. It was her. Now I had to go in.

Except I didn't get in. She told me via the intercom that she would be down in the briefest of minutes. She didn't take long and soon the door opened and I was greeted with a hug, an elbow squeeze and a kiss on each cheek. That is officially the most possible non-boyfriend affection allowed to be expressed under E.U. law. She exuded simplicity in jeans and a t-shirt with a hooded top covering the upper half. She didn't look too wrapped up herself but then if she felt a bit chilly I could always lend her some support.

"You hungry?" She asked.

"More than peckish." I responded.

“Fancy a fry-up?” Were her next words. Could she be any more perfect?

She took me to one of her favourite haunts, just down the road from her place. As we sat and chatted she told me about her plans for the day. Her father and brother were Hammers season ticket holders, as was she, the rest of her family couldn't go today so there was a spare ticket. She asked if I would like to go. I informed her that that was a redundant question. Not only that but they were playing Newcastle so I would have a double reason to be blowing bubbles come five o'clock. As she sat there eating her black pudding and telling me her all time favourite Hammers side, it was hard to listen, not like when a woman sometimes talks to you and it is hard to listen because you have heard it all before or don't care, this time it was different, there was so much to take in that I didn't know where to look. It was like having a great mate, you could imagine her doing loud burps after polishing off a curry, yet at the same time you could see as the personification of female beauty. As I dipped my sausage into the runny yolk, I knew there was no way she could take me to a place where the yolks were hard, I thought about the possibility that I was falling in love. I felt I had to do something romantic, some kind of gesture so she knew I wasn't only here with her to borrow her Makita power drill, which I was sure she would have and use better than me, so I told her she looked beautiful. Instead of looking uncomfortable, or even pleased, she just pulled what can only be described, despite the political incorrectness, as a spaz face and flicked a couple of cold baked beans at me. She told me to get a move on so we could have a pint before the game. To get to Upton Park was quite a trek, it was one in the afternoon now so she looked at the tube entrance and then decided on a taxi. I felt I had better get the taxi as she had come up with the tickets. When we arrived at the ground, I noticed that the taxi had cost me one pound more than the face value of the ticket, in days gone by this would have riled me, now, nothing like that mattered.

We found a bar near the ground and had a well earned pint. She knew a few people in there and introduced me to some of her mates, I began to wonder if she was a closet hooliganette, but these Hammers didn't seem too much into their agro. As we didn't have the encumbrance of a vehicle to drive, we decided that another pint could be enjoyed before the game, anyway, the fry-up could soak up any excess. She gulped down her half pint without flinching and told me it was time to leave. During my time in London I was surprised to have not visited more of the capital's grounds, as a Sunderland supporter our continuous flutter between top and second tier football meant that there was nearly always a monthly option to see the Black Cats, but traipsing across London to spend the afternoon being looked at as if I didn't know where Covent Garden Opera House was just didn't cut it for me, whenever I was back home I tried to take in a game at the Stadium of Light, which was, in many respects, the only way to do things. Still, the Magpies lost and that endeared me to all and sundry, during the eighty-seven boring minutes we discussed everything from the Cruyff turn, to Ni-



etzsche, to dishcloths to a framework for a better society, being occasionally reminded by the other twenty-thousand or so that we were actually here to pay our bi-weekly penance.

After the game we went back to the pub and had a couple more pints and gleefully entered what you might call that silly stage. The music coming from the jukebox helped our mood as did the genuinely unbeatable post-match atmosphere. Whenever she went to the toilet I allowed myself the chance to detach myself from what had been going on around me, and drink in another nectar, something wholly more fulfilling than the lager that was cursing through my veins. Had I ever been this happy? Probably, yes, but she did have the effect of making it difficult for me to remember, or even try to. This was almost like my personal hard drive had been reformatted and I still had my old memories on a CD somewhere, I would just have to reinstall them at a later date.

We left the pub slightly tipsy and she asked what I wanted to do next. I was clear in my beliefs that quite frankly anything as long as it was in her joyous company. We ended up going back to hers, eating pizza and playing our favourite records with minor references to their personal, sociological and anthropological importance. I liked her flat and was glad we hadn't gone to mine. I have always loved the flats of girls who live alone, they have a special aura about them, you never got a smell like that in a bloke's flat, it made you feel warm, it made you want to stay for ever. At some point, despite being quite drunk I was aware that the issue would come up, this was clearly the next step we would have to take. I weighed up the pros and cons and decided that a drunken fumble would probably be the most appropriate way to initiate this next venture, if I were stone cold sober I would probably be too nervous, so the handy addition of a ready made and socially acceptable excuse for failure was a welcome new friend at the table. By the time I had thought of that the next thing I knew was that I was awake with a slightly pounding head, semi clothed but more towards the semi-dressed, in her bed, with her. I hobbled to the bathroom, not wanting to wake her up, just in case it had been an absolute disaster, evacuated my bladder had a mouthful of Listerine and a splash of water, a quick nose through her bathroom cabinet, essential first night activity, found some painkillers, treated myself to two and snuggled back into bed. She didn't wake but did that delightful thing that was half groan and half outstretched arm, inviting me to take up a more comfortable position behind her and drifted off into a world that confused me, I didn't know if the dream was the part before I went to sleep or after, either way, perfection lay on both sides.

Sunday morning came and went without much of an announcement. I was glad to see the time go past ten o'clock and her remain asleep and not tell me to get ready for church. It had gone half past twelve when she appeared to reacquaint herself with a conscious state and announced that she had a hangover. I

had never realised how much fun hangovers could be, this was simply divine, and I almost felt sad as the coffee, toast and painkillers had me feeling normal again. We sat around her flat and watched TV and films. I wondered whether it was time for me to go but she didn't seem too worried by my presence. While I dozed on the sofa she made me some pasta. If I hadn't been convinced before then now I was experiencing more happiness than anyone else had ever known in the history of time. Eventually the day had to come to an end and we said rather cringe-worthy, soppy goodbyes before I made my way to the tube station. She offered to drive me but I said that she would never get to work on time the next day.

Plans were made, though I would have to be strong as she was going to be away for the next three days. She apologised for that. Can you believe that? She apologised for having to do her job and was worried that that didn't fit in with my plans. I tried to get along with things from Monday to Thursday but it wasn't easy as my mind had taken a leave of absence. I think most of my colleagues preferred me as a miserable, acerbic cynic. All the ladies in the office thought it was simply delightful and Sandra took all the credit, but I just laughed it off. I simply counted the seconds till Thursday came along.

She said she had planned something special. She phoned me every night and we talked until one of us had no more battery left. I wanted to record the conversations and listen to them again, but I knew that they were in my head, deep down somewhere. I tried to think of something that I didn't like about her, just to make her seem a little more real, and I was sure she already had a reasonable list of my foibles, but all I could come up with was that I was not too keen on her name, Michelle, still, she even managed to wear that well.

She had planned a mystery day out in London for me on Thursday. Except she was honest that in reality she hadn't planned very much, quite the opposite. I had to take the day off work, probably a relief for them, they were keen for me to leave the daft stage behind, but also worried that I would then enter a paranoid, neurotic phase that was equally painful for them. I promised them that they would probably look back at all this and laugh but their faces did not register much conviction.

The only information that I had was that I was to be at Marble Arch for before nine in the morning. From there we would take the first bus that we saw and liked, I hoped it was one of the old ones that you could hop on and off, and then when we got to a train station we liked we would get off there and, well the day would simply fall into place. She was waiting for me on the corner and it didn't take us long to decide on the number thirty bus, we were both of that age it



seemed quite appropriate, she said that she had many big plans for the day, but that it was all a secret and laughed. At just a bit after nine the bus left Marble Arch towards Hackney, we passed King's Cross but that seemed like too much of an obvious choice. We wanted a nice, smaller station for the next part of our journey. When we got to Euston it was more or less the same story except there was something of a commotion going on there, probably another rail strike, so we decided to continue on the bus. Forty odd minutes were beginning to get the better of us so we made the decision to alight at the next feasible juncture. It wasn't a part of London that I knew well and as we turned into Tavistock Square it seemed a good a place as any to get off. I held her arm to help her up and went to press the button but my finger never made it. Suddenly a noise came from nowhere and the bus shook. It took me about ten seconds to realise that I should start to look for her when there she was. The scene was incomprehensible. The roof of the bus had gone, there was smoke everywhere yet somehow through it there she was. I tried to move towards her but was halted in my tracks as it transpired that I was no longer the owner of legs. I could still see her head through smoke, but as the bus moved again I found out that it was her head, but it was no longer attached to her body, it rolled towards and that is when I felt the real explosion. I looked down at what was left of me and felt my hand go inside the wound in my stomach, and I thought to myself, it won't be long now.



# Blue Monday

Dave sat back on the chair and threw the newspaper onto the table with an element of scorn rarely seen even for a rag of such low quality. If he had to stomach another article about Pope Malcolm of Kidderminster or Enrique Fettuccini he felt that he would surely go that extra step and recreate that Michael Douglas film that he laughed about so heartily in the cinema. Despite it being already gone eleven on a Monday morning, and that for most people meant that the initial pain and recognition of the end of your scant leisure time and the beginning of the working week would have gone to have a begrudging feeling of acceptance take its place, but with Dave, even the passing of the first three hours did little to help his cause.

Dave suffered from an affliction that the medical profession failed to recognise, and indeed most people when told about would raise an eyebrow and suggest that the laddie pull his socks up. Nobody understood the depth of his phobia, so for that reason he kept it to himself. David had an uncontrollable fear of Mondays. He didn't just dislike them, rather the idea of the concept of Monday was such an anathema to him that his whole body entered into convulsions at the mere thought of them. This wasn't a fear that could be pushed to one side, Dave felt anger at every aspect of Monday and although he had taken more than a few off in his time, he knew that that was no solution.

His company had also noticed that he was a different person on that critical day. With other employers perhaps an eye might not have been turned or a word had, but Dave was special in the company, he not only was capable of doing the equivalent of more than five days' work in the four days when he could function during the week, but also they were loathe to lose him. He was the undoubted star of the show, so despite there being industry jokes and block senders going round about him, his bosses knew that any possibility of him leaving the company would cause a bevy of head-hunters to require spare batteries for their Blackberries.



Dave would undergo various changes of personality during the weekend. The person who left the office a little after four on a Friday was unrecognisable next the person who returned there on Monday morning. After work he would have a quick drink with some colleagues before heading home, armed with flowers and chocolates for his wife whom he doted over and a little gift the daughter they both adored. A quick shower would then be the order of the day then he would help little Georgina with her homework before giving her a fun, yet still serious, test on the week's schoolwork. She was an applied student and looked forward to these weekly chances to show her father what she was capable of. After that they would take their Labrador, Goodison, down to the park as all three of them enjoyed an ice-cream should the weather be clement or one of those delightful hot-chocolates with marshmallows that they did in the café on the days when it couldn't be trusted. The three would then return home and get busy in the kitchen, preparing something testing from a Jamie book together, as a family, everyone mucking in and crossing their fingers as the dish that was extracted from the oven bore very little resemblance to the mouth-watering photo in the book, but that didn't matter, this was happy time together, Dave knew so many people who left work with fear inside them at the thought of nearly seventy-two hours with their families. After dinner they cleared the things away together and had afters in the lounge, this was only permitted on Fridays and all of them looked forward to it. After a couple of parlour games or maybe a game of Risk, the television was never touched on Fridays, it would be soon time for their young charge to retire for the night, though she always made a minor fuss and begged for five minutes more. After around twelve minutes her parents realised that the five minutes were up and it was time to sleep. They both tucked her in, and finally, after many kisses, returned downstairs to enjoy a brandy or a cocktail before regressing to their formative years and acting like a pair of love-smitten teenagers.

Saturday was also a day of immense enjoyment. Georgina would be off to ballet class at around nine with her parents taking turns to drive her and the other one staying at home to make sure everything was spic and span. When the parent returned from transporting duties they would take a walk down through the park and along the canal to the fish market. It was a good four miles each way, but the climate never managed to dampen their spirits as they made healthy progress towards one of the finest fish markets outside London, and that far away from the coast. They would spend a good while traipsing the stalls before deciding on something quite exotic and glamorous. Then it would be back home and elbow deep in parsley before exchanging driving duties and collecting the wee one. After lunch Dave would pop to see Reading or Harlequins depending on which was at home and which enticed him more. There would always be a nap in the late afternoon and then Georgina would go off to her cousins' whilst Dave and Linda treated themselves to an expensive restaurant. Friday and Saturday were idyllic, quality time spent with the family, occasionally social obligations meant that they were forced to alter these plans, but generally, invitations were politely rebuffed.

This scene of domestic tranquillity was broken sometime after lunch on Sunday. This was when the realisation that Dave was within twenty four hours of having to return to the office, the fear of Monday morning gripped him. The loving father and attentive husband had left the building and were replaced by a moody, intolerable grouch who was left well alone by his two favourite women. Dave often spent very little time in the house on Sundays. He would sit in the pub, consuming football and lager, watching people come and go until the lager no longer helped his pain, after that, the single malt was required. Often he would be incapable of speech by closing time and the landlord would help him into a taxi. Linda never shared a bed with him on a Sunday, nor did she wait up for his arrival. She heard him downstairs and knew that once again it was time that she would have to trust in to bring her loved one back. The box room was made up for visitors, but often he never got that far and finally entered some form of sleeping pattern, usually with the whiskey glass still in his hand, around two a.m.

Despite the generous libations consumed on the previous eve, a hangover was never Dave's main concern on Monday morning. He always thought about not going, but that was not a solution, and since Linda ran her on-line catering agency from home he was still not a welcome addition to the household. So Dave would arrive at work and be given the widest of berths by his colleagues and management. They knew just to leave him alone, at around two p.m. he would begin to look like his old self and from Tuesday to Thursday his work rate would surpass even the most diligent of those in his office. Management did wonder about the possibility of Dave having a negative effect on the rest of the workforce, people needed to contact him about matters and his responses were always very terse on that part of the week. Still, top brass meetings always featured the issue of Dave somewhere on the agenda, and anyone who came up with a solution would be seen in a very kind light by those who ran the company.

When a potential solution was suggested it did seem almost like a joke at first, indeed the comment was offered in such a pithy way that its provider did not think for one minute that it would be taken seriously. That said, after a while on the back burner, the suggestion seemed to take on a semblance of common sense. It was so simple that no-one could believe that it hadn't been considered before. Dave's problem was Monday, if Monday were removed then Dave's problem would be removed. That meant giving him a three day weekend, but if he came in on Tuesday morning totally refreshed and already did more in four days than most people managed in five, they may even get better results out of him. Of course, this solution had to be kept a secret, the rest of the staff could not know as the camaraderie would experience something of a downturn.



Dave was called into the office and the plan was proposed. At first he thought it was a joke. Then he soon realised that they were deadly serious. He signed the new conditions and told them that keeping this a secret would not be a problem. There were still details to iron out within the company. Dave would have to be there technically to answer questions and help with his normal day to day work. All that meant was having someone at a computer copying and pasting Dave's responses in his typical unfriendly Monday manner. The staff would also need to be told something that would appear plausible. It is always best when lying to employ an element of the truth to throw your subjects off guard, so they simply told everyone that Dave was now involved in a new project that would take him out of the office for one day a week, namely Monday. Most people were actually glad that he wouldn't be around on that day that they took it like a sort of bonus for themselves. Nobody questioned whether there was any funny business going on because Dave was still available for emergencies, though it was subtly inferred that Dave would be terribly busy and that deterred people from actually contacting him.

There was one person who may smell a rat in the company, should Dave suddenly become absent for every Monday till the end of time, the person who suggested the idea. It was discussed that that person's life could be made more comfortable and that a promotion would buy that person's silence. That was considered a risk, if they knew the lengths that the company were prepared to go to then there was always the chance that a certain amount of blackmail could raise its ugly head. The last thing they wanted was to put the person who had solved the Dave problem in such a testing pickle so they decided that the best thing to do was for the troublesome lift at one of their clients' to have a particularly bad day, it would have been foolish for the accident to take place in their own company. And so, one Monday morning the bright spark who had the idea of making Dave and the company's life even better, entered the lift and promptly saw more bright sparks as the lift hurtled towards the basement. The company also implored the family of the victim to take up a civil action.

Dave had no problems adapting to his new life. Linda knew but she was not about to go shooting her mouth off as she gained an extra two days in her week. Sundays were an extension of Saturdays, on fine days they had people round on the patio, Dave taking charge of the barbecue whilst the kids played in the ample garden. Close friends were told a similar story to his colleagues and it actually all sounded so plausible that no-one questioned it. The company couldn't afford to lose him so they found a solution. Why would anyone consider that weird? On Mondays Dave took his daughter to school and then helped with some of Linda's deliveries before taking on the sole responsibilities for lunch. Life became idyllic, he would turn up at work on Tuesday with a smile for everyone, normally not even realising when five p.m. had been and gone and he would still be there help-

ing people with problems. Productivity soared, as did morale. Everyone was happy. It seemed like the perfect solution had been found.

This level of happiness was maintained for the best part of a year when on one Indian summer evening Dave was sat in the garden with his wife, enjoying a freshly cooked piece of halibut and a crisp glass of white when he remembered that the next day was Tuesday and he had to go to work. At first it was just a long sigh, but the next week he found himself thinking about Tuesday from lunchtime on Monday onwards, by the evening he was getting the old pangs back, and found he had nothing to say to Linda. She noticed straight away what was happening, in some ways she had been expecting it, it made sense. He had been cured from his phobia of Mondays by removing Monday as the start of the working week. That had worked fine for a while, but now he felt the same feelings for Tuesday, at least he thought they were the same feelings for Tuesday, after a few weeks he soon realised that they were much more intense, much worse than anything he had ever felt on a Monday morning. By Sunday afternoon he was drinking heavily again, avoiding sleep on Sunday night to drink continuously through, with every sip more pain was heaped upon his ailing body until after about twenty four hours abuse a spasm would attack the left side of his body and he would be paralysed into sleep.

A month of this drove Linda to the conclusion that she couldn't allow their daughter to see what was happening to her father and from then on most of the weekends were spent at the grandparents. With Dave now having nothing to look forward to after his reduced working week was over, now even Wednesdays were not a particularly productive day, his drinking became worse. Management tried to solve the problem in their typical caring way, by ignoring it, until the amount of complaints from colleagues and clients forced them to intervene. In the time it had taken them to arrive at this conclusion Dave had gone over the edge, and when an unwitting temp asked him if he had a stapler, his last shred of sanity left his body and he pushed her through the open fourth floor window to her death. He thought about following her out of the window as well, but he dithered too long and security soon had their burly hands on him. That was the end of Dave in the company, management were convinced that they had got away with it, a small price to pay was how they saw it, losing a temp but not having to pay off Dave, everything could be neatly swept under the carpet and life could carry on.

With the office virtually empty after six p.m. Jasper did what he liked to do most and began to snoop around the offices to find titbits on his supposed colleagues. He resented the word colleague as no-one in the place treated him as such, not that he gave them any reason to be treated in any other way, yet Jasper was the last person to see this flaw in his personality. Jasper was universally dis-



liked in the office, and that dislike was equally displayed outside the office, and indeed, wherever he went. Jasper was a difficult person to like, he made it difficult for people to like him and people responded by avoiding him as best they could. Added to the general feeling of unpleasantness that he evoked in the people he worked with was an element of distrust as they knew about his snooping, despite him being under the misapprehension that this was kept in secret.

As time went on in the company, Jasper furthered his dislike for people like Dave, whom he saw as the enemy. In his eyes Dave and those of his ilk were given preferential treatment in the company at the expense of Jasper. He could not see that people like Dave had a vastly superior work rate to his, and were, if you don't count Mondays, affable with those around them. Jasper then took it upon himself to make it his life's work to bring people like Dave to justice. He despised such "old-school tie" treatment in the company, although Dave had worked his up from the bottom on merit. Jasper had been brought up on a strict diet of socialism, causing him to eschew privilege, though that did not stop him from accepting a well paid post in the computer department of the company. He believed that socialism was personal and could be interpreted in any way he wished. He had been watching Dave closely since the announcement of his special Monday project, and he felt sure that there was more to the story than the paltry information offered by the company. Since the incident with the temp there was even more reason to have a nose at what they were up to. With the excuse of taking on an extra project in the department giving him the opportunity to wander the building till gone nine, checking people's computers and generally making sure everyone thought him more odious than they had done on the previous day.

The search had been reasonably fruitless, he knew that only the people at the very top could know anything about Dave, and he wondered whether he would get the stroke of luck that he somehow felt he deserved. Had the gods had a better planning meeting that day, the CD that accidentally fell into Jasper's hands would have been guarded away in the safest of places, as it was, the CD containing the complete file on Dave was left inside the drive of the second in command's laptop. Jasper didn't know that as he made a copy onto his own system, he didn't have time to check the files, there was always the chance that somebody could turn up at any moment and that would be the end of him and his dream. With the copy made he left for home. He was tempted to have a sneak preview of the disc on the bus, but he knew he had the sort of face that invited thieves and desperately tried to make sure that it looked like he didn't have an expensive laptop in his bag.

He made it through the gruelling eleven stops on the bus to his dingy and poorly lit flat in a disappointingly insalubrious part of London, stopping at the shop to pick up two pasties that would be flung in the microwave and four cans

of extra strong lager. He made one of his favourite suppers, a pasty sandwich, simple to prepare and, in his eyes, delightful on the tongue, nothing more than a microwave pasty, ideally cheese and ham, between two slices of white bread with margarine and tomato sauce. He then opened the disc and awaited its contents. Before him he saw the entire dossier on Dave, how the company had planned his departure on Mondays and how they had covered everything up, knowing that the most likely turn of events would be Dave's breakdown on Tuesdays. Jasper rubbed his hands with glee as he made a phone call to The Sun. He made an appointment to see a journalist the next day at twelve.

Jasper drank the four cans of lager and fell into a dreamy slumber that would allow him to believe that his work would create a better world for the good comrades of socialism like himself. He awoke a bit after ten the next day, he hadn't even bothered to phone work and tell them he wasn't going, and, it was probably the case that they hadn't even noticed that he wasn't there yet. He would never go there again, now he had much greater issues to deal with. As he prepared himself for his meeting he pondered the idea of a career in politics, losing himself in his thoughts with all the good work he could do.

At the company the thought of the press was something that had been unsubtly outlawed. Anyone who spoke to the press about Dave had their contracts terminated, irrespective of whether their comments flattered the company or not. The issue was to be swept under the carpet, and it looked like they had done just that until The Sun called the t until the pet, and it looked like they had done just that low him to believe that his work would create a COE and said that they needed to talk. The company implored the paper not to run the story but they did that repugnant thing that the tabloids do when they want to make a lot of money and expose corruption at the same time, they said they had a moral obligation to print the story.

The company was right to be worried. There was a lot at stake with this story, people did not see what the company was doing with Dave as fair and the papers had no qualms about jumping on the moral high ground about favouritism and cast Dave as a rotter of the highest degree. Jasper enjoyed his moments of fame and claimed his victory for the socialist ideology, but things didn't stay that way for too long. As the scandal developed it was seen that not only the company that employed Dave was involved in similar activities, rather most of the top companies in the country were doing similar stunts to keep their top people content. This information was let slip by an unsporting exec who feared for his own safety as the media net closed in on his own company. After certain information was given which merely scratched the surface of the level of the scandal, but still promised much more for the press, people took to the streets, baying for Dave's blood and that of all the others that had had Mondays free for so long.



However, the anger towards Dave didn't last too long as a more introspective piece commented on how Dave was also a victim in this terrible affair, he had technically done nothing wrong and it was the companies that had used their own greed to force the solution upon him. This was seen to be even more the case when it transpired that for every one of these "Monday projects" the companies used three of what they called "Unsufferers" people who they knew that they could take advantage of and get them to do extra work to make up for any shortfall due to the Monday project people. In this way the company not only avoided losing working hours, rather their production increased without having to pay extra. It was then argued that Jasper was more of a despicable character than Dave, him only bringing the story to light for personal gain and fame. The papers took delight in publishing his work records, interviewing people from his office and anyone, which in reality was most people, who could further discredit Jasper and the companies.

For a while it seemed to be little more than a battle between capitalist companies and the press. The government failed to take an official stance and hoped the situation would blow over, a hope that would disappear just three days after Christmas. A leak from the Central Government Offices gave the papers their best post-yuletide present ever. The government not only knew about the companies programmes, but it had been the product of a government think tank, an idea that not only received the approval of the government rather it came with subsidies used from diverted European funds to pay for these forward thinking strategies. The people took to the streets.

With the opposition and the press making the Government's position untenable, it looked likely that parliament would be dissolved as soon as the Christmas break was over. By now Dave had left the UK and was doing a University tour of the States giving stress-busting lectures, though, as the promoters loved to mention, never on a Monday. Jasper had been forced to take refuge with the government and felt continually worse every day as his socialist dream slowly died on its feet. He was despised now at a national level to the same extent as he was locally and could not go out without the protection of MI5, desperate and tired he made the decision to make a run for it. He thought he was quite clever in giving intelligence the slip, but they were just glad to be rid of him.

Jasper made it to the local train station and mounted the train towards Hull, from there he hoped to make it across to Holland and into a safe house that he had been promised by a group of sympathisers. However, by this time there were no sympathisers for Jasper, it was a simple trick to get Jasper in with the general public. As he sat down on the train an angry mob came towards him and for a

few painful minutes Jasper's existence continued. Video cameras on the train captured the images of Jasper's final moments, but when the police came, a total of nineteen people said they would gladly admit to having been the murderer before a court of law.

The press continued to rub their hands with glee at every new development, they even began wondering when the story would finally end. With the news and footage of Jasper's violent death they assumed that they had had their greatest moment. Sales of every paper and viewing figures had been vastly in excess of the average for far too long, the editors pondered what they would do when the story died, but most concurred that something new would come up as soon as all this was forgotten about.

Though others asked the question whether it actually would be forgotten about. The very fabric of British life had changed and been tarnished, the scandal involved almost all major British companies and the successive governments had been equally involved in the plan that had benefited the stars of rising companies whilst at the same time offsetting any costs incurred, which were virtually nil, by forcing workers who felt an over-bearing sense of loyalty to the firms to do more than their fair share. Suddenly, there were law suits coming from every angle, people who had worked themselves to death had family members claiming a slice of their "Dave Tribute", people who been given preferential treatment by the companies and the government in the first place now claimed compensation for the stress. Everywhere the government turned their already fading image was being made worse. Dissolution of Parliament seemed an inevitability and at times the opposition wondered whether they would even need to fight an election.

Journalists were ready to run with Jasper's murder covering the first ten pages of every publication in, when for the first time in any editor's living memory the call came to "hold the front page". With the pressure mounting on the government and blame falling firmly at the door of number 10, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom had called an emergency meeting to put together a contingency plan for the inevitable moment that would see his party's downfall. He thanked them for their work and expressed his wish that he hoped that they could rescue their careers, and finally, and what caused some curious looks in the room, he bade them all farewell. With that he went back upstairs to his private office and placed a gun he had absconded from a visit to a local barracks in his mouth and pulled on the trigger. The single gunshot was heard all around the Prime Minister's residence by Members of his Cabinet and servants alike, had the government even wanted to cover up the suicide, the images were captured on the CCTV of Number ten and were soon floating round the Internet.



The press couldn't believe what was happening and just how all this was going to affect their business. The opposition, who were already celebrating assuming power before this, though could not openly show their delight at the suicide of their opposite number, now felt confident that Parliament would be dissolved without the need for elections. Within a few days they would be in control of the British government. And indeed it would have been so had the rest of the world not been keeping a keen eye on what was happening in the UK and dusting off old policy conversations that had long been filed away. Most prominent in their observation were the United States, France and Germany. Only when things began to look really bad in Britain did these three nations have their memories jogged about a policy that was made just after the Second World War.

With the European Economy in ruins after the war, the Americans were keen to make sure certain elements did not interfere with regeneration plans. The French and Germans were also willing to see the idea of a united Europe now that the Nazis were out of the way. These three nations were aware that the possible harmony of a united Europe could be disrupted by a dangerous element. To the untrained eye, that might sound like the threat of Communism in Europe, but the Alliance that became known as the Euro-American Economic Agenda saw a much greater threat. They were happy to let Russia have the parts of Eastern Europe that the Alliance had no wish to set foot in, the Alliance's main concern was Britain. Britain was referred to as a 'trouge nation' by the groups that would form the initial base for the United Nations when the war was concluded. All three parties considered Britain to be the weak link in a future United Europe as their political system and economy was based on an antiquated system that even the ruling classes in Britain had feared would fall apart for a number of years. The "British Containment" Policy was adopted in forty-six and approved by the US, Germany and France with even Russia considering the policy to be "appropriate in the light of potential events". The Policy was kept to one side whilst Europe was rebuilt and the fall of Britain was awaited. As it turned out Britain remained relatively stable and even grew in line with the European requirements, as the decades went on the Policy was all but forgotten as stability in Europe meant full scale war on the continent was practically impossible. Problems in the Seventies in Britain were overlooked due to Vietnam, and it was the Eighties that nearly caused the plan to be brought out the cupboard again. The French and Germans feared Thatcher as a dictator that could disrupt Europe and mobilise the British, however, the Americans were never convinced by this idea as their comical President was given some sort of credibility by the Iron Lady.

So time went on, the Policy was never implemented, of course, variants of it were used in other countries such as the former Yugoslavia and parts of the Middle East, but the British were never needed to be contained and the Policy became something of a memory. A memory that was evoked by recent events in the land that once controlled more than half the globe. With the opposition looking

at soft furnishings for number ten, an emergency meeting of the Alliance was called and it was decided that the original plan for the control of the United Kingdom was to be put into place.

The plan was very simple, the United Kingdom would be essentially divided into two sections. A southern section which would be controlled by Germany, which included all of the south of England up to, but not including at the German's insistence, Birmingham, as well as the annexed Gallic zone of Cardiff. The area from Birmingham to the Scottish border was to be controlled by France. They were offered Scotland as well but declined the offer. The areas known as Land Annex 1 (Wales), Aquatic Annex 1 (Northern Ireland) and Aquatic Annex 2 (The Isle of Man) were handed over to NATO control for the time being.

The effect of these changes was immediately felt by the British people. Almost overnight, in the Southern zones, German companies replaced British ones and the Administration in these areas fell wholly under German control. British civil servants were allowed to remain in their posts if they began German courses and attained a certain level of linguistic ability in the first six months. The Germans aimed to have the entire public administration of the southern zones to be conducted in German within one year. It effectively became illegal within a month for anyone employed in the public sector in both zones to conduct their business affairs in English. Perhaps the very nature of the south, its work ethic due to their love of the green stuff meant that the changeover was swift and relatively painless. People realised that the old regime had gone and that if they did not learn German sharpish then they would never get that Smeg fridge they had always dreamt of.

The southern zone was well controlled and policed by the vastly efficient German army. This did of course create an extra burden on the German economy so the Chancellor was keen to have former British troops trained up to German standards. Law breaking elements were easily dealt with as the more upright members of society also offered to do their bit on neighbourhood watch schemes and the like. People who participated in these programmes were rewarded with extra German lessons, or the possibility of a real German teacher coming to their house to practice conversation, or in extreme cases, a fully-paid two week trip to Hanover to practice the language. The Germans saw that it was essential for the new state to be run in German. Obviously this had an effect on British culture, as the English language began to be less commonplace in the streets of Slough and Reading. These places were allowed to maintain their names until a full decision had been reached on the re-naming of English places. All institutions run from London were effected by the linguistic impositions of the new rulers, none more so than the BBC, who dropped their ever-popular modern tragedy East-Enders in favour of a revamped programme about the lives of ordinary



folk in the capital with their amusing mock Schlewsig Holstein accents. The news was broadcast in German with English subtitles but these were only available by SMS purchase, the Germans desperate to finance this venture in any way possible. Families that renounced their subtitle service were rewarded with free television. British programmes remained but were now dubbed into German, also, some of the content had been changed too, with Alf Garnet now ranting about the values of European unity and hard-work. Radio also suffered a similar fate with groups rapidly learning German language versions of English classics. The charts did not count the sales of English language records and so the Top 40 was all in German. With these changes being made without the merest opposition from the workers in the south, the authorities decided that all literature in the zone could only be sold in German and all courses taught in English or about the English language were to be suspended.

Despite this clear removal of civil liberties people were prepared to get on with things in the south as the Germans were very clever with their reward system. The German language was divided into five levels, with every level offering something in return for its students. Level one meant that you could work in the lowest part of the service sector, usually in jobs where English was prevalent which meant that pay was low. The hours were long and the work was arduous, but without the level one accreditation it was impossible for a person to work in the new state. When they passed level two, they were given the status of semi-citizen, which allowed them to work in administrative positions and possess a fortnightly passport to visit Germany once a year in summer. Level three, brought with it the rights to drive a German made car and drive it on the left. The expense of changing the road system was reduced by having level one workers move the signs across the road by hand. When four million people reached level three in the Southern zone, a large concert was organised at Wembley, introduced by the stars of the new East-Enders making jokes about a man from Swansea in a Bratwurst factory, and the highlight being Cast doing a word perfect version of "Hey Jude" in German.

Level four meant that you were a citizen of the new German state. In 2017 it was decided that the new areas should be given the following names, the south was now to be known as Groß-Süd-Englandern, while the French controlled zones were known as Nord-Franglais. The areas of Scotland and the Isle of Man still remained unoccupied and people continued here as before. The Germans expanded into the lands of Southern Wales, occupying the coast as far as Cardigan Bay, which they began to turn into a luxury holiday resort for the German upper-classes. Those who aspired to level five, fully fluent in written and spoken German as well as showing their skills in administration, business and other areas, received full citizenship as a New Britain. This allowed them to travel to other English speaking areas as well as being able to possess music and literature

in their own language, though many didn't bother after their full assimilation into Teutonic culture.

And so things went on in the German controlled south. Life as it had been known before had completely disappeared but people made good of the new situation, and in some areas German was a vast improvement on the Estuary English spoken before. Things did not go so smoothly in the French controlled north. Admittedly, the French did not enter into their possession of the northern territories with the same gusto as their German counterparts. The French felt aggrieved that the major financial centres had been given to the Germans and that they were left with the relatively less profitable northern zones. Almost immediately the French left any place under two-hundred thousand people to their own devices. Military garrisons were sent to all areas but the chances of them maintaining power would require an army with a ratio of almost one to one, so determined were the northerners to avoid French rule.

This meant that the French were required to undertake a major financial outlay to guarantee peace and the upholding of the treaty in the five centres that they determined could be made profitable for the French empire. These centres were Manchester, the capital of the new Northern lands, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield and Newcastle. The French tried to implement the same model that had worked so well in the south but found the locals reticent to change their language in return for the jobs they had done all their lives. People could also see that the French were half-hearted in their implementation of the new system. When they tried to employ force, the population responded, when they requested help from the Germans they simply told the French to get the job done. The Germans quickly mobilised all prisoners detained at her Majesty's pleasure to strengthen border security. Many residents of Birmingham had become discontent about not being included in the south, and tried to join with the Germans. The Germans did not want to undertake a problematic city like Birmingham and annexed the south part of the city for use as a military strategy centre, completely isolated from the north and protected by troops, leaving the rest to be looked after by the French.

French companies and civil servants still poured into the "Cinq villes" but keeping them away from angry locals was costing the French government more than they were making from the new territories. This led to the French administration reducing the minimum wage and raising food prices. People in the cities were starving to death, queues for bread in Manchester went all the way down Piccadilly. Public transport was halted for English people who did not bear the Royal Seal which was given to members of the public without a criminal record or who performed positive acts for the new French controlled nations. This scheme lasted a very short time as those who bore the Seal often refused to



wear it in public for fear of lynching. Finally, the French asked the Americans for help, the response being far from favourable, with references to the Second Gulf War representing the two-finger farewell.

Problems really began to appear for the French in the areas around the major centres. Proud northern towns refused to adopt French and with only a skeleton military force to maintain French order, uprisings were frequent in the north. The French could not pull out without risking a severe backlash from NATO, so their economy was forced to bear the strain of the extra cost of maintaining the empire. Conscription was brought in France, though for only those of foreign extraction and the unemployed. These people did not make the best soldiers but were stationed in Birmingham to act whenever resistance forces attempted to topple power. At first the resistance groups were badly organised, ill-equipped and unarmed. They had strength in numbers but lacked leadership until the aging social agitator Shaun Ryder used his fortune to start a well-led and disciplined militia in Rochdale. The model for his group was copied all over the Greater Manchester area. Boycotts were organised in Preston and Bury, whilst offices of the BNP Paris were burnt in Blackburn. Ryder wanted the French to think that this street-hooliganism was nothing more than that, and the French government were pleased with how quickly these uprisings were dealt with. However, the Northern Workers Militia used only thugs for these attacks, secretly training their best recruits and creaming off the best officers and soldiers from the disillusioned military. With the French concentrating on the safety of Manchester, the Militia decided the time was right to seize Preston. Finding only a small army post in the centre of the town, the French guards were taken prisoner and Preston was declared independent from France. The French reacted by sending squadrons from Birmingham, but estimates suggest that more than half of these joined the Militia willingly and fought against the French. With a force of more than forty thousand strong, Ryder called to the nearby towns to take arms and remove the foreign imperialists from power. In an emotive speech he called for a return to the golden age of the north of England. Within hours the entire Ribble Valley had been secured, and fighters loyal to the Militia took Lancaster, Blackpool and Stoke.

Despite these advances for the Resistance, the French still felt secure in the “Cinq Villes” there they had enough forces to maintain order, although military rule had become a daily necessity. People suspected of supporting the Militia mysteriously disappeared, those who were found to be propagating their message were publicly shot. The French were unprepared for an attack, and Ryder knew that despite the masses being untrained, their passion and anger would carry them through. He made references to Stalingrad as he made his nightly broadcast on the outlawed radio frequency. On the morning of December the 4th 2017, a bomb ripped through the Hotel de Ville in Manchester’s Albert Square, killing forty French civil servants and soldiers as well as an uncounted number of English workers. As the French army tried to recover from the chaos in the centre

bombs in central Leeds and Liverpool brought down the poorly sophisticated French communications set-up. The French made another appeal to NATO to help them but again they were told to clear up their own mess. The French army gave orders to shoot on sight at any agitators but their soldiers soon saw the numbers they were up against. Many deserted without a second thought, giving up their arms to Militia soldiers. TF 1 in Paris reported the Battle of Manchester and how the victorious French troops had crushed the rebels, but the reality was less than fifty rounds had been fired in the northern capital. Inspired by Militia victories in Manchester, the other four cities' Militia groups also began their Coup d'États, in Newcastle the violence was more extreme, and French soldiers in Sheffield, for some reason their elite forces, held on to the city until Christmas Eve. French media continued to report that all was well in the territory, and that Ryder had been captured and given up the names of the head of the Militia under torture. NATO though, was not convinced by the French media and made plans to remedy the chaos in the north.

Meanwhile in the German area, reinforcements were made to the border crossing points as tens of thousands tried to escape into the south. Huge language schools were established in Birmingham, though only those from the north who achieved level four could enter the south, and then, only with level two status for three years minimum. Ryder made an historic web-cast on New Year's Day 2018 proclaiming full independence for the north. Most French diplomats and civil servants had fled the north and the majority of the army had deserted. NATO offered to crush the uprising, but France would have to bare the cost. France had little option but agree.

After a week of freedom from French rule, NATO bombers stationed in Gretna and Belfast made their first raids on Manchester and Liverpool. The rebels were given twenty-four hours to surrender and return power to the French, although NATO was not convinced of this as a solution. The refusal was stubborn and converted military pilots from the French army flew suicide missions over Clwyd and Anglesey to take out NATO targets. A month of carpet bombing ensued which destroyed the five cities formally under French control. Still surrender was not forthcoming, and NATO prepared a land invasion with forces entering Newcastle from Rotterdam and Ostend. Despite resources being thin on the ground, their resolution was firm, and Ryder mobilised his elite Manchester regiment to meet the NATO forces on the Tyne bridge. Every man and woman in the North of England gave themselves to the cause, fighting went from street to street, from building to building as the NATO soldiers not versed in this archaic form of warfare, found themselves incapable of gaining a foothold in any of the cities.



In an emergency meeting of NATO, it was decided that there was only one option left. Another month of fighting would bankrupt France and create a similar situation there. The North was given an ultimatum, either they laid down their arms or nuclear devices would be employed against the five major centres. Should there be no surrender twenty-four hours after the nuclear attack, Bradford, Sunderland, Birkenhead, Blackpool and Huddersfield would receive the same treatment. Ryder was among the few in the Militia that believed NATO would carry out this threat and decided it was time to look for a settlement. Those close to his command did not see things in the same light and opted for further resistance. When it was discovered that Ryder was willing to make peace with NATO, a group of Militia leaders kidnapped him and made the announcement in his name that there would be no surrender.

Midnight came and went. The military heads at NATO were in something of a quandary, enter into a small-scale nuclear war, or tell every terrorist in the world that they would go back on their word. There was no more time for debate, reluctantly the codes were given for the mini-nuclear devices that would cause immense damage yet contained "manageable radiation" which would be contained in radius of twenty miles of the explosion for the duration of its half-life. Population estimates had been vague in Manchester and Leeds for the best part of a year, but even the most conservative ones put the death rate from the blast alone at 30%. With the Militia command in tatters it was almost impossible to find anyone to make the declaration of surrender, and so, amidst the fires and the screams, another twenty-four hours passed. At NATO headquarters it was argued that maybe the Militia had been destroyed and for that reason they didn't respond, though, as is often the way, it is only a difficult decision the first time, and the next set of bombs were launched.

After three days with no communication from the Militia, the observation of satellite pictures proved that there was almost no chance of any major resistance group operating in the north of England. With no-one to sign a peace treaty with, NATO simply announced, on the 11th of November 2018, exactly one hundred years after the World War One Armistice, the cessation of military action against the north of England.

The terms were set out so that France could reoccupy the northern zone in 2023, when the "manageable radiation" would be at safe levels. In the meantime, those who had survived would be allowed to be moved to South America after a period of disinfection. In the years that followed there were occasional cases of radiation leaking into German areas, and squadrons in Birmingham were continually kept busy as survivors attempted to make it into the south. Historians estimate that more than sixteen million people lost their lives in the Northern Conflict, with all major northern areas being destroyed beyond recognition. Manches-

ter began to be repopulated in the early 2030's and others followed suit, though, at the time of writing, 2052, no area in the old North of England has a population in excess of twenty-thousand, most people who live there share a lawless existence, scavenging in the rubble for the wealth that once made the area the industrial heartland of the world.





# El Beso Perfecto

Spanish version of Perfect Kiss

Es que acabas haciendo ese tipo de cosas, ¿no es así? Si me hubieran preguntado en el colegio cual sería mi trabajo perfecto de mayor pues seguro que no habría contestado que quería ser secuestrador. Al menos espero que hubiera sido así. Sin embargo, no hay muchas opciones en esta parte del mundo y, siendo sincero, la mayoría de nuestro trabajo consiste solamente en asustarles un poco a las víctimas para que los que tengan que pagar, bueno, pues, paguen. Seguro que algunos dicen que somos unos captores bastante simpáticos, siempre les ofrecemos un sándwich, y siempre hay una botella de agua fría a mano y así todo el mundo está en casa a una hora razonable mientras los cincuenta mil dólares se dividen entre los grupos involucrados. Nunca nos tenemos que preocupar de la policía o otras personas que no tienen la misma noción de nuestro negocio ya que solo raptamos a personas cuyos pagadores no querrán aparecer en las noticias. Es cuestión de planificarse bien, en este juego, si vas por delante en el juego, eres el juego. De todos modos, siempre donamos algo muy generoso a hospitales y colegios en la zona, lo cual tiene el efecto de hacer que cualquier investigación pendiente se vuelva al final de una lista muy larga.

Los secuestros siempre reciben un trato malo por parte de la prensa. No es un trabajo malo cuando lo comparas con la oferta que hay por aquí. No se paga mal y trae mucho más que si trabajaras en una fábrica u otra forma de esclavitud multinacional. Claro que esto conlleva sus riesgos, pero por eso el éxito depende de ti, si te organizas bien, te mantienes por delante de tus perseguidores. Obviamente, hay factores se presentan que pueden obstaculizar el correcto desarrollo de nuestros servicios, y con las ganancias solo le tienes que echar como 4 meses al año, el resto del tiempo es para ti. Eso a mi me suena menos peligroso que trabajar en las plataformas petrolíferas.

A veces, secuestrar a alguien puede ser aburrido. Sabes que te van a pagar. La mayoría de los trabajos son rápidos, los llamados "secuestros express", se pagan alrededor de cincuenta mil dólares, siempre es recomendable tener algo extra en tu arsenal de chantaje para que las cosas vayan bien, pero casi siempre se arregla todo en poco tiempo. Por ejemplo, si tienes a la hija de un hombre de negocios y él sabe que tú sabes que lleva años sin pagar los impuestos correspondientes, o participa en actividades nocturnas que podrían ser la delicia de la portada del periódico local. Con un trabajo así, el dinero te llega en nada, nada de policía, nada de preguntas. Está bien si puedes buscarte dos o tres trabajos de esos cada mes. Es una de las cosas bonitas de este lugar, uno pensaría que todo el mundo es pobre, pero rasgas la superficie y verás que sobra dinero. Claro que hay gente en la calle que les faltan muchas cosas, pero eso no es mi problema.

Los turistas también traen un buen dinerito, aunque puede ser algo más arriesgado. La policía tiene la opinión de que el turismo es el futuro de nuestra economía y por lo tanto, debe ser recibido con los brazos abiertos. A mi parecer, si pueden permitirse el lujo de venirse hasta aquí, pueden gastar un poco más. Mi problema es, que yo hablo demasiado. Me sorprende que no me haya metido en más líos, quizás tenga suerte también, demasiada, quizás. Solo os cuento todo esto porque me aburro. Estamos esperando, esperando a una pareja de Ohio que hemos decidido enseñarles partes de la ciudad que normalmente no las ven los turistas, y, tampoco desean verlas. Estamos echando un vistazo por la calle, y si hay otros que podrían ocupar su lugar pero creemos que una vez tomada la decisión, hay que ser fiel a ella. Han ido a almorzar en un sitio del centro y están tardando mucho en volver al hotel. Ya empieza a cansar esto y yo soy el que tiene fama de ser el tranquilo, mi colega, Carlos, tiene menos paciencia que yo y él ya tiene esa mirada en la cara, la mirada que te dice que no le digas nada porque es capaz de lanzar toda su ira contra ti. Ya sé que va a pasar, Carlos no aprecia la espera, y este trabajo ya tiene pinta de ser uno de ellos que las cosas simplemente no van como se pensaban. De vez en cuando me gusta que las cosas salgan así, porque, a pesar de mis afirmaciones anteriores, la verdad es que somos unos cabrones de mucho cuidado.

Ahora hemos desperdiciado una hora, el mes nos ha tratado bien y para ser sincero ni siquiera necesitamos este trabajo, pero el tiempo se ha puesto malo y no puedo pensar en nada mejor que hacer. Además, no quiero que Carlos se ponga de mal humor así que decido alegrarle el día cuanto antes. Por fin llegan, medio borrachos, por lo menos eso nos hace el tema más fácil. Tienen pinta de ser no los más listos del mundo, son guapos pero se les ve poco más. Mientras Carlos se prepara, me inclino hacia él y le digo "al carrajo con el dinero". Esa frase le



causa sonreír y estamos listos para trabajar. Simplemente les explicaremos a los jefes que las cosas se complicaban, eso ocurre a veces, les tuvimos que matar.

Consiguiendo que se metan dentro de la furgoneta suele ser la parte más difícil. Nadie entraría en la furgoneta de un desconocido, y aun menos con la pinta que tenemos nosotros. Aun así, esta pareja se merece poco mas que odio, caen en la trampa que les queremos vender chocolate. Nos siguen dentro del callejón y Carlos le da al chico en la nuca con una tubería de plomo. La chica empieza a gritar que el novio tiene el dinero, que es todo nuestro. Le informamos que no queremos el dinero de la cartera, y Carlos hace un gesto que indica que se suba la furgoneta, si hace un ruido, se muere, Carlos le dice. Yo casi no puedo contenerme la risa, ya que sé que se muere de todas formas. Después de demasiado esfuerzo, conseguimos meter al novio en la furgoneta, debe pesar mas de 100 kilos, es atlético, en buena forma y levantarlo no es tarea fácil. Ya estamos. Conduzco yo. Carlos se queda atrás con ella, para asustarla. No penséis que el la va a violar. No somos animales. Carlos simplemente tiene su mano puesta en la garganta de ella. A la nada estamos en las afueras de la ciudad. Carlos le mira fijamente en los ojos, sin abrir y cerrar los ojos desde que iniciamos el viaje. Ella solo tiene miedo en los ojos y por fin, cuando no puede aguantar mas, se mea de miedo. Carlos se acerca su cara a la de ella, y con una mirada final, le da un cabezazo que le deja inconsciente como su novio. Carlos se queja de que ha tardado mas que él esperaba en mearse encima y se moría él de ganas de fumarse un cigarro. Después lo pagarían, me dijo.

Ese comentario casi hace que me ría de nuevo pero logro mantener la compostura. Así es como trabajamos; cuando empezamos en trabajo ya no hay contacto con nadie que nos paga, o que puede tener un vinculo con lo que hacemos. De no hacerlo así sería poco profesional, es más, de tontos. Desde ese momento estamos solos, nadie nos molesta ni nos pregunta nada si algo no va según lo planeado, ya que, en el fondo, a nadie le importa. ¿Porqué les va a importar? Esas cosas pasan, y después del jaleo siempre hay otro a quien secuestrar. ¿Quien se va a acordar de la pareja de Ohio que tuvo mala suerte en la capital. Las noticias se caducan y la gente es cada vez mas pasota, casi parece que están justificando nuestra existencia.

Ya estamos en nuestro refugio en las montañas. No pueden ver nada y no recordarían el camino con mil intentos pero lo que marca el método de trabajo de uno es la profesionalidad en cada momento. Si siempre piensas que te pueden pillar, es casi imposible que te pillen. Les metemos dentro con más esfuerzo que lo previsto. Ella no pesa nada, quizás se ponga los

botines de deportes para que la gravedad no la lleve con ella. A veces arrastra los tobillos mas que nos hubiera gustado pero más o menos se mueve según nuestros órdenes. El problema es él. A ella solo tenemos que atarla a una silla para que pueda ver el espectáculo desde el mejor lugar del teatro, pero a él le tenemos que poner encima de una mesa, la mesa reservada para la victima principal de esta obra. Le decimos a la chica que abra los ojos, queremos que lo vea todo, si no fuera así, ¿Dónde estaría la diversión? Ella ya se da cuenta de que tiene que mirarlo todo, quizás se sienta una compulsión incomprensible para hacerlo, atraída inexplicablemente hacia la imagen de su novio durante su muerte dolorosa. Pero aun es un poco temprano para este tipo de reflexiones, tenemos a invitados y sería de mala educación no atenderles.

Desde este momento Carlos asume el papel de maestro de ceremonias, y, os lo tengo que decir, él sabe como montar un show de primera. Ella sigue gritando, esto lo consideramos normal, Carlos le dejará que grite un par de minutos más, entonces, ella se dará cuenta de que esta acción es fútil, o él hará que se dé cuenta de este hecho. Les pongo un vasito de agua fría de una botella recién sacada del frigo. Añado un par de cubitos de hielo y un trocito de limón y se lo doy. Ya sé que Carlos no va a querer agua así no se lo pongo, yo bebo de la botella. Aceptan el agua con gratitud, pero demostrando confusión. Carlos les pregunta si quieren un bocadillo y le informan que eso sería un detalle. Casi estamos disfrutando de la escena, parecemos un grupo de viejos amigos, pasándolo bien en el campo, quizás ellos piensan que esto no tiene que ir por el camino difícil, y se empiezan a relajar. Un segundo después Carlos les pregunta si han terminado y indican que así es. Hasta les sonrío mientras se lleva los platos, y veo al chico que ofrece una mirada que parece decir que todo saldrá bien. Ella necesita que se lo diga y que él piense que esto tiene salida. Casi no tienen tiempo para asimilar este pensamiento cuando Carlos, con un movimiento de enorme destreza, mete una de las muñecas de la chica en las esposas. El chico hace un pequeño gesto inútil al cual Carlos responde con un codazo en la cara. Con ella inmovilizada y el inconsciente podemos tomar nuestro primer descanso desde que estamos aquí, bien merecido también, en mi opinión honesta.

Para nuestro descanso Carlos quita el tapón de una botella de tequila con los dientes y corta dos rayazos para mantener la mente alerta mientras trabajamos. Ella nos mira mientras tomamos lo nuestro, qué lindo! Aún piensan que si hacen lo que les decimos podrán salir de esta situación, pero todavía no queremos que sepan que van a morir, solamente que van a experimentar más dolor que podían imaginar. Pronto, Carlos y yo empezamos a sentir los efectos beneficiosos de nuestro reposo. Carlos insiste en que repitamos y tengo que concordar, es mejor hacer las cosas así con Carlitos. Esta vez Carlos deja escapar un gemido fuerte cuando el



polvo traspasa el billete y entra su sistema sanguíneo. Ya listos para empezar el trabajo de verdad, Carlos le mira a la chica con la cara más malvada que si la vieras, te dejaría con secuelas el resto de tu vida, pero, en realidad si vieras esa cara, el resto de tu vida no sería un periodo muy largo.

Esa cantidad de droga, mezclada con la intensidad de la misma situación causa que el corazón de cualquiera alcance 200 latidos por minuto. Cada nervio en el cuerpo se acentúa, recibiendo todas las señales del mundo exterior con una claridad raramente vista en el mundo normal. Carlos entra en unos espasmos mientras su cuerpo y su cerebro luchan para ver que cosas malvadas de que es capaz esta vez. Recuerdo la primera vez que le vi en este estado, incluso tuve miedo. Él se parece al diablo si se toma un cola-coa, así que intentad imaginarle ahora. Me pongo a mirar que las herramientas que he preparado para el trabajo de Carlos están en su sitio, ahora mi papel se convierte en algo secundario, porque, sin duda, el artista es él. La mesa tiene correas para atar las manos y los pies: Carlos me indica que ya es la hora y saco mi cuchillo de cazador del bolsillo y lo sostengo en el cuello del hombre mientras Carlos se asegura de que no puede moverse el novio, aunque, ¿a donde va a ir?. La chica ya ha dejado de gritar y la imagen del cuchillo hace que veamos por segunda vez el sándwich que acaba de consumir. Quizás se haya dado cuenta de que van a morir aquí, en esta montaña reclusa, donde nadie escuchará sus gritos ni vendrá a rescatarlos. Este momento se puede dominar el que donde la diversión pasa a ser exclusivamente nuestra. Me aseguro de que las esposas de la chica están bien puestas pero casi no son necesarias, lo único que les queda ya es esperar que la muerte sea rápida y sin dolor, algo que claramente no va a pasar.

Carlos empieza desde su guión bien memorizado. "Siempre me gusta empezar estas cosas con un jueguecillo. Claro, esto es trabajo, pero eso no quiere decir que no podemos pasarlo bien al mismo tiempo. Veo, guapa, que te has dado cuenta de que el grito inútil que insistías en hacer repetidamente no te servirá de nada. Eso es una buena noticia para mis oídos y para tus posibilidades de sobrevivir esto, las cuales son mas bien remotas." Carlos se acerca a la chica, ella no parece convencida de que el juego sea divertido. Carlos saca una baraja de cartas y se toma un trago de la botella de tequila. Empieza a explicar las reglas del juego. "Seguro que habréis visto esto en la tele. Saco una carta y simplemente me tienes que decir si la siguiente será más alta o más baja. No podría ser más sencillo." Le mira a la chica. "Si aciertas tres veces, obtendréis un premio, el cual podría ser incluso la salvación, pero si fallas una sola vez, me tendrás que decir cual de los dígitos de tu novio debo quitar. ¿Entendido? Carlos le hace una mirada que sugiere que le toca responder. Ella abre la boca patéticamente e intenta decir

que sí, pero ningún sonido le acompaña. Carlos no está acostumbrado a repetir sus ordenes y esto le cambia su buen humor. Se acerca a la chica y coge un manojo de su pelo, que ya está empapado con sudor y lo tira tan fuerte que el peso se desprende del cráneo de la chica, llevándose con él un buen trozo de piel, anteriormente usado para proteger su cabeza. Ella vuelve a gritar pero esta vez se puede considerar que se justifica. Carlos coge la botella de tequila de nuevo y echa una cantidad cuantiosa en la herida de la chica, lo cual hace que los decibelios lleguen a un nivel poco visto fuera del ámbito del dolor intenso. Ahora ella lo deja muy claro que ha entendido. Carlos enciende un cigarro y indica que espera que esto sea así.

Ahora las lagrimas empiezan a caer por su cara, hasta ahora no había llorado, quizás estuviera demasiada confusa o asustada para hacerlo. Carlos se pone delante de ella y saca una baraja de cartas, ahora estamos listos para jugar. Saca la primera carta de la baraja, un seis, una carta de las del medio. No está mal.

"¿No es el mejor de los comienzos eh?" Bromea Carlos. "Pero yo sé que a los yanquis os gusta la tele y sabrás como son las reglas. Claro que tienes derecho a cambiarla. Puede que yo sea muchas cosas pero no soy tramposo. ¿La quieres cambiar? La mirada de Carlos sugiere que su respuesta sea audible.

"Sí, cámbiamela." Habla con una confianza que se ve muy poco en estas situaciones. Quizás no quiera perder más pelo, todos sabemos como son los americanos de vanos.

Carlos le cambia la carta y esta vez sale un 4. Eso es mucho mejor. Ella mira a su novio, pero la decisión se queda con ella. La probabilidad dice que la siguiente carta será más alta, pero la probabilidad también dice que las posibilidades de que acaben en una situación así son mínimas, pero allí están. Ella dice más alto, el novio no puede ver las cartas desde su posición, solo ve a Carlos de lado, y con mucho teatro saca la siguiente carta que es un 9. "Buen trabajo querida." Dice. Ella va ganando, y respira un poco más tranquila. "¿Cuál será la siguiente? Dice Carlos. Ella piensa un poco pero al final sigue sus instintos y elige más bajo. El novio está de acuerdo aunque le cuesta mucho vocalizar su opinión. Carlos pide que suenen los tambores y saca un 3. Ya casi han ganado. Ella empieza a sonreír pero solo con una miradita por el sitio donde están, hace que recuerde donde están y la poca necesidad de sonreír. Ella empieza a maquinar y se da cuenta de que solo 4 de las 52 cartas en la baraja pueden hacer que pierda, y



ella se lo indica al novio para que los dos digan mas alto a la vez. "Oh querida, los dioses no han sido generosos contigo" Dice Carlos mientras saca la carta. Ella por un momento no le cree, y piensa que forma parte del show de Carlos, pero con una sonrisa malvada en su cara, todos presentes ven la carta que ha salido, un 2. Ella vuelve a mirar al novio, intentando disculparse por su mala elección, esto me parece un poco irónico, ya que su fortuna siempre ha sido mala y solo va a empeorar.

"Hicimos un trato. Elige un dígito. ¿Dedo o dedo del pie? Ella sabía que Carlos no mentía y empleando la lógica que un dedo del pie dolería menos por ser mas pequeño, eligió la amputación del dedo del pie pequeño de su novio. Carlos sonríe y le felicita la inteligencia de su elección. Carlos extrajo unos alicates especiales para cortar alambre, mientras yo sostenía el dedito. Carlos empezó a cortar y después del sonido de los alicates que crujían el dedito, el novio dejó salir un grito que para la mayoría de las personas las aterrorizaría para el resto de sus vidas, pero que para nosotros era simplemente currar. Ella cerró los ojos pero Carlos hizo que los abriera de nuevo, se puso muy cerca de ella y le obligó a mirar mientras se metió el dedo del pie en su boca y lo tragó con una buena cantidad de tequila. Nunca dejando de sonreírle, le dijo. "Ahora vais a sufrir, hijos de puta."

Ella se desmayó en ese momento. Carlos echó algo de tequila en la herida del dedo del pie. Yo no entendía el porque, no iba a tener tiempo para infectarse. El hecho de que ella estaba dormida nos venía bien para organizar las herramientas para el acto final de este drama. El Él ahora está listo para hacer el trabajo que Dios le puso en este planeta para hacer. Coge un cuchillo que compramos durante unas vacaciones en España, uno que corta muy bien, especial para cortar jamón. Creo que lo compramos en Cáceres pero puede que la memoria me falle. Si recuerdo los deliciosos trozos de jamoncito fino que cortaba y como se puede emplear en la piel de los humanos con el mismo efecto. Carlos indica al chico que debe mantener la cabeza sin moverse, y que también deje de hacer ruidos porque él empieza a dolerse de la cabeza, y Carlos con dolor de cabeza puede ser un autentico cabronazo. Acordaron que ni un ruido más, de no ser así Carlos empezaría a extraerle dientes usando los mismos alicates que habían acabado con el equilibrio en los pies del chico. Carlos le hizo entender al chico que si se movía mucho los trozos que se cortaban serían gordos e incomedibles, y nadie quiere recibir un plato de jamón así.

Carlos empezó a cortar la mejilla del chico como si de una paleta se tratase. Desgraciadamente, el chico no era capaz de mantener el silencio y le salieron unos gemidos que hacia que el chico grande parecía un niño. Las lágrimas también empezaron a impedir el trabajo de Carlos, pero seguía. Después de unos minutos dolorosos, lo que quedaba de la parte izquierda del chico era nada más que parecía plástico para guardar comida. Usando los dedos Carlos hizo un agujero en lo que quedaba de la piel. El grito que salió de la boca del chico era suficiente para que la novia se despertara, y Carlos le dijo que se alegraba que estuviera consciente para disfrutar de este momento con nosotros, también le preguntó si tenía cariño para los dentistas aficionados. Ella no sabía a que se refería Carlos pero cuando vio los alicates entrar por el agujero en la cara de su novio, y poco después la extracción torpe de una muela, hicieron falta tres intentos para sacarla totalmente, y con el ultimo trocito, era tan complicado coger el ángulo necesario que Carlos se veía obligado a dislocar la mandíbula del chico. Después de tal esfuerzo el chico perdió el conocimiento y la chica se quedó mirando el escenario. Decidimos que era ya la hora de almorzar.

Mi madre nos había preparado comida típica, enchiladas y burritos, los cuales los calentamos en el microondas. Teniendo en cuenta las enormes cantidades de tequila y cocaína que habíamos ingerido anteriormente, la verdad es que había poca hambre, pero el cuerpo necesita su alimento y hay que cuidar al cuerpo porque Dios solo nos dio uno. Además, teníamos que dejarle descansar un poco al chico, si no, se nos puede morir en cualquier momento, y no quiero privarle a Carlos de su diversión y su famoso final.

Carlos se acercaba a su momento de gloria, pero no quería terminar su actuación sin ofrecerle al público unos de los ejemplos de tortura más emblemáticos de su carrera. Había vuelto a la sala principal de su obra con un taladro, la chica parecía aceptar esta imagen con facilidad, como si fuera la cosa más normal del mundo. Quizás lo único que lo asustaba ya era el porque le dejábamos vivir tanto tiempo. Pero claro, ella tiene el papel fácil, solo tenía que mirar. El novio, de nuevo consciente, no miraba el taladro con el mismo cariño. Si vas a usar este tipo de herramienta con el cuerpo de alguien, debes tener mucho cuidado, no se manejan fácilmente y un desliz puede provocar un accidente no deseado, eso podría significar el final temprano de la diversión, y nadie quiere eso. La experiencia nos ha enseñado que lo mejor para esto es usarlo en los codos o las rodillas, yo prefiero las rodillas ya que puedes mirar la cara de la víctima mientras la broca entra. No se puede entrar demasiado, solo romper la piel y un poco del hueso. El truco está en crear un dolor intenso pero no duradero, así evitando que la víctima se



desmaye. Debemos tener en cuenta el hecho de que el corazón del chico ya no puede aguantar mucho mas, y no queremos matarle, al menos no de esta forma.

Carlos empieza el trabajo con el taladro sin quitarle la mirada al chico. ¡Como entiende el mundo del espectáculo mi Carlos! El chico cierra los ojos, haciéndose fiel a la filosofía de que si no lo ve, no le duele. Siempre me río con este tipo de inocencia. Otra ventaja de la rodilla es que hay poca sangre circulando por esa zona, es importante evitar las venas si no quieres estar dos horas lavando la ropa. Cuando el taladro se acerca a la segunda rodilla por fin conseguimos una reacción de la chica, solo es una palabra "Cabrones" pero parece resumir sus sentimientos acerca de nosotros. No habíamos planeado nada de tortura física para ella, la suya iba a ser únicamente mental, obviamente el incidente con el pelo no cuenta ya que era necesario y culpa suya. Carlos me dijo que quería cortarle la lengua para que no dijera mas tacos pero teníamos que podía morirse desangrada antes de que viera la ultima acción. Así que Carlos se conformó con meterle el taladro en el muslo derecho de la chica, y después, sin más, él apagó la maquina. Le dije que igual le apetecía un trocito de la tarta de chocolate que mi madre había incluido con el almuerzo y respondió que le parecía una idea estupenda.

Mi madre siempre nos cuida si tenemos que trabajar fuera de la ciudad. Carlos no tiene mucho contacto con su familia, quizás le consideren un poco extremo, aunque yo sé muy bien que no se oyen quejas cuando una cantidad sustanciosa de dinero llega en un sobre no marcado. La tarta de chocolate era deliciosa y no dudamos en repetir. Me hace pensar que pronto me puedo jubilar de esto y comprar una granja donde puedo vivir en paz con mi mamá. A ella le encantaría, ya se va haciendo mayor para la ciudad y después de todo que ha trabajado, se merece un descanso. Carlos empieza a impacientarse, mira el reloj cada dos por tres, prepara mas drogas y me indica que estamos listos para rematar la faena.

Yo preparo las herramientas que va a necesitar para esto. Son numerosas y todas con un aspecto desagradable. Carlos ha convertido esto en casi una obra de arte. Es capaz de realizar una intervención quirúrgica para quitar un órgano pequeño, sin anestesia y sin que se muera la victima. Este trabajo para él era su David. Carlos ahora posee una habilidad con el bisturí que otros médicos solo podrían envidiar. No siempre ha sido así, y los primeros intentos acabaron con la necesidad de la ayuda de Don Limpio y sus amigos. Carlos se acerca a la mesa y observa que todo está como el quiere, todo menos la chica, que sigue fuera de si, le corta la cara con el cuchillo y ahora vuelve al teatro. El le dice que tiene que mirarlo todo, y si no lo hace, que él la matará durante un periodo de tres semanas, y que cada día experimentará una nueva definición de sufrimiento. Ella le dice que entiende y él termina informándole que si se porta

bien, dentro de media hora estará libre de todo esto. Ella sabe perfectamente que esto no quiere decir que se va a librar, o sea, solo en un sentido espiritual.

Ella mantiene la mirada en el tronco de su novio, y Carlos hace la primera incisión. Ella ya no puede mirarle la cara, si es que se puede decir que él sigue teniendo cara. El chico intentar levantar el cuello para ver que le pasa. Carlos dijo que quería mirar, había una forma mas fácil de hacerlo. Saca una cuchara de un cajón y cuidadosamente la mete debajo del parpado del chico, quitándole el ojo con una precisión tremenda. Con mucho cuidado Carlos iba desenrollando las pequeñas fibras del ojo hasta que el mismo ojo estaba a medio metro de la cabeza del chico. Poniéndolo en un trípode impromptu, Carlos preguntó al chico se veía, y el dijo que sí. Carlos tenía a mano también una colección de aromas fuertes que podían ser de gran utilidad en caso de que una victima se desmayara. Yo puse el aroma mas fuerte debajo de la nariz del chico y otra vez volvió a estar con nosotros. Ya su ojo veía como la mano de Carlos fue introducida dentro de su estomago y salió con un riñón. La cara de Carlos es todo orgullo mientras nos enseña el órgano, de una forma extraña el chico también parece impresionado. La chica, por otra parte, se ha vuelto muy gritona y eso empieza a fastidiarnos un poco.

Nadie puede decir que no nos hemos ganado un trago, y durante una merecida pausa, el líquido entra bienvenido en nuestras bocas. Carlos coge un vaso de agua y lo lleva al chico, ayudándole a beber, Carlos le dice que está orgulloso de él, que ha sido un bueno chico y que se merece una recompensa. Carlos le pregunta si quiere un beso de los labios de su novia, y con casi todas las fuerzas que le quedaban, él respondió que sí, casi era capaz de forzar una pequeña sonrisa también. Carlos sabe que él no puede llegar a los labios de su novia así que le dice al chico que le ayudaría, que no se esforzara mas. Cuando dijo eso, yo sabía que el final estaba cerca. Ella seguía gritando, y Carlos cogió su pelo rubio por las puntas para que ella levantara la cabeza. Con un movimiento rápido y limpio de su espada Carlos le cortó la cabeza mientras el novio esperaba sobre la mesa con los ojos cerrados, esperando aquel beso final. Carlos llevaba la cabeza a la mesa y yo me alegré de que ya no pudiera gritar más. Carlos dijo al chico que se preparara para recibir el beso y acercó la cabeza para que los labios coincidieran. Él empezó a besarle a su novia pero pronto se dio cuenta de la poca reacción de ella, abriendo los ojos, vio su novia decapitada con Carlos riéndose detrás. Eso era la señal para que el corazón del chico, que había pasado por tanto, finalmente decidiera despedirse de este mundo para que pudiera estar con ella de nuevo en el siguiente. Ya era hora de prepara el baño de ácido.



Carlos usaba su propia solución que era capaz de destruir un cuerpo humano en menos de seis horas. Después se podía usar también con pesticida efectiva, la verdad es que a veces no me puedo creer la suerte que tengo en poder trabajar con tal genio. Había que tener mucho cuidado al tocarla ya que una simple gota podía hacer mucho daño, así que siendo listos robamos unos monos bastante monos de un central nuclear que sirven para este tipo de trabajo. Yo me ocupaba de los baños, Carlos decía que el olor le hacía sentir mal, y él limpiaba la sangre de la mesa. Le gusta ver los restos de los pasos de su arte, cada trozo de cuerpo haciéndole recordar cada momento de su vocación. Los baños tardaban veinte minutos en prepararse, pensamos en descuartizar los cuerpos para facilitar el trabajo, pero no había prisa, teníamos comida preparada para después y, por supuesto un suministro de cerveza y drogas para hacer las seis horas pasar volando. Luego solo sería cuestión de fertilizar las plantas con los restos y volver a la capital para cobrar.

Introducimos los cuerpos en los baños, y después cerramos la zona con cinta industrial. Parecían contentos en sus baños, intentamos ponerle la cabeza de la chica en su lugar habitual pero siempre se caía. Carlos empezó a reírse al verme enfadarme con ella. Me moría por un pitillo pero Carlos insistía en que terminara el trabajo antes. Unos duros minutos después y ya por fin me podía relajar. ¡Vaya día! Encendimos la televisión y nos alegramos de saber que hay un partido de fútbol. Ahora apetece una cervecita y no pierdo tiempo en buscarlas. No hay nada mejor que sentarse con una cerveza bien fría después de un día complicado en la oficina. Cada veinte minutos voy a echar un vistazo a los baños para asegurarme de que todo va bien, no es necesario pero no me gusta dejar la profesionalidad a un lado. Carlos aprovecha la tranquilidad para llamar a su hija y preguntarle como le ha ido el día. No teníamos hambre aun debido a la coca así que nos quedamos en el sofá, viendo el partido y hablando sobre mil cosas. No esperábamos que pasara nada más.

Diez minutos después, sonó el móvil de Carlos. Esto no era normal. Era su móvil de trabajo y solo lo tenían los que no iban a querer ningún contacto con nosotros en un día como hoy. La voz del jefe habló.

"ABORTAR MISION" Dijo. Después había una pausa.

"Ya es un poco tarde. Se pusieron bordes, ya están en el baño de ácido". Respondió Carlos haciendo que pareciera mas bonito que había sido.

"Vaya par de gillipollas" El jefe no lo veía de la misma manera. "Teníamos información incorrecta sobre los objetivos. El padre de ella es Gobernador de un sitio de mierda en los Estados Unidos. Tiene contactos en la FBI. Por favor, dime que estás de broma".

"Ya te dije que es demasiado tarde. No te preocupes, dentro de dos horas serán abono para las plantas. No pasa nada. Solo falta cobrar." Carlos no tenía el don de la diplomacia.

"No os movéis. Vamos a inspeccionar el lugar." EL jefe colgó. No tardarían mucho en llegar. Solo había un camino hacia la capital así que no nos quedaba otra que esperar. El jefe no parecía muy contento con lo ocurrido pero lo hecho estaba hecho, no podíamos hacer nada. La evidencia pronto desaparecería. Solo sería cuestión de organizarnos entre nosotros para que nadie lo supiera. Carlos podría hablar con el jefe, Carlos lo arreglaría todo.

No había pasado mucho tiempo cuando oímos por primera vez el sonido de los motores de los vehículos subiendo el paso de montaña. Carlos me dijo que tenía un plan que nos sacaría de esta. Solo tenía yo que seguirle. Él siempre cuidaba de mi, así que cortamos unas rayas de tamaño extremo para que tuviésemos fuerzas para afrontar la situación y nada mas que tomar un buen trago de tequila, ya estaba allí el jefe. No parecía llevar un plus para nosotros dentro del maletín. Yo me dejé totalmente en las manos de Carlos, quien se puso a hablar.

"Intenté pararle." Me señaló a mí. "Se volvió loco. Se puso salvaje con ella, él quería violarla, le dijo que era la cosa más guapa que jamás había visto y que tenía que disfrutar de ella. Yo intenté pararle, me tienen que creer, pero dijo que mataría a mi hijita si no me apartaba de su camino. ¿Qué podía hacer? No se sabe de qué es capaz. Me obligó a matarles y si no, acabo yo en el baño." Carlos le da una mirada al jefe que le ruega que se lo crea. Carlos sabía que hacía, no me gustaba el camino que tomaba el tema, pero seguía confiando en que Carlos me sacase de ésta.



"Además me incita a hacer otras cosas, otros crímenes, cosas horribles que después me siento sucio. Se alimenta de la energía de ver a sus sujetos hacer cosas malvadas. No quiero hacer las cosas que me pide, pero me controla. Quiero estar libre de este demonio." Continuó Carlos

Jamás lo había pensado así. Quizás Carlos es la persona normal y yo provoqué estas cosas en él. Joder! así el malo soy yo. No me había dado cuenta del daño y sufrimiento que le había hecho pasar durante todos estos años. El jefe me miró. Me sentía mal por Carlos, yo lo que yo había creado.

"Así que tú eres el villano de esta obra." El jefe parecía aceptar la explicación de Carlos. "La chica tenía un guardaespaldas y te vio, pero afortunadamente su coche no arrancaba y te perdieron. Las autoridades han sido advertidas pero siempre puedo usar mi influencia para que condenen a otro. Carlos, te creo hijo, pero me tienes que demostrar que lo que dices es la verdad. Mete a esta escoria en el baño con ellos. Hazlo y ven conmigo. ¿Lo harás por mí? El jefe pregunta a Carlos.

Carlos dice que sí, Será su liberación, libre de mí. Yo le he hecho sufrir con mis antojos perversos y ahora puede andar libre. Uno de los cohortes del jefe pone una pistola en mi cabeza pero no es necesario. Ando con Carlos hacia uno de los baños y me pongo delante mientras Carlos añade más ácido. Se despide de mí y con un empujón me caigo dentro del baño. El dolor es intenso por un lado, y liberador por otro, pero aún así consigo darle las gracias antes de que mi cabeza vaya debajo del agua.



# Neurosis de Guerra

## Spanish Version of Shellshock

No tenía muchas esperanzas puestas en la cita. Con eso quiero decir que tenía más esperanzas que nunca puestas en ella, yo sabía cómo era, se aproximaba a la perfección, lo tenía todo, ese nivel de perfección raramente visto en mujer u hombre. El cuerpo no era perfecto, eso destruiría la magia, algo que se podía formar o mejorar no se puede considerar la perfección, sino algo parecido a un regalo divino, algo que nace para ser perfecto, eso es la perfección que ella posee. Además, los magníficos entremeses que son su belleza que se sirven antes del plato principal que es ella en persona, sólo existen para abrir el apetito, un apetito que nunca se satisfará. He aquí una mujer que puedo decir sin miedo a equivocarme que si me ofrecieran pasar el resto de mi vida con ella ahora mismo, mi única pregunta sería ¿Dónde firmo? Así que en ella, tenía puestas esperanzas. El problema era yo. No lograba entender por qué me había dicho que sí cuando le dije, con una torpeza poco vista fuera del circo, si quería ir a tomar algo. Desde el momento en que me dijo que sí, volví a analizar cada uno de mis defectos, haciéndome falta un cuaderno y lápiz para no perder la cuenta. No sabía yo dónde parar, los fallos, tanto físicos como personales sólo servían para hacerle parecer aún más perfecta. Mi corazón me dijo que no lo jodiera, pero en realidad me preguntaba cuánto tiempo haría falta antes de que empezara a excusarse y recordar el montón de ropa que tenía sin planchar.

Porque esto era una cita. De eso no había duda. Nos conocimos en una fiesta, ya hace dos semanas. Era amiga de una compañera de mi trabajo. La amiga me informó de que esta preciosa estaba soltera desde hace un par de meses debido al hecho de que su ex quería ser aficionado del Sevilla y del Betis a la vez. Esta noticia me hizo sonreír un poco, no por el sufrimiento de ella, pero siempre es grato saber que por allí anda uno que es más gillipollas que tú. Yo me conformo con estar entre los diez primeros. Después interrogué a su amiga Sandra



en la oficina, aunque estaba seguro de recordar cada palabra de la conversación que mantuvimos (la cual duró tres minutos y cuarenta y seis segundos). También recuerdo cómo intentaba llegar a la meta crucial de cuatro minutos con comentarios superficiales sobre las impresoras o los microondas. Aún así pasó algo mágico durante la conversación, como si ella quisiera que le hablara de cosas más profundas, como si me retara a cautivarla y mientras lo cagaba, ella seguía escuchándome, quizás convencida de que podía darle más. Sin embargo, mi pequeño cerebro no era capaz de asimilar esta información a tiempo, y unos segundos después la fiesta se llevó mi sueño y una vez más la pobre estaba rodeada de idiotas con líneas de usar y tirar, un grupo de ingratos que ni siquiera merecían respirar el mismo aire que ella, pero lo respiraban, y juntos, y yo no. Media hora después me recompuse del palo y fui a buscarla, pero ya era tarde. El mundo había acabado, así, sin avisos, la vida humana se había convertido en una cosa superflua porque yo no era capaz de usar magia contra la magia. La única opción que me quedaba era apoderarme de una botella de algo fuerte y buscar refugio. Lo encontré en los brazos de una peluquera cuya idea de conversación estimulante era imitar los expulsados del gran hermano. Para que dejara de hablar, le metí la lengua en su boca, mi única preocupación siendo si ella tendría suficiente dinero en metálico para pagarse el taxi a su casa.

Entonces se podía decir que era algo sorprendente saber que la amiga de Sandra me había mencionado, y encima de forma positiva. Después me enteré de que Sandra era partidaria de traducciones liberales y las palabras reales de la divina fueron "que él parecía tan torpe e incómodo, que me despertó el interés." Sigo adorando la segunda parte de esa frase, sólo tengo problemas con la parte de antes de la coma. Entonces empecé a convencerme, no todas quieren un James Bond, no dicen que las mujeres son capaces de mirar más allá de lo físico, claro que muchos de nosotros caemos en ese obstáculo, lo que tenemos que hacer es sacar partido de nuestras virtudes. Enormemente aliviado con este descubrimiento, me prometí hacerlo en el momento que las encontrara.

Bueno, pues quien dice que los milagros no existen miente; Sandra le pasó un mensaje a su amiga y aceptó quedar conmigo un viernes. Este viernes. Hemos quedado en un bar pijo en la zona de Londres donde te cobran en los servicios según la cantidad de orina que expulsas, la verdad es que no sé por qué he escogido ese sitio. ¿Para impresionarla? Alguien así no se deja impresionar con cosas tan frívolas. Ella va a pensar si pago casi diez libras por una copa de vino que me puede costar tres la botella en el súper que no podrá resistir mis avances. Sabía que lo estaba cagando antes de llegar, pero al mismo tiempo sabía que era mejor que llevarla a mi bar de siempre, con los amigos que tengo.

Así que ahora es viernes, voy tarde, en parte porque he necesitado tres páginas para decir que he conocido a una chica, pero no os puedo culpar. Hemos quedado a las siete y cuarto. Una hora curiosa para quedar, demasiada exacta. Demasiada cerca de ahora. Me tengo que poner en marcha. He elegido un armario informal para esta noche, no demasiado elegante pero tampoco zarrapastroso, lo bueno de ser hombre es que uno se puede arreglar en nada y el uniforme es casi igual en todos lados. Mi ropa es como la ropa de los demás, no quiero ponerme ropa que hace que destaque, porque no quiero destacar, a veces es más fácil ser del montón. Además, tengo que coger un taxi que atraviesa la mitad de la metrópolis y entonces ahora necesito la asistencia del tráfico para ayudar mi causa. También estoy nervioso porque me he tomado una copa de vino para tranquilizarme, y después una segunda, para, bueno, tranquilizarme más. Ahora es imprescindible que llegue antes para que pueda pedirme otra copa. Si llego y ella está allí y mi boca huele a vino, pues más bien se puede decir buenas noches, pero si llego antes y me tomo tres sorbitos ella no puede saber nunca cuánto ha pasado por mis labios, siempre que no me tome siete copas y estoy allí cantando Frank Sinatra encima del piano. Así cuando le doy un besito en la mejilla, ella me puede preguntar qué he pedido y luego comentar sobre mi buen gusto. Otro problema si ella llega antes es que puede pensar que vengo del pub y que no tengo ganas. La verdad es que es un campo de minas y mientras me subo al taxi mi mayor deseo es que pongan mini-bares en los taxis londinenses. El estrés empieza a estar demasiado latente en mi cuerpo cuando, a un kilómetro del bar, el tráfico se paraliza, son las siete y once. Estoy condenado. Ella tiene pinta de ser puntual, se le nota en los codos. Una vez más ésta, como todas las oportunidades que he tenido, se va por el camino de siempre.

Llego. Son las siete y dieciséis. Ella está allí. Quizás lo mejor sería darme la vuelta y salir para preparar mi muerte triste y solitaria. Me lo pienso cuando me doy cuenta de que no es ella. ¡Sigo vivo! Dos segundos después el bolsillo vibra y me muero de nuevo. Un mensaje. Claro. Empezará con algo como "Lo siento mucho pero" y después se inserta una excusa adecuada. Leí su mensaje, sí empezó con lo de lo siento pero después del pero (el pero mas feliz de mi vida) el mensaje seguía "tráfico una pesadilla. Espero llegar pronto. Besos. x x." Que SMS mas bueno, quería enmarcarlo. Quería enseñárselo a todos en el bar. Y besos, en plural, el doble de uno. Las matemáticas no mienten. Me busqué un lugar en la barra y me pedí otro vino (¿alguien puede decir que no me lo merezco?) y un agua con gas, por si acaso. Bebo el agua hasta que llegue ella y después me deshago del agüita. Ahora yo controlo la arena de combate.



Sólo cuando me senté y podía respirar tranquilo me di cuenta de que había consumido más de la mitad de una botella de vino. La idea era de que las uvas combatieran contra mis nervios. Ahora, teníamos otro invitado en la mesa, mi paranoia. Un invitado no deseado, como gorrion en la feria. Igual yo pienso que estoy siendo entrañable, encantador, mientras ella piensa que estoy con un ciego y un poco insoportable. Si intento remediarlo por ponerme serio, las posibilidades de una reunión exitosa se reducen. La clave está en yo poder hacer mi actuación de siempre, si es así, puede que me funcione. Aun así, empecé a odiar el mundo, toda la tecnología en este planeta y no pueden inventar una pastilla que te "desemborracha" cuando has bebido por error. Me encantaría volver a la primera copa. ¿Por qué es el mundo tan cruel? Mientras busco la respuesta, veo que ha entrado. Tiene un aspecto espectacular, perfección sin esfuerzo lo voy a llamar yo a partir de ahora. Me levanto, casi tiro la mesa al suelo mientras intento sonreírle sin parecer estreñido. Me da dos besos, ¡Muy europeo, así me gusta! Me repito a mí mismo que tengo que estar tranquilo, me coge de la mano y de inmediato me siento más tranquilo.

"Siento llegar tarde. He tenido un día de perros en el curro, pero ya ha terminado y no me importa decirte que me apetecen unas cuantas de esas copas de vino, con tu permiso, claro." ¡Vaya manera de empezar! Lo único que yo tenía que hacer era esperar a que ella pasara mis niveles de intoxicación y todo el terreno sería mío. Siempre cabía la posibilidad de que había crecido en una isla cerca de la costa escocesa donde aprenden a beber güisqui con tres años pero hasta ahora los dioses me habían sonreído y confiaba en que seguían haciéndolo. Pedimos una botella de vino y charlamos. Normalmente en estas situaciones la conversación está un poco artificial y parece que todo ha sido sacado de un buscador de Internet cuando el usuario ha puesto "como tener una buena cita" en el campo de búsqueda. Con ella no era así, la conversación fluía con la misma facilidad que el vino que bebíamos. Ella se rió de algunos de mis chistes pero al mismo tiempo me lo dijo cuando apestaban. Hablamos de tonterías superficiales pero cambiando para exponer nuestros sentimientos más profundos sobre el espíritu humano sin perder el ritmo de la conversación, Fuimos sinceros, no hacía falta inventarse nada, parecía que este momento duraría para siempre. Después de la segunda botella de vino no sabía si los doce grados de alcohol habían puesto la sonrisa en mi cara, o simplemente era la vida misma.

Se decidió que íbamos a comer algo. Ella decía que le apetecía comida italiana. Soy de la filosofía de que la comida italiana ofrece varias posibilidades para quedar fatal al mismo tiempo que decorar la camisa con salsa boloñesa. Aún así le dije que me parecía una idea es-

pléndida. Pediría una calzone para limitar el desorden. Comíamos mientras seguíamos hablando, a veces me preguntaba si ella se preguntaría porqué no intentaba entrarle aunque por alguna razón que no os puedo explicar ella parecía adoptar una postura casi asexual en ese momento-a pesar de ser la criatura más hermosa que jamás había caminado por este planeta-y no era capaz de pensar en ella de esa manera. Ahora se acercaba ese momento post-restaurante que presentaría un problema. Mientras nos tomábamos los cafés, empezaron a sudarme las manos y maquinaba la siguiente jugada. Podía invitarla a mi casa, ir a otro sitio pero al final opto por algo que jamás diría a mis amigos: un paseo. Ella confirmó la sabiduría de esta idea y nos echamos a andar por las calles de Londres, calles que he visto miles de veces pero nunca me han parecido tan bonitas. Ni Roma ni París podían ofrecer el mismo aspecto que aquel barrio londinense en aquel momento. Sabía que se acercaba el final, pero seguro de que sólo era el final del primer capítulo y que habría más, mucho más. Mi trabajo había sido de calidad. La metí en un taxi y la vi desaparecer, consumida por la noche urbana y únicamente volví a la realidad cuando un segundo taxi casi me atropella; a pesar del flirteo con la muerte, aproveché el estacionamiento inesperado para montarme e irme feliz a mi casa. Iba en el taxi cuando recibí otro mensaje, esta vez la paranoia no estaba presente y lo leí como un adulto. Era ella, preguntándome si tenía planes para mañana y si no, pues que la recogiera sobre las doce. ¿planes? Solamente vivir el segundo día de mi vida después de treinta años de espera. Seguro que el taxista pensaba que me faltaba un tornillo por la cara que se me quedó, pero me daba igual. Nada más importaba.

Me quedé dormido sin problemas y me desperté al día siguiente como si sólo hubiera bebido un zumo de zanahorias la noche anterior. Casi bailé hasta el cuarto de baño, haciendo unos movimientos que harían que mis amigos cuestionaran ciertas tendencias. Sin embargo, las opiniones de los demás no tenían lugar en el nuevo palacio que era ahora mi vida. Me dije que tenía que tranquilizarme, las cosas no iban tan deprisa. Pero mi cabeza no me hizo caso y me preguntaba cuándo la Catedral de Londres estaría disponible para la boda. Algo está mal en el agua de la ducha, me limpian pero me hace pensar que igual ella es una buena persona, quizás un poco aburrida, aún peor, le doy pena y piensa que me vendría bien que me sacasen por ahí. La boda se cancela. Además de estos pensamientos tan negros, escucho el sonido de un mensaje en el móvil. Tenía que saber el contenido, a pesar de tener más champú en los ojos que en el pelo, aunque ya sabía qué iba a poner, que lo sentía pero ayer había bebido y la verdad es que prefería ir de compras con Idi Amin y Hitler que pasar cinco minutos más conmigo. Intenté salirme de la ducha, con la prisa que tenía se me olvidaba de que uno suele empezar a andar cuando las dos piernas están en el suelo. Me caí y me di con la cabeza en el lavabo. No podía ver si me había lesionado así que finalmente encontré el pomo y abrí la puerta pero sin



cambiar mi ubicación espacial y la puerta encontró el mismo lugar que me había dado con el lavabo.

El resto del viaje hacia el móvil, tres metros cuarenta y siete centímetros, pasó sin incidencias, ahora sólo tenía que leer el mensaje, pero como ya me habían matado por dentro, me daba igual. No pude evitar la risa con la generosa oferta de mi operadora de disfrutar de una tarifa nueva. Con la toalla y poca elegancia, me quito lo que puedo de champú y voy de nuevo hacia el baño. Dos segundos después hay otro mensaje, esta vez va a ser ella, lo sé, qué poco dura la alegría. Le doy a abrir mensajes pero cierro los ojos, no puedo leerlo, si no lo sé, no me puede hacer daño. Después de cuatro minutos así, me doy cuenta de que es una actitud que algunos podrían considerar infantil. Con una fuerza sobrehumana abro los ojos y leo el mensaje. Pone que me abrigue que hoy hace frío. Vuelvo a respirar. Me pregunto si puedo pasar tanto estrés cada vez que suene el teléfono, y la respuesta es, por ella, sí.

Decido coger el metro en vez de conducir por Londres. La conducción en esta ciudad ocupa un puesto en la página veintitrés de mis cosas favoritas. El problema de abrigarme hace que empiece a pasar calor en el metro. Esto hace que me ponga nervioso ya que veo la batalla sudor vs. Sanex siendo ganada por el primero. Recuerdo cuánto odio el transporte público aquí, algo extraño ya que cuando estoy en otros lugares me encanta probar sus sistemas de transportes y familiarizarme con el mapa del metro. Sé que con cada movimiento del tren me acerco más a ella, pero no dejo de pensar en el alcalde que ha hecho algo con los trenes para que no llegue. Me bajo del tren después de pasar siete años dentro y me doy cuenta de que no conozco esta parte de Londres. Supongo que eso, en resumen, es Londres, conoces la parte donde tú vives y luego la parte de los turistas, pero siempre pasas de esa parte porque está ya muy vista.

Normalmente no va conmigo preguntar por direcciones en la calle. Va en contra de mi filosofía sobre la vida y además los polis aquí los fines de semana son de un pueblo a cien millas de aquí, sólo vienen a por las horas extra. Sin embargo, decido arriesgarme ante tantas posibles catástrofes y pregunto a un señor mayor. Me mira como si le acabara de responsabilizar del holocausto y con un tono de repugnancia me dice que estoy en la calle que busco. Hay que reírse. Fui a llamar al timbre y me paré. ¿qué le iba a decir? ¿Cómo era mi guión? Nadie me lo había dado. Me habían dado esta misión sin la preparación adecuada. Delante me esperaba el

desastre y el fracaso. Resulta que era uno de esos timbres modernos que funcionan pulsándolo, cuando la fuerza del dedo llega a cierto punto, hace que suene. Ella contestó; ya era tarde, tendría que entrar.

Pero no entré. Me dijo que estaría conmigo en un momento; tuve ocasión de preguntarme la duración exacta de un momento y llegué a la conclusión de que era menos de tres minutos y treinta y cuatro segundos. ME saludó con un abrazo, me cogió de una forma rara por el codo y por último, dos besos. Ya todo valía la pena. No podía esperar más pero la ley europea pone de manifiesto que hasta que no me otorguen el estatus de novio y ligue oficial, los besos van para los mofletes, igual para mí, su tía y el resto de la población. Ella no parecía muy abrigada pero mantuve la boca cerrada.

"¿tienes hambre?" Me pregunta.

"Algo podía picar" Desde luego soy Cary Grant.

"¿Desayuno inglés con todo?" fueron las siguientes palabras en salir de su boca. ¿podría ser tan perfecta?

Me llevó a uno de sus lugares favoritos, cerca de su piso. Nos sentamos y me contó sus planes para el día. Su padre y ella eran socios del West Ham, pero ese día el padre no podía ir así que sobraba una entrada, y si me apetecía ir a ver el partido. Entraron miles de respuestas sarcásticas en mi cabeza pero me limité a decir que sí. Además, el rival era el Newcastle así que doble razón para hacerme del West Ham durante un día, o una vida, depende cuál dura más. Mientras ella comía morcilla me contaba su once histórico del West Ham, me costaba escucharla, no como a veces cuando te habla una chica y no escuchas porque no tienes ni el más remoto interés en la historia sobre las cortinas o lo que dijo Pepa en la boda de Pepe...pero mi mente no podía estarse quieta, hacía planes y preparaba nuestra vida juntos, no era como una chica, era como un colega, alguien con quien podría compartir un curry, y luego ver quién puede hacer el eructo más ruidoso.

Simplemente la miraba y mojaba la salchicha con la yema del huevo, la yema seguía líquida, claro, ella sólo podía llevarme a un sitio con yemas líquidas. A pesar de esto, empecé a



preocuparme, tenía que hacer un gesto romántico, si íbamos por el camino de coleguillas pues igual ella acaba pensando que solamente quiero que me preste su taladro-algo que estaba seguro de que tendría y sabría usar mejor que yo-. Así que le dije que iba guapísima y ella, en vez de sentirme incómoda, puso una cara horrible y me tiró una alubia a la cara. Me dijo que moviera el culo ya que siempre le gustaba tomar un par de pintas antes del partido. Para llegar al campo era un trabajo de ingenieros civiles en metro así que cogimos un taxi. Me di cuenta de que el taxi costó una libra menos de lo que hubiera tenido que pagar por la entrada, así que yo seguía ganando.

Encontramos un bar cerca del campo y nos tomamos una pinta muy merecida después de nuestro excelente trabajo. Me presentó a unos de sus amigos, me pregunté si era hooligan en secreto, pero esta gente parecía venir en paz. Ya sin el encubramiento de un vehículo, nos parecía de la peor educación no tomar una segunda pinta. La ideología del desayuno inglés sirve para estos momentos, actúa como una esponja sobre todo lo que entre en el estómago. Durante mi estancia en Londres me sorprendía no haber visitado más campos de la capital, siendo del Sunderland y dado nuestro romance continuo con el descenso. Prefería guardarlo para la vuelta a casa, y verlos en su estadio, como debe ser. La buena noticia era que las Urracas perdieron, durante los ochenta y siete minutos aburridos sin goles ni acción, hablamos de todo, desde los movimientos de Johann Cruyff hasta Nietzsche, desde trapos de cocina hasta el marco para una sociedad menos corrupta. Fue el mejor partido de fútbol que jamás he visto y sin embargo no recuerdo nada de él.

Después del partido volvimos al bar y tomamos dos pintas más, llegando a la hora del pavo con muchas ganas. La música que sonaba de fondo parecía formar la perfecta banda sonora para nuestra película. ¿Había sido así de feliz antes? Quizás sí, pero ella tenía el don de hacerme olvidar todo lo que había pasado antes, incluso de querer hacerlo. Sabía que tenía la memoria de antes en algún lugar del disco duro, pero tendría que volver a instalarlos en otro momento.

Salimos del bar y era justo decir que íbamos un poco bebidos y me preguntó qué quería que hiciésemos después. Le dije que cualquier cosa me parecía buena en su compañía. Acabamos en su piso, comiendo pizza y poniendo nuestras canciones favoritas con referencias menores a su importancia sociológica y antropológica. Me gustó estar en su casa en vez de la mía, siempre me han encantado las casas de las mujeres que viven solas; tienen un aura especial, y los pisos de los hombres nunca huelen así. Me sentía bien, protegido, y me querían quedar allí para siempre. En algún momento, a pesar de la borrachera, sabía que tendríamos que hacer

frente al "asunto". Mi cabeza evaluaba la situación y se decidió que lo mejor sería algo torpe en la oscuridad con la excusa de la bebida; así, la siguiente vez sería perfecta. Si estuviera sobrio probablemente estaría demasiado nervioso, así que la excusa pre-fabricada me venía bien.

La próxima vez que tuve ocasión de pensar era ya las seis de la mañana y estábamos en la cama con la mitad de la ropa que llevábamos al entrar en su casa. Llegué con dificultad al cuarto de baño y vacié la vejiga. Enjuagué la boca con un líquido de menta y me regalé dos pastillas de paracetamol. Sin querer despertarla, volví a meterme en la cama; ella hizo un ruido que parecía que mi presencia no le causaba náusea, así que tomé una posición detrás de ella y me dormí de nuevo.

No participamos plenamente del domingo por la mañana. Me alegré de que a las diez de la mañana no dijera nada de ir a misa. Era cerca de la una cuando nos levantamos y me informó de que tenía resaca. Nunca me había dado cuenta de lo divertido que pueden llegar a ser las resacas. Casi me puse triste cuando el café, la tostada y más paracetamol me hicieron sentir normal de nuevo. Nos quedamos en plan vago en su piso, viendo la tele, no haciendo nada, me preguntaba si era hora de irme, pero mi presencia parecía no molestarle demasiado. Me quedé dormido en el sofá y ella preparó pasta, era una cosa sencilla pero estaba seguro de que era el momento de más felicidad que un ser humano jamás había experimentado con otro. Al final el día pues sí tenía que terminar. Nos dijimos cosas muy pastelosas que os voy a hacer sufrir por repetirlas aquí, y me fui a la estación de metro. Me dijo que llevaba en su coche pero fui caballero y le dije que no hacía falta, que otra ocasión sería...

Hicimos planes, pero tendría que ser fuerte ya que se iba de viaje toda la semana con la empresa. Se disculpó. No me lo podía creer. Se disculpó por tener que hacer su trabajo y se preocupaba de que eso no fuera con mis planes. Me dijo que se volvía el jueves y entonces vería mi recompensa. Intenté sobrevivir la semana pero el periodo fue el más infeliz de mi vida. Mis compañeros de trabajo probablemente preferían el inmaduro acerbo que ocupaba mi lugar antes en vez de estar en alerta permanente de un posible suicidio. Solo podía decirles que este mundo era tan cruel.

Me dijo que había planeado algo especial. Me llamó todas las noches después de terminar los ponentes de su congreso hablábamos hasta que uno de los se quedase sin batería.



Ojalá pudiera grabar nuestras conversaciones para volver a escucharlas repetidamente, pero aún así, sabía que se guardaban en alguna parte de mi cabeza. En los ratos de pensamiento claro intentaba encontrar algo de ella que no me gustaba pero no pude nombrar ni una cosa. Mientras tanto, me convencía que estaba elaborando ya una lista enorme de mis fallos. Por fin llegó el jueves, y mi primer pensamiento? Pues que ya se habría dado cuenta de que se metía en muchos problemas y se acabaría antes de la hora del té inglés.

La única información que me dio era que debía estar en una parte de Londres que se llamaba Marble Arch a las nueve de la mañana. Desde allí, íbamos a coger el primer autobús que viéramos y que nos gustara. Yo esperaba que fuera uno de estos antiguos que se podía subir y bajar desde la parte de atrás. Después, cuando viéramos una estación de trenes que nos pareciera interesante, nos bajábamos allí para seguir la aventura. Me dijo que tenía grandes planes para el día pero que no me diría más y sólo se reía cuando se lo preguntaba.

Un poco después de las nueve cogimos un autobús con dirección Hackney, el famoso barrio de los taxis negros. Pasamos por la estación ferrocarril de King's Cross pero dijo que era demasiado grande, demasiado obvio. Llegamos a Euston y nos vimos con mucha gente que podía hacer que los planes se atrasasen. Seguro que estarían de huelga o algo por el estilo. Diez minutos más en el autobús y ya empezábamos a aburrirnos, así que tomamos la decisión de bajarnos en la siguiente parada que tuviera estación de trenes cerca. Fui a darle al botón para avisarle al conductor de que queríamos bajar pero mi dedo nunca llegó. De repente oí un ruido infernal y el autobús temblaba. Tardé diez segundos en darme cuenta de que ella no estaba conmigo, y de que debería ir a buscarla. La escena era incomprensible, el techo del autobús no estaba, había mucho humo pero a pesar de ello, pude ver su cara de nuevo. El principal problema en aquel momento era que su cabeza estaba en el suelo pero no unida a su cuerpo, que aún seguía perdido. Me di cuenta de que había sido una explosión pero la realidad me vino cuando la vi así en el suelo. Pensé que sería de utilidad investigar en que estado había quedado mi cuerpo y es un momento duro cuando alguien tiene que prepararse para echar de menos sus piernas en esta vida, y con el último esfuerzo que me quedaba, logré tocarle la cabeza por última vez en esta vida, mientras íbamos haciendo planes para la próxima.



Y DURANTE UN MOMENTO EL REINO ANIMAL  
ESTUVO EN PAZ Y LOS PLANETAS SE ALINEARON  
PARA OFRECER ESPERANZA A LA HUMANIDAD  
HASTA QUE ..... STEVEN MALDITO SEGAL

El perro mordió al gato.

El gato adoptó su posición habitual para devolverle el favor, preparando sus garras para un ataque feroz con la intención de infligir aún más daño al ojo izquierdo del canino, ya bien marcado con cicatrices de luchas anteriores, cuando se paró al tener una idea revolucionaria.

-¿Por qué?- preguntó el gato.

-¿Por qué qué?- respondió el perro. No había sido adiestrado para contestar cuestiones existenciales.

-¿Por qué te tengo que arañar?- Tú me mordiste entonces ¿debo seguir el juego? - O sea, me muerdes porque el bípedo se enfada y te da una patada. Antes de eso no había hecho nada para perturbar tu día; de hecho recibiste mi más cordial saludo después del desayuno - el gato le miró de forma suplicante al perro.

- Lo cual fue correspondido. No sé porqué las cosas pasan así pero es la naturaleza. No te veo quejándote cuando te toca meter tus dientes en el ratón. Creo que es una especie de cadena. Empieza con el humano, que padece cambios de humor, normalmente a las siete de la tarde los domingos. Entonces, apaga la radio,



blasfema y me pateo. Me enfado y te busco. Que quede bien claro que no tengo nada en contra del gato y su envidiable independencia; me voy dos calles para atrás y me entran escalofríos. Después tú buscas venganza con el ratón. En realidad, si alguien tiene razones para quejarse es él, al ser el más pequeño de nuestro hogar, se lleva la peor parte. Ten en cuenta esto, mi querido colega felino, la patada del humano es molesta, mi mordisco te causa dolor, pero tendrías que tener muy mala suerte para que aquello te llevara de estos lares a destiempo. Pero, ¿el ratón? Debe ser diestro y ágil, tener ojos donde según mis estudios los ratones no los tienen. Cualquier contacto en serio con tus dientes afilados acabaría con él. Ya sabes lo que tiene que aguantar el pobre, y la mujer con su hombro así, sin mencionar los pequeños -. El gato ponderó la aseveración elocuente del perro, mientras el ratón, oliendo la tregua, se asomó a contribuir.

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- Claro, sufro más que nadie. He visto pérdidas. Mi hermano, el primo Felipe. Y tantos otros soldados valientes caídos en esta batalla fútil. Entonces, yo digo también, ¿Por qué?- y miró al perro.

- No sé por qué pensáis que debería saber la respuesta. Después de todo eso, solo soy un perro, no es que tengamos fama de ser los más brillantes de la clase. ¿Pregúntaselo al maldito gato!

El gato aceptó el reto y preparó su discurso. ¿Qué tal si, decimos ¡BASTA YA! Podríamos vivir en armonía juntos. No tenemos que seguir su ejemplo. Podríamos ser pioneros para animales en todo el mundo, luchando pacíficamente para que nos respeten. ¿Quién sabe? Quizás aprendan de nosotros y podrían formar una sociedad nueva mirando el futuro -. El ratón estaba de acuerdo en que estaban a punto de cambiar la historia.

- Solo hace falta un alma valiente dispuesto a arriesgar su vida en nombre de la causa. Nuestro sufrimiento será recordado por generaciones de animales y hu-

manos. Quizás muramos en el intento, pero no dejarán de gritar nuestros nombres -. terminó.

- Desafortunadamente, olvidáis una cosa .- interpuso el perro. – Estaría encantado de firmar un pacto de no agresión con vosotros, pero el problema es el humano. Es imposible comunicarse con él. Entonces significaría una cosa, más violencia para mí, y el fin de la violencia para vosotros. No tocaría al gato después de leer ese libro sobre Egipto, ¿y el ratón? El humano intenta insultar su inteligencia con ese pedazo de queso podrido en la trampa oxidada, sin saber que el ratón tiene un atajo a la cocina para hacerse una buena cesta de navidad -. El perro guiñó un ojo al ratón.

¿Cómo lo habéis sabido? Intento ser discreto y uso las pequeñas tijeras que me presta el gato para no dejar marcas de dientes en el queso. Claro que las lavo antes de devolvérselas. No soy una rata ¡por el amor de Dios! -.

En ese momento recordaron la época de la rata y como lucharon juntos para formar una unión sólida. Lamentablemente, con el paso del tiempo y los hombres en los monos rojos, volvieron a los antiguos hábitos.

El perro siguió – Quizás tengáis razón. Nos convertimos en ellos, materialistas, obsesionados con objetos, la marca pija de la comida, gambas para el gato, cestas cómodas, incluso chalecos de Lacoste para el invierno. Somos versiones cuadrúpedas de ellos. Me ofrezco para la causa. Me pegarán pero no me encogeré. Llevaré a la basura los accesorios de estampa escocesa. ¡Seré vuestra liberación! – El gato y el ratón gritaron animadamente. Esto atrajo la atención del humano, quien tiró una lata al perro. Estoicamente, se quedó inmóvil mientras la lata rebotó en su cabeza.



- Impresionante – le animó el gato. El ratón casi tenía lagrimas en los ojos y puso un trozo pequeño de bistec para curarle el ojo.

- No será fácil – dijo el ratón.

- Mi espíritu es fuerte -. respondió el perro – y cuando la batalla sea ganada, corearán mi nombre. Entonces tendré mi recompensa. Al gato todo esto le parecía exagerado pero se calló.

- Debemos celebrarlo. El humano duerme, ¡veamos la tele! proclamó el ratón. Los tres subimos al sofá para quitarle al humano el mando mientras roncaba. Vieron un anuncio de Coca-Cola y recordaron las cosas que tendría que sacrificar durante la lucha. Quizás no sea para mucho tiempo, pensaron. Después de los anuncios empezó una peli de Steven Segal, el favorito del perro. El gato odiaba ese retrato falso de la policía e intentó quitarle el mando al perro. El gato dijo que echaban La Voz en otro canal pero tanto el perro como el ratón dijeron de ninguna manera. Empezaron a luchar para tener control del mando, lo cual despertó al humano quien tiró otra lata a la cabeza del perro.

Sin pensar, el perro mordió la pierna del gato quien de forma refleja se lanzó sobre el ratón. Con una pelín de suerte el ratón pudo llegar al suelo y entrar en su agujero para salvarse.