

THE CONTENTS OF MY BLOG

This is the contents of my blog (The Notepad, formerly other names that I can't remember offhand). I started it in 2011 as a method for spewing my thoughts. I also did some mini-series of stories if I had the time or felt like it.

Dylan Thompson

On the internet, no-one can hear you scream. Or, everyone can hear you scream, but no-one gives a shit.



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The Mystery Box

Stratford sat dejectedly in a banker's office. How long for, though, was a piece of string question. Unimaginatively designed, a boring, white paint covered the walls of the office, which were otherwise empty. Lit through commercial standard halogen bars mounted to the ceiling, Stratford himself sat in a low-cost, low-productivity, MDF desk right in the center of the room. He had thought being a banker in the financial district of London was stylish. Glamorous. He had thought wrong. He looked out across the sprawling city below – the people, the traffic ... Yet here he was in a blank, empty office, waiting for his last client of the day. Not a busy day, although he'd say it had been, just for show. The client knocked at the door and let himself in. His visitor tag said 'Jones'. So that was his name, or at least the name he had given to the girl on reception.

After all the boring 'hi' stuff, the interview could begin properly.

"I'm afraid, due to the current economic climate, we've done away with interest, and instead offer various rates of 'intrigue'".

"That's ... interesting," Jones began, thoughtful. Jones was poised to leave, pointing towards the door. He continued, "What can you tell me about the accounts?" Then he turned around. His mind had changed.

"Well, the low-intrigue account comes with a cheque book, online banking and whatever's in the Mystery Box," Stratford said while reaching under the desk. Carefully, he placed an ornate box on the table, which then became the most interesting thing in the room (or intriguing, if you prefer).

"And the ..." Jones paused, searching for the words, "higher intrigue account?"

"Why, what have you heard?"

"Uh, nothing? You just mentioned it?" Jones' look of confusion told Stratford he had perhaps gone too far. Now he'd started, he had to carry on going. This was only build-up, the context to the one-liner.

"No, I haven't. I haven't said a word since you arrived". Stratford was beginning to have fun now. The big reveal would be worth it (for him).

"I – I'll take the low intrigue account, thanks". Stratford had been handed a blubbing wreck who didn't even know what was coming. Just a little disappointing, but he'd do. This is how Stratford worked – bring someone in, give them something to do, and get something to do in return. Stratford was dangerous when bored and he was bored now. Well then, I'll get you set up and you can look in the mystery box and see what you've won". Stratford passed over the box, which was quickly opened.

"A bloody knife! What's a bank got a bloody knife for?"

"Correction: a knife covered in blood and your fingerprints."

"But why?" Jones was confused and paranoid now.

"Don't ask me; I don't know what's happened to the Bolivian ambassador." Stratford was pleased, the entertainment value was already high with Jones. He was reacting exactly how you shouldn't.

"What has happened to the Bolivian ambassador?"

"Don't look at me; he hasn't been stuffed in the boot of my car." Stratford could only just keep himself from laughing.

"What do I do?" Desperate now, Jones' eyes were wild, and his voice pleading. Stratford didn't take the bait, he wasn't finished playing the game.

"You have thirty minutes to get to Hong Kong with a full beard, fake passport and working knowledge of Mandarin. Go!"

Stratford couldn't get up fast enough. By the time he had, Jones had gone from the room, leaving a faint trail of smoke out the door.

"I love having a bank, me," Stratford mused to himself. A well concealed lie; at the moment, he was satisfied.

Stratford switched his computer on and opened his email inbox, receiving a picture of Jones running out the front entrance to the tower. Printing off this image, he placed it in an empty picture frame on the wall. He stood back and admired it. Framed, in every sense of the word.

Now all Stratford had to do was dispose of the body of the Bolivian ambassador. All Jones had to do was run.

The phone rang, asking for Jones. Someone had missed his hurried exit.

"No-one called Jones here", said Stratford, "not anymore".

For Jones, the running had started, and his life had finished.

Thick Cloud With A Chance Of Acid Rain – A Discworld Fanfic

A man scurried out of the office of Lord Havelock Vetinari, not checking the door as it slammed shut behind him. Hands covering his face, he was grateful and relieved to have gotten away. I didn't wait long after that. But you never waited long to see Vetinari. Or you waited all day.

He came to the door, opening it gingerly after its recent slam-trauma and I was immediately surprised by both the office, and the man himself. Surprised by the man, a short, greying gentleman in a suit. Respectable. Professional. His office was surprising because a kitchen knife was embedded in the wall above his desk. He ushered me inside, sat me opposite him and said, "so you've heard rumours about me, have you?"

Of course he knew. Thunder crackled in the distance, and rain began to fall, fizzing gently on contact with the roof. Sitting calmly at this very desk, Vetinari would hear everything going on in the city through his many eyes and ears. Start a number of rumours about himself, and find out about the ones he had not. Because his multitude of eyes and ears knew what I wanted – which was scary – so did he. But none of his eyes and ears were as calm, collected and chillingly terrifying as the two just above his nose. He started talking – the interview had begun.

Shipped off to the Assassin's Guild, age 9, by his wealthy parents, the childhood of Havelock Vetinari took an 'unexpected' turn when it was revealed the Guild gave you an education, as well as teaching you how to kill people – a "fortunate and unusual coincidence". This time in the Guild made him so feared he only needed to tap the shoulder of Lord Winder, a ruler of the city, for him to die out of shock. After a relatively successful run in the Guild, Vetinari left, age 30, to continue travelling the Discworld. Prominent destinations in his travel included Uberwald, where he met a diplomat – Baroness von Uberwald, who taught him the ups and downs of politics, and the Counterweight continent, where he mined gold. However, he eventually returned to Ankh-Morpork and succeeded the Mad Lord Snapcase to rule the city.

He stops talking, and taps his nose with a forefinger, knowingly. I am disappointed that he will not elaborate on his rise to power which is, as far as I can tell, undocumented. Gradually, he carries on talking, changing the subject.

Vetinari's main philosophy is 'don't fix what ain't broken'. This is exemplified by the room we are in – an old but functional room that had served as his office for many years. Water dripped through a decent hole in the ceiling into a bucket on the floor. This bucket was midway through the decomposition process – it had been used to clean up acid rain many times. Unsurprisingly, Vetinari did not mind this, as long as you were able to work there. Leaks would be fixed by the end of the week, though. He believes people dislike change. His aim is to, where possible, avoid it.

Gazing out the window, he stops talking again. On the street below, a two-man fight has broken out. The Day Watch walk past, having just finished the mid-day patrol. Both men are arrested. Vetinari smiles to himself; when things become broken, they are fixed very quickly.

His attention shifts steadily back to me, and he carries on talking. "The other reason I've been in power so long, is that I ensure the other Guilds all hate each other more than they hate me". He hopes the city will remain as politically stable as it has been in recent times, for the foreseeable future. His tone while he says this suggests he will take personal steps to ensure this is the case.

Standing slowly and stretching, he informs me the interview is over. We walk back to the main entrance through a labyrinth of corridors. While we do this, he compares his rule to "a room full of people bickering and shouting at each other, and in the middle of it all, one man quietly doing his own thing".

You had to hand it to Lord Vetinari. If you didn't, he sent men to take it away.

Following a Pre-Walked Route

The yellow paper shone in September sunshine. It had to. Otherwise it wouldn't have caught the boy's eye. He didn't know names. Names weren't important. Names were never important when playing with people. Set up a piece of paper somewhere, wait for the first idiot to walk past and see it, then you're off. Because after that point they're in the game too. And they search up the clues, meaningless clues on the paper, and follow a trail that doesn't really exist, which for some reason he set up hours before, knowing it started and finished right here on this exact spot. He smiled to himself as the boy wandered away. The boy was holding a bottle of milk. Light Blue cap. After a time, he left also. He had to make sure the rest of the sequence was correct. It only worked if they got to the end. Getting lost halfway through wasn't an option.

The paper was confusing. What was it, and why was it there? He had only got to get milk, but somehow come back home with a renewed interest in the world. Laying it on the kitchen bench, he poured himself some cereal of some description. He didn't even notice what kind. He was just doing it to carry on some misguided routine. He noticed the yellow paper, seconds before it slid cleanly out of the cereal box and into his bowl. "Get milk" it said. But he'd just done that. So it was pointless. Discarding the outdated scrap of paper, he sat down to eat and mull over the other one. "Silo control room," it said. He ate the cereal, and grabbed his laptop from nearby. Running the phrase "Silo control room" through Google Maps, only one result showed. In the City.

The boy would follow clues, he seemed smart and interested. Or just plain bored. He was. So he laid the next five clues, all in sequence, all able to be followed, leaving a prize of sorts with each one, a piece of refill paper, a hairclip, a pen. Small, meaningless items. If the boy had a GPS, this would be no trouble at all. He had read about geo-caching, and thought it sounded a good idea. So he was testing it out. The final clue for the boy was placed just off the motorway. If he could get there, the final inconsequential prize would be delivered, direct to his door. Some people called him psychopathic. Never to his face. No-one ever saw his face, but he heard them say it. He'd heard the word stalker too. Couldn't see the problem.

The boy caught the bus into the City. It really wasn't hard. Get to Britomart, and you were in. Then it was simply a matter of aimless wandering. He'd made sense of the first clue, and his smartphone was turned on. This game would be easy. He thought. The next five clues were easy. They were just in different places around the city. But the seventh total clue kicked up some fuss. It said "scouts". That was it. All he got. He'd have to do research. So he sat down at Britomart, near a fast food outlet of some description (again, he didn't pay attention). He sat down in Britomart and he researched.

The final clue was laid. All was ready. If he got this right, he would receive his final prize. The most extravagant prize he could think of.

The boy stood up. The clue was at a Scouts' Hall, just off the motorway. Getting there was easy. The clue just said, "go home". The boy had no idea what the clue meant. He supposed people liked to die at home. The boy arrived at his house just after 6. A full day of following clues. As he descended the drive, he noticed the package on his doorstep. A bottle of milk. The way this whole thing had started. Except ...

"But, I only drink LIGHT blue". He heard it from the distance, and kicked himself. The game, however, was now complete. He walked away, now, satisfied. For the time being.

The boy was in bed. He didn't notice the shadow just outside his window.

Hit List

There was one inhabitant of the long room. He was settled in an armchair at the base of the corridor. Facing the door. Difficult. You would have to get to the man another way. But how? And then you notice the carefully laid brown sideboard laced with floral designs that could possibly be several hundred years old, that with just enough persuasion, would come cleanly off the wall, surely revealing something that was worth hiding.

You would then give it a go. Slowly edging the old wood along what seems to be a pre-cut track, the siding would roll away from a now-apparent opening. The opening gave way to a dark passage, the entrance covered in spider webs from years of neglect. You would carefully inch your way along the pitch-dark passageway, with absolutely no idea where you were going. But then you would see a dutifully lit panel in one of the walls further down the passage. Creeping carefully, but faster now, you would make your way over the hard metal floor of the passage, which could once have been a vent of some kind. If there was lighting, you would have seen the orb-shaped security camera directly above your now fully camouflaged body. It would pulsate with odd lights and beep occasionally, but so quietly you wouldn't hear it unless you were listening. You weren't and you had other things on your mind.

Then it flashed. You flatten yourself against the wall, relying on your stealth, and heavy black overcoat for protection against being seen. In your newly acquired vantage point, you rest for several minutes. Now that you think about it, you don't even know who this man is, what he wants, and - most important of all - whether he was the man you were sent here for. Now you think about it, you know nothing of this man. The thoughts are quickly shoved aside, like overdue bills, and you continue. Sounds from the outside world start to filter through the walls.

You must be close to the exterior of the large building. The wind is howling, as if it has some sort of grudge against the rest of the world, with the rain angrily countering this assault, beating hard against the roof. It could be hailing. But you can't tell. You slowly extract a long pipe from your robe. On close inspection, this pipe is thin, and hollowed in the middle. Perhaps most notably, it has spikes on all sides. Positioning yourself carefully, you use this pole to seamlessly remove the camera from the roof, and smash it against the wall. But you didn't take into account the thickness of the walls. The wall on the left hand side of the passage implodes, and you are now exposed to the wrath of the elements. The rain hits hard, soaking you in seconds. It's cold too, you notice, in the corner of your mind. But you keep moving.

Having achieved the task at hand, you work your way toward the lit panel. It is soaked from the rain, and freezing to the touch. You can faintly smell burning wire. You have to move quickly along the passage. Then you see the door that the panel clearly opened. You march through.

And then the wire that was burning steals your thunder. You lunge towards the man – exactly the one you wanted, coincidentally, and the whole building is lifted up, and caught in a massive explosion.

You don't survive.

The Castle

The sun had vanished beyond the blurred horizon hours ago. The old castle lay deserted, sprawling across its large plot of land, protective. In the strong wind, it creaked, as if to say “bring it”.

On closer inspection, the tall turrets were cracked, and heavily lined with use and age. Around the back of the castle grounds, facing towards the calm, impassive face of the ocean, a heavy wooden gate hung loose on rusting hinges. It creaked as it swung, colliding with its frame with a bang that could be heard over a kilometre away. The frame shuddered at the force of each blow.

A steel gate, set heavily into the surrounding tall iron palisade marked the official entrance into the property. From the gate, a twisting, darkened path led up to the massive oak doors of the building itself. The door opened to a courtyard, which housed many tall porcelain statues. A tall Remu stood in the centre of the courtyard, reaching its long arms towards the now-absent sun. The moon was high in the clear sky; however the whole castle was thickly blanketed in a heavy fog. It had been like this since morning. The courtyard led on to an ominous-looking set of stairs, which forked around a central spire like magnetic wire around a steel bar.

The group of children stared out over the sleeping city from a precarious balcony at the top of the staircase. Once, it had been a lookout. Now, the castle was only home to ghosts.

The kids walked back down the empty stairs to the forgotten courtyard. The moon caught a sword in its bright light as the kids passed. They hurried over to the shining weapon. After scouring the dusty ground nearby for several minutes, they found another. And then old helmets and armour were acquired, and put to use for the first time in centuries. For hours, the children played. Ducking, weaving, slashing, sword on sword, sword on armour, until, laughing and tired, they collapsed onto the ground.

They stayed there for several minutes, until, as they realized morning would come soon, they jumped off the hard, dusty ground, laid the old weapons and armour to rest, and moved back to homes that would be expecting them.

And, as the layers of dust consumed the building once more, and particularly old pieces crumbled to dust, time moved on.

The sun rose one ray at a time from behind the tall mountains surrounding the small village. The old castle lay, deserted, sprawling across its large plot of land, protective. In the beating winds, it shuddered.

Bush House

The sun seeped through the thick canopy of intertwined branches. Down below, in a crudely formed clearing, birds of yellow and red flittered between the lower boughs of the great trees, hopped from tree stump to tree stump, chirping and singing. In the midst of the flitting, an old haggard-looking man slowly and carefully opened the door to an unkempt, battered cottage. He took a heavy saw from its resting position against the cottage wall, and moved slowly towards one of the many stumps. He dropped to the ground with a groan, and slowly, meticulously, dissected a small round disc. He laid the saw on the ground, near to the tree.

"That'll be just about right," he said. He stood up slowly.

Scanning the murky green scene, the man felt the crisp early spring air, and smelt the freshly grass cuttings in a large mound off to the left, around the side of the hut. He shuffled back into the confines of his small, haphazard home with his small prize.

The cottage was low, barely taller than a standing man, and had been built years before. The carefully placed branches of the walls supported an expansive thatched roof. The building obviously hadn't been touched in several years, the walls were beginning to show cracks, and collapse was near. The old house backed on to a hastily constructed shed. Through the open door, it was obvious that tools lined the walls of the shed. The room itself was empty, but for a large, sheeted construction towering almost to the roof, in the dead centre of the workshop.

The man ambled into the shed, through the wide open door. A small *thock* signified the wood dropping on to a central pile. Then the man closed the small door with a bang, and a repetitive hammering noise came from the worn cottage.

Many weeks later, in the middle of the night, he made his way through relentless sleet and whipping winds, over the soft, flooding ground to the relative shade of a large oak tree. There, he knelt to the ground and scooped brown muck from the earth at the base of the oak. He then staggered back through the blinding rain to his small shed.

The inside of the cottage was bare, only two chairs, a small table and a well-used bunk occupied the interior. There was a small courtyard with a fire pit, where the man did all his cooking. The man dropped his burden in a large iron pot on the small bench in his workstation, then he ambled into the main house.

He sat down heavily on one of the two chairs. The other was occupied. The occupant of the chair wore a large coat, with a cowl stretching over his face, showing only the hooked tip of his nose.

"When will I get to see your blessed creation?" he said.

"Soon."

"I want to see it *now*," the man exploded. He lashed out at the wall of the old cottage. It splintered, and slowly buckled inwards. On its inward path, the door of the cottage opened, and sideswiped the crude shed. The whole thing came down with a clatter, the following silence broken only by the resounding *whoingwhoingwhoingwhoing* of a hacksaw spinning uncontrollably on the floor. Slowly, the sheet slid off the construction, piling neatly on the floor.

The rain hit the two men like knives, each blow stinging with cold.

Lightning forked onto a nearby tree, setting it ablaze, illuminating the construction in an ominous light. It loomed, taller than any man, head bowed, eyes shut. It was made of mismatched clay. It's face was crude, rushed, it's body ornate, and the flickering light of the flames caused the creature to glow gently.

The man looked up, and gasped.

"What the ..."

Thunder clapped loud, directly overhead.

Notes from a Young Filmmaker

In 2011, I wrote an article for the magazine of our high school. They never ended up using it, and I lost all my copies of the article, or at least I thought I had. I found it again on my Google Drive, and so here it is. Unedited.

And it started with a Bang!

Our film production team had already worked together on numerous occasions through 2010 (our Year 9), designing websites, and so, when we figured out we were all in the same Year 10 Media Studies class, we (James Ashworth, Aaron Wong and I) immediately cottoned on to the idea we would work together. And so Bang Films was born (title reference). Not long after we had a half-hour movie project [a TV ad that went well over duration]. Then we considered moving on to comparably bigger and better things. And we did. *The Blank Job* was our next big project.

Basically, the plot is this: a disc that the police need as evidence goes missing, and the courier that delivers it is an ex-gang-member and may or may not have deliberately lost it [the disc contained incriminating phone records that would have promised imprisonment for senior members of the gang]. But the disc that the courier lost was a fake disc, and he actually still had the original. The adventure continues under Mangere Bridge, where the gang leader is waiting, in an exchange intended to swap his sister who had been kidnapped as leverage, for the real disc. Considering that we managed to fit all that in five and a half minutes, I don't think we did too badly (or we did terribly; depends on your outlook).

After that, we immediately started planning a half feature length film (45 minutes) that is of a similar tune to *The Blank Job*, although, it will invariably be better written. We are also planning an Urban-Western (a modern take on the Western genre, however, instead of starring a chain smoking, gun-welding gunslinger, will have a chain-texting lawyer, who occasionally dons a backwards baseball cap, as the lead.

It's funny because we thought we'd make heaps of bloopers in each of our productions that meant we needed a huge bloopers reel, but we didn't. We made bloopers – but not many of them were funny! Although, where our comedy was lacking, our technology and resources weren't – for example, we created our own boom mike and recording studio.

Our filming processes were otherwise, reasonably standard. We used 1080p cameras, meaning we shot mostly in HD, and that was one (and possibly the only) piece of our process that wasn't really complicated. We did, however, shoot far too much footage, and have had to cut most of it out of the finished products.

The Blank Job was actually entered into Cut! National Film Competition, which is for films of the drama or documentary genre [of 4 to 6 minutes]. We also produced an ad for the *Fair Go School Ad Awards*, and wait with baited breath to hear how we fared.

Now we have begun screenwriting for projects that won't get underway until next year some time, can't say when – but hoping it'll all work out. It will, or it'd better ...

Dylan Thompson

Stealth – Series Archive

Chapter 1: I Read It On The Internet

Pop.

That's all it was. Eric was expecting something more dramatic. It felt just like when a plane lands and your ears pop. Along with a faint sound, of course. But, physically, the world just ... changed. He could see it through the window of the capsule. No sideways movements or anything, no mysterious vortexes, just ... pop; gone there, arrive here, in one smooth move.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Then the capsule started to shake.

"Um, guys, this isn't standard procedure, is it? I can't stand up in here, it's shaking too – oof!" He shouted his query urgently, but collided with the floor and couldn't finish. Nevertheless, a reply came through.

"All good here, not sure what's happening. I'll look into it." Calm, measured and responsive.

"Actually, uhhh ..." Eric trailed off as he looked out the windows, "I think I see the problem."

"Just for our own notes, what was it?"

"Basically I'm being mauled by a dinosaur."

"Would you like extraction?"

"No, thanks, I'd rather risk death by dinosaur as the only person to do that in 365 million years, I thought it'd be nice." Eric yelled sarcastically, yelling both because the question was very silly, and the dinosaur had started making a lot of noise. The command center got his message eventually.

Pop.

This time, the landing wasn't smooth because the machine had been mid-swing when it departed. It ended up firing across an empty warehouse floor for about ten metres. After all the component parts came to rest and the lab techs had recovered from the noise, one of the scurried across and opened the door.

"Pangaea's quite nice this time of year." Eric quipped as his legs failed him, and he fell out the door of the capsule.

Two men stood around in an empty bunker. Fully lit, there was just nothing happening.

One of the guys looked at his watch; "they've been gone for about two minutes; when were we expecting them?"

"Should be around now, yeah."

"We can't let this get out."

"Do you mean the girl in your basement, or –"

He was interrupted by a bright flash and all the lights in the bunker shattering.

"First of all, for fuck's sake."

"And secondly, I think we invented time travel."

The men heard a massive crash from the bunker next door.

"Uh, dude. Did you pay attention in the meeting?"

"... No. It seems I did not."

"The wrong fucking room and we fucking missed it you fucktard."

Chang shut the laptop with a snap. He'd forget there wasn't a proper spring on the lid, every so often. Then he'd risk breaking it with his carelessness. "As far as I can see," he said, carefully; not fully sure of his opinion, "all you need to do is reset your IP address in command prompt. That should solve your internet problem."

"How do I do that?" His mate Adrian. A maths student, where Chang studied Computer Science. But equally nerdy.

"Type in 'cmd'. Then type 'ipconfig /renew' in the window that comes up."

"You're such a nerd."

"You study maths, which isn't much better."

"Fair point." They lapsed back into silence and peering at the screens of their respective laptops because Adrian's laptop had been reconnected to the internet. After about a minute, Adrian looked away from his screen. He'd been reading a news article.

"Dude, they're saying the Government have discovered how to time travel."

"Is this the Herald? The same site that devoted two whole articles to how the Taylor Swift and Tom Hiddleston breakup was the Worst Thing Ever?"

"You make a fair point, but this isn't the same as 'we've encountered aliens' conspiracy theories, because people can see something odd and just go 'aliens' but; other than actually experiencing it, how would you be able to know it had been invented?"

Adrian looked across at Chang, who had fallen asleep. “Dude,” he shook Chang on the shoulder, “wake up this is serious.”

“Seriously boring.”

“Chang, shut up. The only way we can know for sure is if we infiltrate the Government.”

“And how many people will be thinking that at this moment?”

“About a million, probably. But significantly fewer will actually do it.”

“Hopefully no others.”

“But we should.”

“Oh, why not. We need something to do over summer anyway, and worst case scenario we get internships that lead to jobs.”

“Unlikely though. You’ve seen the job market, right?”

“So are we on?”

“We’re on. I’ll see what jobs they’re offering later today.”

“So what order are we gonna do it? Hitler, then preventing the Black Death, then finding Atlantis?” A lab technician called Rob walked with Eric as they headed towards the bunker.

“You do know Atlantis isn’t real, right?” Eric wasn’t the type of guy to indulge in fantasy. Perfect guy to be in control of a time machine, right?

“Well, that’s the thing; no, we absolutely do NOT know that. But now we have a TIME MACHINE.” Rob, however, did want Eric’s job. Eric made sure not to hand out his (real) address to anyone. Or any other legitimate contact details. Illegitimate ones, though? Yeah, that was fine.

“So ... we should find out, right?” Eric wasn’t convinced, but he saw this was the fastest way to end the conversation. It more or less worked, when he continued; “That’s what I’m doing right now. You’re literally the only thing standing in my way.”

“Well, the bunker door’s closed. So I’m not **literally** the only obstacle in your way.” Rob took exception to bad grammar. But Eric didn’t give a shit. Rob trailed off, mumbling about bad grammar and how people misuse words. But by this point, Eric had opened the previously-shut bunker door, walked through and slammed it on his colleague’s mildly annoyed face.

“Morning, gentlemen,” Eric announced, his voice booming through the empty echo of the bunker. “It is morning, isn’t it? Can’t tell, what with all this time travel ...” He trailed off, and heard some giggles from some of the lab techs. They had just finished setting up the machine for its first planned voyage into the past. They’d probably been there all night.

“Just need to give you a bit of a briefing before you depart.” A lab tech passed him a sheet of paper with handwriting on that got messier as it went on. You could easily distinguish the sections written at 7PM from the sections written at 4AM.

“Is this the ‘don’t step on a fly or you’ll kill your grandfather and never be born’ talk?” Eric had a slightly unhealthy disregard for the rules of time travel, and wasn’t taking this quite seriously enough.

“Yes, sir. It is that talk.”

“They’ve just given us secretarial jobs. They must be fucking desperate.” Chang and Adrian had waited a week, but they’d still not expected to hear anything for at least another week.

“Well, at least we start our jobs on Monday.”

“Only you could be excited about going to work. I’d rather sleep, personally.”

“But sleeping on your own is boring.”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“What?”

“Nevermind.”

“Hmm.”

“Secretarial jobs ... You could say they sound very ... secretive.”

“And it starts on Monday. Maybe we should think about the kind of information we actually want to find, and come up with a plan of how we’ll get it. It’s not like we’ll have that much time once we actually take up our posts.”

“I’m just gonna ignore that shitty joke.”

Chang’s phone beeped. “Sabrina?” Adrian was far more curious than Chang wanted him to be.

“Yes.”

“You should ask her out, you know.”

“Yeah, and hurt myself voluntarily. There’s a special name for people who do that sort of thing.”

“Masochists?”

“Well, yes. But that’s not the one I had in mind. And anyway, I play the kind of long games most people get tired of after a week. Eventually, the theory goes, she’ll be mine. If there’s one thing I’ve got ... it’s patience.”

“That’s one hell of a plan, dude.”

“It’s definitely hell, yes.”

Pop.

The machine filled the scenery instantaneously. London, 1666. He wasn’t used to the look of things. Very Tudor. Old-fashioned. And the smell, my God. He wasn’t even inside the city. About five hundred metres outside it.

Stop the Great Fire of London.

There was a fly buzzing around his head. Annoying, even now. Always are, always were. Always would be. Simple. He swatted at it, idly, while he thought of a plan.

He’d go into the city and get a job at the bakery in Pudding Lane. Then he’d wait until the night of the 26th and try to stop the fire before it spread. Then --

He stopped thinking. About that, anyway. He moved on. The weather ... dry. Hot, not humid. Grass isn’t green anymore. All signs of what would come ... but only if he couldn’t stop it. His thought pattern had changed, and so had his swatting rhythm. He’d knocked the fly on to the ground. Dazed.

He bent down and picked up the fly. “I’d best not ...” Put it in his backpack in a pocket.

Control saw this on a feed. They always had a feed to his eyes and ears. No point having a time travelling vigilante you couldn’t control. There’s whole TV shows about that sort of thing. One of the drugged-up (they’d been awake for nigh on forty hours by this point) lab techs muttered. “Wait a minute, there’s something wrong with that fly ... Eric got to the bakery just before nightfall on the 25th. He’d also been mugged about three times. Got a job easily. They didn’t get many offers. They also didn’t get many customers, though. So it roughly levelled out.

One more day to wait. Hopefully he wouldn’t even have to sleep.

He set out to work. It was easy enough. In fact, he got bored and had to distract himself from the tedium within the bakery. He set a loaf to bake, and walked back to the time machine. He’d leave his bag there, and probably sleep there. Cheaper than proper accommodation.

Eric made sure he put the fly in a jar. He was many things, but he wasn’t a murderer. Except for that one, unfortunate swipe at an annoying fly. Which had brought him here, more or less. He certainly wouldn’t have dropped off the bag if he hadn’t captured the fly.

Then he walked back again. Eric hadn’t walked this much in years. Not since his youth ... well, they did have a time machine. Nostalgia was just one of the ways Eric had been sent back ...

He snapped himself out of his memories. His loaf had finished cooking. Twenty minutes. Easy, see?

The rest of the day passed in a blur of heat ... wheat ... and a ticking clock. It passed surprisingly quickly, given that there was nobody of interest to interact with.

At half past eleven on the 26th of September, Eric was summoned back to the time machine. In theory, he’d prevented the disaster. But it wouldn’t happen until midnight, in half an hour. They’d got it wrong, Eric just knew. He got back to the machine and something seemed amiss. The fly had gone from the jar. Not a huge bother, but worth note. That wasn’t even the biggest thing. It seemed like someone had been walking around ...

Nevermind. Later.

The machine started to whir.

Wait. Eric left bread. In the oven. Oh, no. Please.

They were pulling him back ...

Chang and Adrian started work just after 8 o’clock on the Monday. Introductory team-building exercises drove Chang insane. Adrian could tolerate them slightly better; they had a purpose that could be readily understood. That took up about an hour and a half of time. What a fucking waste. Work, then go home, Chang thought. No need for friends. Or rather, not really even a need to do work. That wasn’t why he and Adrian were even here.

He got back to his desk just after lunch. Or rather, after he’d gone to get his boss’ lunch. He was a secretary, after all. His boss was a relatively nice (by boss standards) woman of approximately middle-age (although he’d dare not ask).

“Do you know what they keep in the bunkers in the south end of the compound?” Chang asked her, after about a week had passed.

“I’ve never asked, there’s probably a rule against knowing more than you should,” was the reply.

“Adrian,” Chang phoned him during one of their breaks, “you’ll have to try and seduce someone to get the info we

need if there is a rule against knowing more than you should.”

“Well, yeah, but I’m me and I look like this. But I’ll give it a try, just for you.” Adrian blew a sarcastic kiss down the phone.

Adrian tried to hit on one of the assistants to someone who looked high-up. He certainly looked high most of the time, but Adrian didn’t know the office dynamics well enough to know who he actually was. Unluckily for him, the woman he hit was a) five years older, and b) extremely not interested.

“Uh, okay,” Chang said through the phone (again) after Adrian had filled him in. “We could work late then nosy around and see what we find? It’s, like, our last hope.”

They tried that too, on the following Friday. People would leave early, right? They had homes to be at. In theory. In practice, though, the place was still buzzing at a quarter to midnight, and Chang and Adrian decided they needed an answer immediately, so they’d look for one themselves.

Chang gave Adrian a microphone to wear and the knowledge that he would be being recorded if he found anything, with it being plugged into his laptop.

They agreed on the bunker they’d try, and Chang sent Adrian there while he waited in an empty office (some people *had* gone home). Hopefully he wouldn’t be waiting too much longer or his mum would worry where he was.

Actually, no. They were on holiday in Fiji, so they weren’t waiting up.

The machine re-entered the bunker. There was always a corresponding gust of wind when the machine returned. Eric stepped out of the machine; a slightly squashed sphere shape, remembering what he’d left in the bakery. Remembering, then slowly realising. Shock. He’d caused the Great Fire. Which he’d been sent to stop. Maybe this whole time travel thing wasn’t such a good idea.

“Uhh, guys. I think we have to think more carefully about this.”

“What makes you say that?” His boss, John, was on-hand; as was now conventional when Eric returned from trips.

“Well, I left a bun in the oven –”

“Was the sex worth it?” A random lab tech piped up, thinking he was clever.

“Shut up, Jones. There’s a reason you’re just a lab tech.”

“Left a bun in the oven, caused the Great Fire. Exactly the opposite outcome to what we wanted.”

“So you think we should have a plan?” John.

“Yes. And I’m free now if you wanna have a meeting about it?”

“Well ... okay. I guess I can just reschedule the whole day’s worth of meetings. Just for you, specially.”

“Cool, let’s book a room.” Eric sealed the deal.

“Ooooooh, get a roooooooooom,” Jones belted out while refilling the time machine’s oil.

“All right. What’s the game plan?”

“You mean for time travel? Or the All Blacks game on Saturday?” Eric wasn’t clueless, he was just a smart-ass.

“The rugby. Because it’s more important.”

“Are you fucking kidding me.”

“Anyway, we need to figure out what we’re gonna do with this whole –” One of the lab techs dropped something in the bunker, and the meeting was disrupted by the loud clang noise. “—thing.”

“I guess if we’re gonna go on missions, we need to make sure we finish properly before we pull it back.” Eric was still bitter about that.

“Yes. Now, where would you recommend we go?”

“Kill Hitler, cure the Black Death, find someone to oppose Hillary Clinton in the US election, because obviously that’s the worst thing imaginable.”

“In that order?”

“Well, we’re agreed.”

“There is one other thing I’d like to discuss.”

“You mean other than the rugby and who we’d go back in time and kill?”

“Yeah. I did mean that. Because there’s some internet communities that are convinced we’ve discovered time travel.” John seemed, at first, to be fine with this information, but as his sentence went on, his composure crumbled.

“You’re saying that like it’s a lie. We’ll have to disclose that eventually. So maybe we *should* start thinking about that day, even though it’s closer to the heat death of the universe than ... we currently are.”

“What would we say?”

“I’d say we should use a similar press release to any of the ‘we’ve landed on the moon’, ‘we use torture techniques on people who aren’t necessarily guilty’, ‘there’s a contagion that’s been released’. Those sort of ones.”

"If you want you can draft it. Start that now, and we'll probably tell them after we've finished with it."

"What? Like; 'we're done with it, you have a go?'"

"No. That's a mistake. But we can at least tell them we have it, after we've already used it."

"True, because we wouldn't want to be beset by Human Rights groups."

"Right. Next mission: Kill Hitler. And you'll need a team of a few scientists, just for ... supervision. When?"

"Let's say tomorrow? It's just easier. You look exhausted."

"You're the one who's talking. Okay, agreed."

"They ... have actually done it." Adrian gasped into his walkie-talkie. He'd made it to the bunker and could see an outline of the machine in the unlit room.

"Make sure it actually works first, but I'll record everything from here on out to send to the press."

"The press typing out an audio-only recording. That's about the state of the media nowadays."

"And the first line of our conspiracy-busting audio recording is ..." Chang reminded Adrian through his earpiece that he was on tape.

"Oh yeah. You may want to edit this first."

"Yes, indeed. Especially if you get tragically killed. That would be very unfortunate and need minor cutting."

"Should I turn on the lights?"

"No. You'll get noticed that way. Don't be silly, just use the flashlight on your phone."

"It's just ... a metal structure. Could really be anything, but they're definitely working on something."

"Like a mission control centre?"

"Yeah, maybe. We were definitely right to poke around. And the theories definitely have a point."

"Would you be okay with having a proper look at the machine?"

"Yeah, I've got my flashlight and everything. I'm not scared of the dark, jeez."

That last one was only partially true, and because he knew he was on record. Adrian moved closer to the machine.

"There's buttons ... lots of buttons. This is definitely ... hardcore."

"Any idea what it is?"

Adrian had finished his survey ... and then seen something. "No idea ... wait a minute."

Chang heard Adrian's clanking steps as he moved back out of the machine. Adrian had definitely seen something. Shadows in an empty, unlit bunker shouldn't be possible. That's what Adrian had seen. No. This one had legs. And arms. And a head ...

Snap. Chang only heard the crunch of bone through the recording, and was nearly sick.

"Adrian! What the fuck!" Chang yelled through his walkie talkie, mostly from shock, after about a second's delay.

"HOW DARE YOU?" A deep, monotonous and very, very loud voice that was definitely not Adrian's filled Chang's ears. Almost deafened him, and shocked him even more than the previous sudden turn of events.

"W... w ... who ... who ... are you?" Chang quavered into his headset.

"NO, THERE WILL COME A TIME FOR THAT. BUT I KNOW WHO YOU ARE CHANG SMITH." The connection fuzzed out, possibly the sheer volume had shorted out Adrian's headset's microphone.

Chang's hands were shaking from the shocking turn of events, as he frantically stopped the recording and threw his headset across the room. Which solved all of the problems he was facing, as it normally does in films when people do that, mostly because he was no longer facing them. He waited for a very, very long time. Just to be sure. Then he called maintenance and told them to inspect the time machine. They found Adrian's body, of course. But nothing else. Moved it ... somewhere. They certainly never told Chang what they actually did with the body. He assumed there was a morgue somewhere that Chang could be prepared to be buried.

He was, in fact, correct. The lab tech that moved Adrian's body would swear he put it on the main table, in the centre of the white room, and not any of the fridges. He would have to swear this a number of times, because Adrian's body seemed to have moved itself from where the tech said he'd left it. They found it slumped in the control seat of the time machine, back only a little from where they'd found it in the first place.

In his panic, Chang had left the compound, and arrived back at his house, just after 1AM.

Chang sat in his room and stared at the now-broken headset. Aliens were out there. The Government had been hiding something after all. He wasted no time connecting to a Skype call with his mates in, after forwarding the recording of Adrian's death (unhappy sidenote) to the media.

About ten minutes in to the call he realised he should have connected to an encrypted network.

"Oh, shit. I should have used Tor to connect to here. And 2FA for my emails, and, and, and ..." Chang panicked and couldn't finish. The rest of his Skype call understood, though.

"They're coming for you. I'd pack then fucking run, dude."

Chang didn't need telling twice. He slammed shut the laptop, killing the call immediately. (If it's any consolation, I doubt it felt anything). He threw the sports bag he used for uni on to his bed and filled it with things. An older, less useful computer that couldn't be traced as easily to him, his bus card and money (because obviously). Some clothes. He wouldn't come back here again. Then he threw some canned food and socks in the bag and closed it up.

How could he make sure that they not trace back to him?

He'd have to set fire to the house. But that would cost time. Did he have the time?

There were sirens and a tire squeal from outside. He froze. Waited. But the car had carried on. Not the security agencies. Yes, he would set the fire.

His dad kept a petrol can in the back shed for the lawnmower, and there was nobody else in the house. They wouldn't be able to find him, and if he moved quickly, there wouldn't be an identifiable body; so he'd have died in the blaze. He turned on the oven, stove and all the lights to full power.

He raised the petrol can over his head, ready to torch his home. A valiant attempt at self-preservation, he thought. His home.

His parents had left for work in the morning, and they'd get home to find they didn't have a house any more. Did he have a right to do that to them? He'd pay them back eventually, the most immediate of these paybacks would be by ... not being dead in the first place. But, for now, he had to do this.

Someone kicked the gate down. This was not a drill, any more.

Chang panicked, and tried to speed up his task. He was ready to go now.

The person was now coming down the garden path. About a minute away.

Chang poured the liquid, cursing as he realised he'd got it all over himself.

Cursing, then making peace, as he saw the Security officer at the door, and knew what he now had to do. They wouldn't catch him. Not this way.

Chang poured the liquid and lit a match.

The Security officer's face was the last thing Chang saw. The Security officer, on the other hand, was sole witness to a teenage setting himself on fire in his kitchen.

*

"Interrupting the broadcast, we have some breaking news; a recording leaked to the media has revealed both the Government's secret use of time travel, and its first contact with a seemingly hostile alien being –"

John switched off the TV, silencing the news anchor who seemed to be mocking him. "Fuck. And Eric was halfway through writing that briefing, too."

"So what will we tell them?"

"We'll tell them nothing."

"Oh, good, because there's reporters outside with questions, and a mob outside with rocks. Which should I address first?"

"The mob, it's less scary."

John's press secretary opened the door to the Parliament building and the press gang waiting immediately exploded.

"Does the Prime Minister have a comment on this recording?" One of the reporters from a major network yelled over everybody else. Then everybody else took over, and the press secretary couldn't respond.

"I – this recording may not even be legit –" he couldn't finish the sentence before being overrun by boo's from the assembled mob. Who then started to throw their gathered rocks.

"If you won't tell us the truth, we'll find it for ourselves."

The press secretary slammed the door of the buildings, and ran back to John's office.

"We need to secure the compound, now. They'll send a protest mob to overrun it."

"It's too late, that's already started." John couldn't even look up. He was just ... tired.

"There's probably a news report on it or something," the press secretary made a move to switch on the TV.

"Don't turn on the TV." This wasn't the request of a boss eager to maintain a sense of power and control. So, in a sense, it was new ground for the staffer that had a remote in his hand. He'd never seen Jacob like this.

"So ... would you like me to leave you alone?"

"Do whatever." Still defeated. There was no way this war could be won. He'd been beaten.

"We could find the IP address of the leak?" The press secretary tried to keep calm.

"So search all the fucking records we ever made and don't stop until you find that son of a bitch traitor."

Ah, being yelled at, the lab tech thought with a certain level of relief. Familiar territory.

But now he was faced with a new, but far more manageable, problem. Sorting through thousands of records to find names of the traitors, with no way to tell whether they were the traitors or not.

As it turned out, he didn't have to look for long before a soldier butted in, and said, "We already looked and sent someone. It's been dealt with."

Damn. That broke the lab tech's concentration and sent him back to the Wrath of John.

"Oh? And did we ever figure out what the hell had happened to that kid and how he'd moved from the morgue?"

"That's hardly the most pressing issue. Some idiot leaked that we have time travel. All the newspapers are running a recording."

"Don't fucking remind me."

"But, sir, we have an IP address for one of the whistleblowers, if you want it."

"Just send all the men you can to bring the kid in for questioning."

"We found the kid, but he blew himself up by mistake."

"Are you ready for the mission with the team of four scientists?"

"Yeah basically. But it's hell out there. There's people at the gates with rocks. I'm confident that security will keep them out, though. Are we still gonna progress with the mission?" Eric had heard a little about the protests.

"I don't see why not. Get kitted up and we'll fire up the machine." Jones was the next-highest up the chain of command so he oversaw the mission while John was indisposed.

Eric set about getting himself sorted out, while some of the lab techs warmed up the time machine.

He was instructed to perform the last few steps before departure himself in the machine, so he boarded, and offered a sort of goodbye to Jones.

"Good luck on the mission." Jones' last comment to Eric.

"Good luck back here." Eric felt the situation was dire enough to allow comment.

"I'll need it." Jones' reply. Nervous.

"I'll need it." Eric closed the door of the machine as Jones prepared the machine for departure.

About a minute out from departure, Eric could hear some noises outside Control.

"Um, what's all the noise?"

"The protesters smashed their way through the gates and they're on their way. About another five minutes and we'll be under attack. Quick, lets get moving."

"Okay. We're ready when you are."

They gave Eric the go-ahead a few minutes later and he departed mere seconds before an angry mob roke down the door of the bunker to find ... nothing.

Eric's problems were only just beginning, however. Small changed to the machine were starting to be noticed, and he radioed to control just as his course was altered.

"What the fuck?" he asked, and control came back with a panicked reply, mostly due to the fact they were still being overrun by angry people with weapons.

"The good news is ... actually, fuck, no. There's no good news. The bad news is that the creature's on board and now there's nothing we can do. And we can't do anything because the mob's broken through —" There was static through the radio as they lost contact.

"So I'm on my own and there's nothing I can do?" Eric said for the benefit of the disconnected radio.

"INCORRECT. YOU CAN STILL DIE." The voice shocked Eric, who jumped and hit his head on the roof, knocking himself out.

Chapter 2: So It Must Be Out To Get Me

Chapter 3: I Wrote Down My Invasion Plans

Chapter 4: So It Must Be Too Late To Use Them

Chapter 5: I Let Our Enemies Get Prepared

Chapter 6: So We Have To Fight For The Planet

By Executive Order

This is what you voted for. Unless you didn't. And every possible sentiment that statement can imply.

The thing that's probably hurt the most about this whole ... thing; with Britain as well as Trump; is that it's painfully reminded me how many selfish, ignorant, idiotic people there are in the world. And that everyone probably knows one or two of them. The internet hasn't helped this, I wouldn't say. Without the internet, we can kind of pretend negativity isn't a part of people's identity. But the more you read on the internet, you just go ... oh. Right.

To the people who voted for him: So Donald Trump is president! Fact! And you know what we think about facts ... And experts, and the media, and Muslims, and Mexicans, and women! Heaven forbid they be given the same opportunities as straight white men (who EVERYONE knows are superior beings). But no. We don't think that way and we aren't sexist, or racist, or whatever. That's just the Liberal Media That Is Lying. How will that affect the future? Who cares about that because we're in power. Because, despite mumbling about a rigged system and dirty politics, that's all that really matters in the end. This is the man for whom you have voted. He's delivered, or looks like he will, on almost everything he campaigned for (in the extreme ways he campaigned for it). Don't be surprised by the fact that the world hates you and thinks you an ignorant idiot that couldn't see it. In fact, I would go so far as to say the opinions of the world swing more towards 'knew exactly how racist what he was saying was then decided to ignore and vote for him anyway'. You will not get sympathy. In however long, when the dust settles, people will probably ask how nothing was done. Or why nothing was done. The 'I was just following orders' approach doesn't work. The rest of the world hasn't forgiven Germany for World War 2. They have, however, forgotten how it happened. If you need a refresher, then analyse your current behaviour. Your ignorance of Trump and its consequences disgusts me.

To the people who didn't vote for him: Relax, and take time off. Please. This presidency will have enough victims as it is. Don't add to that list, it's not worth it (if possible. If that's not possible for whatever reason then please ignore this advice). Then fight for ... specific things. Trying to fight for everything is impossible, but it will drive you insane. There isn't that much else, really. What with him being almost-proven to be in bed with Putin (Russian prostitutes urinate on him (Trump)), in a tape that Putin has – circumstantial evidence; but is this ... worth ... note? Or the election hacking that rigged the very election Trump claimed was rigged from the very beginning and proved him right? Worth note? Or his rich-white-men-but-we'll-still-destroy-the-establishment Cabinet. Worth note? Fuck. Let's just breathe. For a bit. I don't know ... Maybe there will be positive change, I hope there will be. As opposed to using the correct currency and getting no change whatsoever.

To the Man Himself: This job will be hard, and engineering specific details then whining like a four year old with a stubbed toe on Twitter when things don't go right for you will not earn you favour (hasn't; low poll numbers but they've been wrong before, so eh). Tweeting about companies that don't do what you want or journalists that say negative things about you is dangerous for the global economy. There is a reason people were cautious of your Presidential bid. I mean, more than the reasons you've dismissed. If you can buckle up (or down, that word choice doesn't seem to matter too much) and focus on trying to do things you say, rather than firing random insults in random directions, then maybe; just maybe, you'll get through it. Hopefully, you'll be able to achieve something in four years. Should be. My advice, though, is; "Know when you're beaten, if you are beaten." In a motion, an election, a Bill, an Executive Order, Military action ... anything. Just don't keep fighting for something beyond the point where time you've put in > outcome you get. But either way, buckle up for the next four years. Eight if you play the game well (12 and 16 perhaps, if you smash the board).

Sidenote: There's reasonably good analysis (for which I will omit sources because fuck people who want sources for information now, right?) that behaviour used by TrumpaDumpa supporters is emotionally abusive. With the sneering and mocking (of people, normal people, regular people, your families even) that make you scum. Like actual piece-of-shit humans that I wouldn't mind seeing the back of. Not the front, don't want to actually look at you. Just think about what you're saying online and why you're saying it, because as it currently stands this is the type of 'person' I think you are. Being, or saying you are Right-Wing is not a good enough excuse. I'm not especially left-leaning. You're just being fuckheads that need to get your heads out of your asses.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/donald-trump-inauguration-girls-growing-up-world-leader-groping-women-caroline-lucas-sex-education-a7535721.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/21/letter-to-donald-trump-president-armando-iannucci>

Balance Be Damned

This is probably the last point before which writing articles like this will become defamatory and I'll probably get sued by the Great Big Baby Whom Needs No Nameth. I just hope that people that voted for him (and everything he entails, whether or not they personally agree with all aspects of it) are prepared for the implications of that. Personally, I would have been fine with the implications of being a Clinton voter. But I feel that most Trump voters haven't considered all the facets of his ideology because they've ignored the bits that they don't like.

At this point, it is worth asking why the people who voted for Donald Trump did what they did. Or more specifically, whether their motivations for voting (let's call those motivations from now on) line up with what a Trump presidency will likely be like – extrapolated from ... Trump's behaviour as a human (he is human, right?), and his behaviour since the election.

In terms of policy, I doubt it. Economically, I'm not sure a Trump presidency will benefit the lower and middle classes in the long-term. This is because it looks as though Trump will follow Keynesian economics; very much 'the market will do what it will do and Government can only really stimulate by making money and that's about it'. Which sounds fine, right? Except that this will then depend on the way created money is used to offset the inflationary pressures that would also be created. His infrastructure plan is solid though.

His Cabinet looks like a massive 'boys locker room' if his October remarks can be briefly referenced here. Consider this list: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/trump-cabinet-tracker/510527/>. It seems to be dominated by rich, white businessmen with little or no other actual Government experience. Broken, of course, by Elaine Chao and Besty DeVoss. The only two women, and absolutely in the minority of politicians that know what they're doing in high office. In this Cabinet at least.

His executive office is staffed by high-up Republicans (logical) and key white supremacists. Which makes sense if you've analysed the patterns of the Trump campaign and transition, but not if you labour under the delusion that the Trump objective was to actually make Washington less corrupt.

Trump's position on Russian hacking and Putin (on top) are also worthy of note, as he seems to deny that Russia helped him to win the election, something an overwhelming majority of intelligence agencies have confirmed. He could be doing this because to admit it might make him seem inadequate, or because he has ties to Russian business (which, for people who voted for him because he was less corrupt ...)

Tweeting about businesses has spooked the markets meaning that businesses will operate in way that appease the Great Overlord. This is the problem many people had with the TPPA and its use of ISDS to get what it wants. If okay in one place, why not the other? Answer; because it's not really okay in either place.

He has walked back on most of his central campaign policy in some way. The Wall will be built, but ... only a fence. He won't prosecute Clinton, or so he says. He'll keep parts of Obamacare, and he's recognised humans may be contributing to climate change. So, this administration looks like it will have to be believed on what it does, rather than what it says. But also that it will say quite a lot, and most of it will be rubbish. Being able to tweet things and this have global impact immediately makes Trump enormously unpredictable; especially due to his characteristically fragile ego, and childish responses to challenges on it.

Trump has allegedly refused the majority of his Security briefings since becoming elected. That's interesting, given that he's also used the following quotes. "I believe what I read on the internet." Oh, honey. And; "I don't need the briefings because I'm smart." Sweetie pie, they don't brief you on security stuff because you're not smart. They do that so you don't nuke someone based on stuff you read on Twitter.

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A Year In Review (2016)

This is not a film for the light-hearted. Or the sociopathic. Or anyone at all, actually. Just don't watch it. If you value your sanity, turn away now. Yes, now. Have you turned away? Good. Full spoilers follow.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle for the opening of the film is the fact that it comes as the most recent edition in a long-running series, and is tasked with following on from the previous film's obscenely dull cliffhanger. 'Will there be enough tea to go around' (the passive-aggressiveness later in the film says yes, there is). Picking up the strands from the cliffhanger of the previous film in the series, while alternating mindnumbingly slow pacing and gratuitous character death. B-list celebrity after b-list celebrity were gratuitously disposed of in a shameless attempt to impersonate a sense of 'grit' or 'darkness'.

Later in the first act, a nonsensical political race between the wolf from off of Little Red Riding Hood and an electrocuted and inexplicably partially melted wax model from Madame Tussauds. A third contender in the race, not entirely dissimilar to the man behind the curtain in the Wizard of Oz, isn't particularly relevant to the plot of the film but is given a disproportionate amount of screentime early on.

There's a temporary sidetrack relating to a virus from mosquito bites. But nevermind about that because it is so much not the actual point of the film that literally nobody cares about how the subplot is represented in the first place. Except that it's close to the place where the Olympics will be held where apparently worker conditions are appalling. But if there's anything the director of this film takes pains to show, it's that the people in this alternate-reality dystopia do not care about how other humans are treated. This sharp and shocking revelation underscores the transition into the second third, which ...

The second Act opens with some levity, as you'd expect an unremittingly bleak movie (as this turns out to be) to do; "Headline will go here blah blah blah bla", "Postman's speed fine got lost in the post", "City Unsure Why the Sewer Smells", "Wisconsin Woman Takes Husband to Police for 'Talking Stupidly'", "Red Tape Holds Up New Bridge", "Self-Proclaimed Invisible Man No Show at Court Hearing", are among the better examples the filmmakers have elected to include in the picture. But then, the creative team decide, viewers should be reminded with a jolt what the actual goal of this film is – and they show an election won by a section of the population known only for their extreme and somewhat racist views. Then their Prime Minister resigned and was replaced by – gasp – a woman. And apparently the decision as to how that power will be returned shouldn't be made by a political body? Because judges that said that got death threats? These guys have no idea what they're doing. Thank God reality's not like that.

Another temporary reprieve with a subplot about a game based on a children's cartoon from years back temporarily draws attention away from the psychotic lions' mane on steroids. But there is no such thing as "fun for the whole family". For every sequence that shows kids having fun walking into walls because they'd been focussing on their phones instead of the physical obstacles actually in front of them, there's a scene that is fun for the racist, sexist, closed-minded uncle, the younger kids are hiding behind the sofa in terror, mostly at the thought of what will happen to them if they're left in a room with him. The general populace got their summer trends the wrong way around between exploratory game and what it would be like if a racist potato could have thoughts. What a shame.

Then a Muslim with a gun walks into a gay bar. Nobody can decide the motivation of the resulting shooting. Or why it happened. Which just serves to underline the tension, fear and insecurity present in popular culture at that point; obviously this tension was due to the fact that the Olympics happened at this point in the film, and then the tension multiplied by six when a phone was introduced on to the market which exploded. Literally. Which amplified the impact of our wax-melty, not-golden golden boy had on the American voter, and allowed him to talk shit on his Twitter account about voter fraud, election rigging and media bias. All of which, if proven to impact the election at all, would have impacted in the favour of our straw effigy on a string friend. Funny how he never brought that up after the fact. Oh, fuck. I've spoiled the ending of the film. At this point, there was also the biggest supermoon of the last 60 years because Donald Trump decided he hasn't had enough attention of late. OH SHIT. I USED HIS NAME. OH NO. Like Lord Voldemort, he'll come for me (NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH COMING 'AT' ME. Which I either would a) win or b) file a sexual harassment suit, depending on how you define the word 'come').

Oh yeah, and it's been alleged that Russia interfered to help the electrified orangutan. But nevermind.

During this section of the film, a gorilla died and nobody moved on. For the rest of the film. Donald Trump apologised for 2005 comments. Not sure if this refers to the year or number of his inappropriate comments. His economic plan was revealed and is basically the board game Monopoly. All of the memes and the rise of meme

culture, although there's a compelling argument that this is actually the cause of all of the problems in the film. Or at least didn't in any positive way contribute to their conclusion.

Narrative escalations at the end of the second Act predict an exciting climax. And it ... at the same time delivers and disappoints; like that pizza delivery you scheduled on Christmas Day. A scene involving the ratification of a climate change deal is undercut by a scene in which a stressed and impulsive haybale on legs debates against my Grandma who's got out of her home Seriously; someone please help, she's escaped. Probably by pretending to be dead. This would continue over three events over the next fifteen minutes of film.

There was a shock by-election in Mt Roskill when the current MP ~~got electrocuted~~ became Mayor of the City. Went as well as expected; actually the winner won it by a larger margin than expected, so I guess that's good. And left-wing which is an improvement on the alt-right (EDIT: racists who want the Government to give them benefits) sweep through Europe and the UK and US. Looks like a positive reversal of a trend, no?

You'd think, in the last ten minutes, that the writers would decide to put a positive upward twist in the script. Which is mostly right; except the twist that actually showed up was a downwards flick. If such a thing were possible considering how dark this film has fucking got by this point. But no. The elected president blackmailed an aircraft manufacturer into giving him money while three different Governments around this fictional world self-destruct with leader resignations. Praise be to the team of writers who made up that epic motherfucker (lets not give Trump any ideas) of a cliffhanger need more respect. Mostly because I get the feeling that if they don't get the respect they want, they'll tweet about you until some white supremacist nails you to a swastika. "Hail Trump," they'll cry but they're not saluting him, just telling him to get inside because it'll rain soon. Pointing at the rain clouds with outstretched hands, that's what they said.

Worst film I've seen all year. Although next year there's Fifty Shades Darker. So it's probably better than that. -5/10. I'd say 'would not recommend', but that would be overstating its quality.

In conclusion, we've all died and this is what hell looks like. Oh noes. And, before you say 'hell hasn't frozen over – of course it hasn't. The Americans don't believe in climate change because it's a hoax by the Chinese to make US manufacturing noncompetitive. That was a direct quote from Donald Trump, the first openly orangutan-shaped American president. Hopefully I'll see you next year for more of this sort of thing. But that genuinely is only 50% likely at the moment.

Just Another University Party – Series Archive

Chapter 1: Thinking

>>> This chapter compiled by Daisy <<<

Monday 10 August 2015. The Basics.

Welcome to the blog relating to the political party known as the Don't-Stop-The Party. I didn't pick the name, don't yell at me. Various people involved in the party will post here over the course of our campaign to give a full account of things that happened to us while we were campaigning. This might give you some idea of the kind of people we work with, and the kind of issues we have to deal with on a more regular basis than is probably appropriate. As to the end result of the campaign ... with a party name as ridiculous as ours, you'd probably not expect us to get very far. And you might be right. Or, alternatively, I might be writing this while sitting in a parliamentary debate. You'll have to read it and see. And no; I don't offer TL;DR's for the posts.

Friday 14 August 2015. The World's A Horrific Place.

Thinking is bad. Anyone that does it enough will tell you that. By the way, my name is Daisy. I am – well, you'll see eventually. Basically; female, uni student, busy, not especially tall. The good thing is, I keep myself busy enough that the whole thinking thing never gets too bad. Or it does, but I try to do stuff about the things I think, so at least I feel like I'm making some form of difference to the world. Which I am, I swear. It just might not be that big of a difference. There's only so much damage a teenage girl can do to processes and systems engrained by hundreds of years of reinforcement. But I try; like a bull at a brick wall. And it achieves much the same result. That is; none, the brick wall is probably built to contain the bull, if you want to continue that crappy metaphor.

So the question is; what would you do about the world we live in? And the answer, I think, is look at it and cry. I mean, let's see; terrorism, immigration problems across the whole world and not just in America (which I'm sure Americans would dispute ...). There's also global warming (which really sounds a lot more tame than it actually is; why not call it 'Doomaggon Of Death With Fire'. Global warming sounds like a holiday for a week in Hawaii, and not the systematic screwing-up of the whole planet ...

That's just the top of the list. This world is slowly messing itself up, and for the sake of narrative convenience, I am going to assume it's up to me to fix it. But the question is, how? That's for another day, I think. I'm signing off now, but not to sleep; I probably have some maths to do or something like that. I'll sleep at like 2.

Saturday 15 August 2015: The Team.

Now, I'm not saying this will actually happen, but I really hope it does. I may have kind of suggested starting a political party with my friend group, and they might not entirely disagree. These are the people that will take turns at running this blog over the course of our campaign. The thing is, I'm not sure that many people in my group of friends would have any interest at all with starting a political party. Also I don't even know that we share the same political views. So this could be a horrifically bad idea. I might talk to some people about it later, but then again I may never get around to it because I zip around from activity to activity like Tigger on steroids. Should be ten people that are on board, either by choice or coercion because I know where they live and when they go to sleep (or not, in one or two cases ...). But we'll see. Because of the way the blog's run, I won't introduce the whole team here and they can introduce themselves properly in their own posts. But I'll just tell you a bit about them quickly;

I am me; being me, doing 'me' stuff. We've already met. Or you've met me. I haven't met you. Then there's Daniel, he's the admin guy. Kinda short, very sarcastic. Like a teapot with sass. Raj's the resident 'interesting guy'. And he sleeps a lot. Paul is flirty. Sometimes irritatingly so. Actually, I don't like him much. Simran's quiet, reasonably sensible. She probably knows that working here is a mistake. Luke's ultra-anxious, all the time. Mike's averse to interaction, and seems non-political. So I'm not sure why he's even here. But he is. Hassan's chirpy and naïve, like a bird in the morning. Jerry is tall. Like, his head is monitored by ATC, tall. Catherine's slightly more outgoing than Simran, with a similar level of maturity.

Sunday 16 August 2015: Discussion.

Has anyone ever thought about making a political party? I don't mean the idiots that actually do it. I mean regular, normal, everyday people that just live normal lives and yell at the fact that the wrong decisions keep being made. I

I think Daniel and Jerry shared a bed too. I didn't ask. It's like being a gay American soldier before 2011; don't ask, don't tell.

Luke, Mike and Hassan passed out in the lounge. They all had sore heads and backs. I assume that's at least partly hangover. Although apparently the floor's hard; not that I'd know because I shared a bed with – I really don't want to remember that.

Catherine and Simran were sipping tea in the kitchen, looking very much like that frog meme. I don't think they were even hung over. They probably drank responsibly. Or not at all. Or they were hung over, and trying to make the rest of us feel bad. It was working.

Oh, and Daisy passed out over my laptop, and it turns out we started a political party; and there's a 500-member Facebook group that exists to prove it would be possible to create the party. Or it might exist because we *did* create the party. Oh God. That one's probably the worst. I'd have sex with anyone who asked if it would undo that one. No, not you.

Saturday 12 September 2015: Flashbacks, Flash bangs and Flashing

Today's been fun. I think that's the word for it. I'm back, anyway. Third (or maybe was it fourth) post today. I'm told the whole team's been having flashbacks all day. I suppose that helps to piece together what exactly happened that night. It turns out very little of actual consequence happened. So let's move on.

Hahahaha I wish. The first flashback was Luke when he went to get chips for breakfast and nearly got run over after stopping in the middle of the road. Many more shocked expressions, dropped plates and the odd begging apology comprised the rest of the day as the team of ten relatively socially awkward, sheltered and naïve (although polite and very nice) people came to terms with the first major social faux-pas they couldn't even remember.

And I just sat there, watching it unfold. And by 'it' I mean the bedsheets that needed changing, the clothes that needed washing and the restoration of memory to the rest of the team.

What else interesting happened over that night ... Jerry got out some flashbangs that he'd kept from last year's fireworks display and lit them up. The shells were outside, and Jerry's lighter was on the bench. There was a ten-minute period of time that I'd really rather not remember, when a very, very, VERY drunk Paul decided somehow that streaking would be wise. Good thing is he ended up in his bed immediately after and then he passed out ... yeah. And now I've remembered the other thing I'm trying to forget.

Saturday 12 September 2015: Round-Table Meeting

Meeting up to discuss the formation of the party. If it helps, it wasn't actually a round table, I'm fairly certain it was rectangular. In any case, the meeting was a total trainwreck, even though I thought it would end up that way.

"What will we call the Party?" Daniel tried to moderate the discussion.

"No idea. How about we come back to that later on." Jerry interjected after a short pause.

"Next item of business; what do we stand for?" Daniel again.

"War. HUH." I think I misjudged that joke.

"No. Wrong reference. There isn't a reference I can think of that works but it isn't that." Simran cut me off.

"I think we're fairly centre-aligned." Jerry, back to politics. Is this what he actually thinks, or is it simply that the alternative is scary for him to consider?

"Which means we should stay off the roads." Paul jumped in with a joke before the tone got too serious.

"Huh?" Daisy, confused. She'd get the joke in ten minutes.

"If you want to be on the roads, then you must keep left." Or Luke would explain it.

"That joke was worth nobody's time." Daniel again, trying to steer the conversation back to topic.

"So was your mum." Mike.

"OOOOOOOOOOH". Everybody responding to that burn. Even though its originality is questionable at best.

Yeah, it went well, and we decided nothing. Well, mostly nothing. We did decide to call our Party the "Don't Stop The" Party. Ha ha ha ha. It's funny and when we rule the world it'll be illegal not to laugh. But for now, it's not. So I guess the fact that the joke is crap and unfunny is okay. I came up with that, and should probably be nominated for the 'Shithead of the Year' award. That's why I do things, mostly. Because I find them funny. That'll probably be important when explaining some of my later actions. Not sure what they'll be, but I 90% guarantee there'll be something. It's the kind of thing I'd do, let's be honest.

Either that or sit in the corner watching Anime.

Chapter 3: Sweeping For Scandals

>>> This chapter compiled by Daniel <<<

Saturday 19 September 2015: Can't Go Back

Hello there, I'm Daniel, and you don't give a flying fuck. I'll stop wasting your time. It isn't me you came here to see. You probably came to read all the scandals. But we agreed not to publish any so you're a bit ... out of luck. Daisy already introduced me a bit. I'm the admin guy. The one trying to keep things on track. I maybe should have become a train driver.

<EDITED>

"We've done too much to back out of the party now." That's the kind of statement made by an introvert who's made a horrible mistake, but has a moral obligation not to slink off, even though nobody will notice. Or maybe just rocking backwards and forwards moaning like he's in pain. That was what Luke and Mike normally did.

"What do you propose we do?" Jerry replied, and this threw me a bit. Because I had no idea what the next course of action was. And Hassan had stealthily tipped my chair over.

"Well ... I think we should try to find scandals that could be used against us when campaigning," I replied after a pause, and getting up off the floor. "That way we know who'd make a good candidate for leader."

"And who'd be least missed if they got killed." Simran glared at Hassan, who looked like a dog that had made a big mess and was pretending it didn't exist.

"Or who would have reason enough to be murdered." Hassan returned the glare, without even turning around.

Basically, there's a hole in the wall now because of the intensity.

"Why're we talking about killing people?" Luke walked in.

"Why indeed ..." Jerry answered in a conspiratorial manner.

Sunday 20 September 2015: Headless Chicken Run

There are a few things I regret. There are other things I find very, very funny that I've done and I wish I hadn't. This is probably closer to the second than the first, but the line's definitely blurred. Not like the song, which is actual, literal, trash. It was definitely entertaining.

Setting ten people against each other in an informal context and situation in which whatever you find will have no consequence within the wider world (so; how the people in Government seem to think Government works). It started innocently enough, with minor scanning of Facebook pages and social media. There were, however, minor skirmishes between members of the team in the late stages of the 'game', that I happened to witness in whole or in part. I never asked for further details of what I saw, it's not my business after all. But I shall relay some of the more interesting pieces of corporate and social espionage.

<EDITED>

The first I heard of the case I will refer to as Raj v. Simran was a scream of some sort (I assume from Simran, but it's theoretically possible it wasn't). There was a lot of running backwards and forwards asking for papers back. I think there was a time of quiet, but frankly I didn't really notice over the rest of the pandemonium in the office. I think she might have discovered Raj was adopted at one point and he stormed off for a bit. He was by the coffee machine at lunchtime, so he must've got over it or something. Or found a way to get even. He made his coffee with Red Bull, apparently.

<EDITED>

Jerry v. Paul started more slowly, subtly. It might even have been going on before the 'competition' was suggested. The first find was a post on Paul's wall; '1/3 of proposals happen over holiday season. IT MIGHT HAPPEN TO ME even though I'm single bleh.'. Paul, in reply, found a series of messages of Jerry' (he never disclosed with whom); 'Thought you might want to - / Get fucked. / Um, sure. / No, I mean you can go and get fucked'. And so this continued, blow for blow. This was perhaps the most equal competition, and a very bad description of how things progressed.

<EDITED>

Hassan v. Luke wasn't a competition in quite the same way the other two were. It was more amicable, a way that two people that thought they could outsmart the other. Luke's approach was quite methodical and deliberate; first check Facebook, then other social media, then waterboard Hassan while he was at his desk. That last one didn't last

long before the screams of a panicking Hassan alerted the rest of the office and Luke stopped, having found some information. Hassan's approach involved discovering information that seemed irrelevant and disclosing it in the middle of innocuous-seeming sentences as if it means nothing. That was probably a basic part of the reason why Luke got so annoyed and resorted to waterboarding Hassan.

<EDITED>

At least it finished quickly. Quickly, even though Simran still won't look at Raj without scowling. So, in a way, the whole exercise wasn't without consequence; but none of the consequences made it to the media. Which is as it should be. That doesn't in any way mean the whole exercise was counter-productive.

The team met up in the afternoon to collate data (presumably without revealing any actual data, which somewhat complicates matters ...). It was reasonably forthcoming that Daisy should be the candidate under the 'Don't Stop The' Party box on the vote form because she was definitely the best candidate. I mean, come on; seriously. Mike got annoyed at this and swept out of the office, removing most of the carpet before realising that a wire brush was perhaps not appropriate for the task. Then he ragequit and swept out of the room ... I won't do that joke again.

Chapter 4: Raking Up Ideas

>>> This chapter compiled by Mike <<<

Saturday 26 September 2015: Hit The Street

When they say 'hit the streets', they don't in fact mean to make contact between fist and pavement. I have similar problems with the statement 'pound the pavement'. Although I suppose it is accurate, because at more than one point in the day I'd probably have beat the footpath out of sheer frustration. Huh, I managed to find three different ways to refer to the same thing. Maybe I can get used to this metaphor business. But the actual process of talking to people is one I'm ... not a fan of. Being an engineer by ... I guess you can say 'trade', talking to people isn't my strong suit (although if I were a professional Yu-Gi-Oh player, that would definitely be 'by trade ...'. That was almost a joke, hmm). I'm Mike, good afternoon.

The actual process of talking to people proved to me just how I'll never, ever work in retail. This is even before you consider my aversion to talking to people. I think I probably got the wrong job, and it definitely showed.

The first guy I talked to had no hair and a massive stomach. Seemed unemployed, you know how with some people you can just *tell*. Couldn't really hold a decent conversation with him, he just kept mumbling about benefits and the minimum wage. Hadn't done any economics at all. The second guy was slightly more informed, although he still thought a mandated \$18 an hour minimum wage was possible. Or at least that's what I think he said, he might have been talking about prostitutes. Frankly that would have been preferable. At least then I'd have got something out of it (I'll leave that deliberately vague ...).

I think the point with the canvassing was that we'd done it, and not what the people actually said. We already knew what we believed, even if we hadn't articulated that in a group meeting. We also knew the public were like sheep, just following the most popular idea without actually looking at what the policy was and whether it would work. Apparently a guy wearing camo trousers tried to talk to me, but I didn't see him.

The others were about as successful overall, as me. It was a waste of a day and I don't think anyone really made any decent headway. Look, just look at the kind of people that protest about things. Normally they're extreme about whatever they think their beliefs are. Extreme and often misguided. Obvious exceptions to this rule are ... basically the TPPA 'negotiations'. As a general rule, most people who protest things in rallies don't actually have proper means to elicit change in a meaningful way and/or haven't made the proper level of peace with authority which is apparently a part of maturing (growing up ... if you prefer).

Anyway, that was me going off on a tangent. Speaking of tangents; $y-y_1=m(x-x_1)$. Aah, now even my tangents have tangents. But the main point is talking to people told me everything I already knew and helped very little with deciding policy. People are stupid, what can I say. The problem with that is, of course, that the team of ten ended up wasting a whole day essentially pounding the pavement, and heads against a brick wall, without achieving many responses. See, there's another 'pound the pavement' or hit something with a stick metaphor.

After an hour around the table, we had nothing. Well, half a pad of scrapped ideas, and balled-up paper. Still no idea what people wanted. And we had about a day and a half to decide on policy. Maybe the best bet would be to just get really high on cocaine, write random words down on paper and spout that. I'm pretty sure that's what Donald Trump does; at least he can do public speaking. I prefer to believe that than realise that he's actually aware of the racist, sexist, ignorant crap he spouts out of the anus in the center of his face.

I feel like I should point out, I'm not normally this sarcastic, harsh or eloquent in real life. That's because it's real life, and people don't actually care about what you really think in real life (except for some cases ...). Conversations just consist of pauses where people are waiting for their turn to talk again. I figured out it was easier to just be quiet. Which is sort of why it intrinsically made very little sense that I spearheaded the canvassing team. I must have thought 'canvassing' had to do with camping tents.

There was an awkward silence for about a minute in the meeting; which I suppose is evidence of the inept-ness I just talked to you about. We had nothing. We needed a page. We had a day and a half. And talking to other people wouldn't help. So the question remained; what would we do?

An hour later, we broke off for lunch. Walked to get pizza. It was a nice day outside, even though the combined double-whammy of New Zealand summertime and persistent global warming made the temperature 30 degrees celcius, something that I personally hadn't heard of before. The walk wasn't especially pleasant. Although, when we arrived back in the office (with our pizzas ...) we'd talked with about ten different people on the walk back. These people offered far more valuable (and reasonable, and balanced...) opinions, and we finally had an idea of the policies we'd go for.

While Hassan and Luke typed up the policy (Hassan dictated, Luke typing), I worked on this piece. We needed to update the party blog. The campaigning would start tomorrow, well, the pre-campaign. Making signs, posters, ads and brochures; getting people in the right place at the right time and saying the right stuff. Tomorrow would mean hard work. But the day after that That could be revolutionary. Or maybe it'd just make our heads spin.

Chapter 5: Campaign Day Zero

>>> This chapter compiled by Mike <<<

Sunday 27 September 2015: Yawn. Yawn. Lawn. Yawn.

Mike, my words. That was legitimately said to me at least once today. Yeah, it's me again. First campaign meeting today. It was in the late afternoon because of Uni lectures that we needed to attend (played games anyway, so ...)

The meeting was boring, but I don't especially mind that kind of thing. It started with a kind of presentation where we shared what we'd gathered on the weekend. Everyone had gathered a reasonable amount of information, but Hassan had also gathered some daisies. I wasn't really listening until about halfway through; then I heard my name. "What?"

"We need you to go to the pro-rape rally and try and get some support for our party."

"What, *change people's minds*? That isn't going to happen, especially with pro-rape faux-beta-male lunatics."

"You just don't want to talk to them."

"Do you?"

"Well, no. But someone has to go and you lost the round of not-bitch."

"There was a round of not-bitch?"

As far as research had dictated, the protest would be at Aotea Square. Research meaning a five-minute lookup on my phone. As opposed to the five minute hook-ups most people use their phones to arrange. But the whole thing had been blocked off by barricades and guards. One of the guards was eating a donut, seemed pretty harmless, to be honest. That only seemed to have moved the protest rather than eliminating it. They weren't anywhere I could see. I could just go home. Oh well, too bad. But no. Have to stay. Try to find. Do not want. But I must.

I found a small group of men in fedoras sitting at a bar. Not sure exactly which one. Or maybe I am, but I'm redacting my blog post to stop you going there. Ooooooh. Anyway, I found them, and sat down; recording what they said discreetly through my phone in my pocket. Eventually they broke off, and I could talk to the leader.

"You don't actually believe this, do you?"

"Well yes. I wouldn't be here if I did ..."

"So it would be okay if I raped your sister?" He went pale and stiffened (not a euphemism).

"You go near my sister ..."

"How's that different to any other girl? Surely it's the same thing. If I'm not allowed to rape your sister, why would you be allowed to rape some other guy's sister or daughter or wife?"

"Because I don't know them."

"Oh, right, I see and that makes it fine, does it? Because proximity (or lack of) validates that kind of an action. You see how ignorant and narrow-minded this sounds, don't you?"

"Get out."

I left there fairly well straight away. Even if we as a political party needed those guys' votes to win a seat, I didn't want them. I made my way back to the one of the cafes at uni, sat at a table and waited for further instructions. While I did that, I sent the recording of the meeting and my conversation afterwards to the police. About half an hour later, after a coffee and a good, long pat-myself-on-the-back session, I got my orders and moved off. The police had arrived by that point, and had started arresting people. Not because of their views, per se. Because after the police showed up, the whole meeting turned very violent, very fast; as you might expect by people who spout views online that they aren't accountable for. That also meant I had to wade through a pile of angry, slightly drunk neckbeards throwing punches left, right and center.

Four. That's how many people I knocked out. Morality's never bothered me, as such. I think there are times for moral decision-making and times where you let idiots get trampled in a stampede. This is one of the latter times, in case you noticed.

The street signs weren't much help and my internal map of the city had massive holes in it; like a moth had eaten through bits over the last few years. I arrived at a three-storey apartment building about ten minutes later than I should have been. In fact, the girl I was meeting was standing on the roadside. Shut up, it's not like that.

"You seem relieved we're meeting on the road."

"It's just the stairs ..."

"No it's not. You think I'll cry rape."

"I can't say that didn't cross my mind ..."

"That's not how most people think. The majority of people actually aren't arseholes."

"It does seem odd that you're defending people, though."

"Why, because I'm the one who got raped?"

"Uh ... well, I mean ... yeah, a little bit."

"Sorry we didn't even introduce ourselves. I'm a crazed feminazi who's gonna cry rape if you take another step. But you can call me Steph."

"Ah, right. And I'm the guy who isn't going to take another step. But you can call me Mike."

"So, shall we walk?"

"But I'd have to ... take a step?"

"Oh come on. Live a little. Take the risk."

I've not been out much. But it turns out the September weather is quite nice. Steph's not bad either. Pretty good, considering. We talked about life and things that weren't politics. Because politics isn't all that interesting to me. Mind you, neither's talking to people...

About ten minutes later we ended up back outside her apartment building.

"Well, that was nice. You're from the Don't Stop The Party, right?"

"Yeah. I thought it would've come up before."

"Why? I already know who I'm voting for."

"And who would that be?"

"I'll tell my friends to vote for you."

"But will *you* vote for us?"

"You'll see." She left me on the roadside and walked back into the apartment building.

Success. Well, one out of two. But I didn't expect the first one to actually work.

Now we just had to discuss policy that we can all agree on. Difficult. I got back to the campaign office to sign out and saw boxes of the signs and banners ready to be put up. Campaigning would start tomorrow. Fun times. Not. Sigh. Guess I'd better get some sleep. Up early tomorrow. Why am I still fucking typing. I'll delete all this and not post it ...

<EDITED>

Fuck. That's not delete.

Chapter 6: Campaign Day One

>>> This chapter compiled by Jerry <<<

Monday 28 September 2015: Panic! At The Deadline

Sigh. I get this story. Jerry here.

Even though we know what we're doing, I'm still freaked out. Is this how it's supposed to be? I think it is ... but I'm not exactly the best on 'reality'. That's other people's area. There was a box on the doormat when we arrived at the temporary campaign offices. Those cost money, but I'm not sure exactly how the money showed up; Daisy probably worked a fourth job to cover the rent. I'm not sure though, it never really came up.

The box contained our banners, due to go up in key strategic locations around the city before the end of the day. But we weren't allowed to put them up before 10 in the morning. The box was torn open with such gusto that one of the banners was sacrificed to the great God Hassan-Smash, but cable ties and duct tape fixed it up such that it was presentable. The team split, as you might expect in situations like this, into ten subgroups. Or everyone went off individually, whichever you prefer. We each took a different area around the city and had burner phones with \$100 of credit to be used throughout the campaign, instead of walkie talkies because in those things the word 'stick' becomes 'dick'; and if there's ever another incident of someone putting their genitals between a banner and the place we want it put – then the police will get called.

Daniel was leader. Well, most organised. From where I was standing on this intersection in the middle of four busy roads, I think the rest of the banner-placing was going well. Certainly there was a lack of profanity-laden yelling through my phone. In fact, there was a sense of calm and tension (at the same time ... go figure).

Five minutes.

I attached cable ties to the banner. No messages on the phone.

Four minutes.

A woman honked and yelled out the window that I had a nice butt, and told me I'd be prettier if I smiled.

Three minutes.

Nothing. I read the sign. It was just a massive picture of Nicolas Cage with Daisy's details at the bottom. Our party slogan was 'get out of the Cage'.

Two minutes.

Drum roll please. I'm told the others were frantically busy, but I was calm, more or less. Slightly tense, but there was nothing else I could do until the time was up.

One minute.

The phone rang and I didn't even bother to answer it. Hanging up the banner and desperately trying to secure one rogue cable tie that refused to submit to the rule of the post I was trying to tie it to. The phone rang again and I picked it up.

"You didn't answer before."

"You were just saying I could hang up, though?"

"Hang up the banner, if you could've let me finish. And the people in the central city have realised they left their flyers in the office. So you need to hand out those and get theirs to them as well."

"Ah. Right." I hung up, and a passerby in a car hooted long and loud at the sign, then had taken his attention away from the road and smacked into a wall where the road should have been.

Flyers. Basically they're horrific. You know what I was saying before about being calm while everyone else panicked? It was sort of the opposite of that. Managed to get back half an hour later and found the team at a McDonalds drinking milkshakes on the grass verge. There were some supporters with them; which I didn't expect. A hundred flyers each and decent sized brainfreeze later and the team were ready to campaign. Which basically comprised standing on the roadside and getting insulted by people. Brilliant use of my mid-semester break. Not like I have better things to do with my time.

One guy and his girlfriend showed up and wasted about ten flyers when they kept requesting them from Hassan who kept handing them over; only for the two pesky students, who probably thought they were political activists, to throw them away and come back to ask for more.

So we ran out of flyers far below our recommended target. This was not good. Hopefully, the lack of flyers advertising would be made up for by Paul and Luke who had fucked off to start a social media campaign. Just a Facebook page and basic work on the site website that would go up tomorrow.

I looked on it later before Daniel could see it; just in case I would know to record him getting angry at the two guys later on. They, broadly, made a functioning campaign page where they'd post information and updates, and hopefully get people to vote for them. Except they put false policy (or at least I hope it was false ...) demanding the legislation that a brick wall will be built around the whole country (even though the Pacific Ocean is a gigantic moat ...), and they invited all the current members of the Conservative Party Facebook group (all ten of them, and that page would probably shut down by the end of the week ... yeah, that wouldn't last. And hopefully they'd change it up before the page went live. That could do us damage. That took about an hour. Screw all the people who say teenagers are on their phones all the time. Just because you old twats can't turn them on doesn't necessarily mean we can't turn them off ...

Eventually the whole team was clustered around the Facebook page in the evening just before it went live (for the record; the Conservative people had declined the invitations and reported us). Watching the campaign catch on. The campaign has begun.

Chapter 7: It's A Sign

>>> This chapter compiled by Simran <<<

Tuesday 29 September 2015: A Study Of Sign

A defaced sign. For fuck's sake. That would take an hour to get off and it's not like I have other more important shit to do. Even though I want to, because the alternative currently staring me in the face was removal of a cock and balls from a sign of Nicolas Cage. Talk about mentally scarring. Yeah it's Simran here and – I. Am. Pissed.

What the fuck is it with these people? I don't just mean the team of nine idiots I work with – I mean all people everywhere. Let's take, for instance, the graffiti-ed sign that's in front of me. I mean, seriously; why? We don't really have a campaign budget, either. I mean, would you expect us to have one? Money doesn't grow on trees (even though paper does ...). My point is, I guess, that I will need to hunt down the culprit. Also I have nothing else on today so I've nothing to lose. I just need a deerstalker (although stalking deer is difficult in the central city ... no, no response? Okay, fine) and a pipe for that bit at the end after I find the fucker.

So ... my detective hat is on. Well, a hat, and I feel like a detective. But it's the same thing, isn't it?

There was CCTV footage of the intersection available from a local petrol station. Handy, because I needed a snack. The guy there was nice, but probably the sort of guy that thought me asking to look at footage was the same as asking him out. For the clarity of anyone listening, it is not.

Apparently it's acceptable for girls to ask guys out on Valentine's Day now. Not that I fancy any of the guys I work with. Raj comes close, but ... no. Anyway. I'd better solve this crap before more signs are defaced (even though the graffiti was technically a face so the term 'defaced' doesn't apply. I need a new term, and also a nap). Apologies for that side track. Back to scheduled programming. Speaking of, I need to debug my Python assignment.

OOOOOOOKAY. Does the security footage tell me anything? That is the question, never mind 'to be or not to be?'. There he is, clear as day. Because it's the middle of the day and the image is clear. But he's wearing a mask, like the Anonymous-style Guy Fawkes ones. Although not a lot of people wear those when they commit crimes, often a simple balaclava or in one particularly arresting (ha ha ha) case, this guy used an anaconda (don't).

So I know who did it. Well, I know that someone did do it, and it wasn't a robot (although this isn't an online shopping site, that isn't really an option...). Speaking of online shopping, I need to start with my Christmas presents. She says in September, and definitely won't start until Christmas Eve.

I think ... um ... it was Hassan who was on duty. Oh. I see how this all happened now.

<EDITED>

Hassan didn't have anything to say. That could have something to do with the fact that he wasn't around there on the day, or it might be because I ambushed him when he was leaving the men's bathroom and he ironically shat himself. Or at least he looked like he might have done, but he was wearing brown trousers so I can't be sure.

Well this has been a saddening and disappointing day. But I suppose that's what life is like. Especially nowadays. I think I'll turn in for the night and start up the hunt again tomorrow. You never know, might have been done by a really attractive guy ...

Wednesday 30 September 2015: The Sign of Ours

Overnight, there had been another vandalism. Jerry had fallen asleep at his desk, with Hassan taking to him with a Mikeer pen. Just after doing the twirly bit on a mustache, Hassan saw me standing in the doorway and a thought occurred to him. I know this happened because it isn't the sort of thing that comes up very often so his whole face and body contort with the movement of thought through his veins (even though that isn't how thought works ...).

"Just after you left the guy came back and tried to amend his drawing." Hassan seemed almost sheepish. Well, he was wearing a wool coat.

"Did he try and take it off?" Confused. Hassan hadn't been specific enough, and I needed more information.

"Oh, no. Just amended his earlier rubbish ... I arrested him though." He was still hiding something, I could tell from his expression. It might have been the set of handcuffs he had behind his back.

"Arrested? Oh. So the police have him?" Still vague. He was definitely hiding something.

"No, he's tied up in the boot of my car." Ah, there it was.

"Arrested, or kidnapped?"

"What?"

"Nothing."

Bang. Bang. Bang. Mind you, I suppose the banging was an appropriate response for being tied in the boot of a car. He wouldn't say much, but then again, he was gagged.

We finally got him to talk ... by taking out the gag.

He ... wasn't a fan of our policies. That we have. Whatever they are. I never bothered to check.

He'd committed the crime, and he admitted to it. As you would, in the circumstances.

But solving the case wasn't enough, in the circumstances. Photos of the vandalised sign had leaked to the media. Journalists had done what journalists tend to do and made up the rest of the story. Don't Stop The Party was down in the polls. Vandalising the sign had done significant damage to the party's credibility, to be fixed by ... you guessed it ... press interview. Done by ... you guessed it ... Raj. He missed the round of not-bitch and lost by default. This would be interesting. Or horrific. Time would tell ...

Chapter 8: It's A Mistake

>>> This chapter compiled by Raj <<<

Friday 2 October 2015: Since You Asked Me

Guys, I fucked up. Again. Yeah, Raj here. I'm back.

So umm ... yup. I suppose I'd better tell you what went wrong. Even though I really don't want to.

AHEM. Let me start that again.

<EDITED>

Well. Since you asked me for a story about a boy partaking in a TV interview; I believe I have a tale that ... does that.

You see, it began when university students decided they could influence decision making by taking power into their own hands. These guys aren't protesters, I swear. It was late evening and the sky was orange, not that we could see it. You see, the makeup and hair room (where I was making up my responses while a pretty lady did my hair by looking at it and going 'yup'; which is all you can really expect with short hair.

Then the guy came through and called for me. Walked through corridors. Would have got lost in the maze if the guy hadn't been with me. Through a door, which I didn't quite time right and it hit me on the kneecap and I fell over. Embarrassing. Into a studio, where some pompous fuckflap was sitting like a king. Time to mess up his day and/or life, don't you think? Nah? Has he not pissed you off yet?

Because the first thing he said to me was "Hello there son, do you want a lollipop?" and ruffled my hair. No. He was scum. Time to make him suffer.

The lights went up, and Mr Host-Man, whose name I never cared to learn for obvious reasons, said; “so I’m speaking to Raj, a representative from the Don’t Stop The Party, and political hopeful.”

“Or are you? Oooh”.

Ignoring this. “So, let’s talk policy.”

“I think we should build a wall.” I figured out very quickly that the way to play this interview was to speak with a totally straight face. Doing mental arithmetic should help with not thinking about the jokes when I say them.

“We live on an island.” If I cared about the tone of his voice or his body language or ... him; I might’ve noticed he was confused.

“All the more reason. Every castle needs a moat.” That was an easy set-up and the riposte cost me nothing in terms of thinking. Or cash. I don’t pay for my jokes.

“And what’s your position on gays?” Trying to rile me. Probably because I was beginning to rile him.

“Preferrably on top. Sometimes I’ll accept bottom duty.” Didn’t even begin to annoy me.

“Come on. You asked us to be here. Be serious.” But it had continued to annoy him. Exasperated.

“I might be being serious. You’ll never know. Unless you vote for us.” I winked at the camera, and that sent him through the roof. He recovered his composure by remembering he was being recorded.

“And ...” Mr Host-Man (which sounds like a Marvel superhero for reality TV; I mean, he had the hair ... and cape, or at least I think it’s a cape) paused, “... what do you think about the minimum wage?”

“Of consent, yeah I think it’s about right.” Let’s outright try and make him punch me.

The interviewer actually facepalmed; so close. “Not the minimum age of consent, no. I mean the minimum wage.”

“I think the Government-imposed minimum wage is about as high as it should be.” He was clearly shocked by the presence of a legitimate answer. Shocked, relieved and eager to know more.

“You say that like there’s an alternative?”

“What about if firms raised their wages to an appropriate level on their own?”

“How is that different?” Still going. He wasn’t sure if this was the setup to an elaborate punchline.

“Because that way there isn’t increases in unemployment due to higher wages, because the wages are a choice. Like whether or not you do TV interviews.”

“I’m sure any McDonalds exec that’s watching is taking notes.” He paused, considering, then continued, “but while we’re on the subject, why did you waste my airtime just now?”

“Waste your airtime? You already do that plenty well enough on your own.” WUMPH. Back of the net.

“One reason why people should vote for you is ...” the interviewer started, and there was a lengthy silence as both parties waited for the other to finish the sentence.

“Oh, you mean me. Well, you should vote for us if you agree with our policy because we’ll try and fix what we think is wrong with the world. Note the use of the word ‘try’ and subjective nature of the word ‘fix’.”

“And ... although this isn’t the first time I’ve asked you this question,” the interviewer was going pale with anger by this point, “what is your policy?”

“On what, we have many policies.”

“For fuck’s – just tell me what you think.” I was getting to him. Black eye in ten ...

“You’ll have to apologise for that language, is what I think.”

“Look. I think it’s about time we wrap up.” Black eye in five ...

“Warm because Winter is Coming.”

“Look, I’ve been nothing but hospitable –” Black eye in two ...

“I normally find that people who say they’re hospitable are dicks.”

Cut to black (eye).

<EDITED>

And then the interview finished. And the presenter proved my point quite literally hand over fist, by punching me in the face. I’m told that the interview didn’t go very well.

So, what to do.

More of a statement than a question. The point of it isn’t to actually question what to do. Just to show the thought had crossed my mind. Because I already knew. I simply had to steal the tape from the studio before they could edit and broadcast it. That would salvage the team’s reputation. Or at least prevent me from permanently destroying it. As it turns out, the assistant directors are easily bribed, and tapes easily obtained.

That was easy. Too easy.

We got back to the team’s offices and played it, just to be sure.

And it was the wrong tape. The one we'd taken was a warmup tape of Mr Host-Man flexing his muscles. So no great loss.

Oh no.

Oh God.

The saddest thing is that the answer was readily apparent.

We needed to steal the real one, and quickly.

I know just the man for the job. With a tape in the TV station's archives that would ruin our reputation and only one way to stop it being broadcast, a man was chosen. A man sent to retrieve it. And that man would be ...

Chapter 9: Ruin The Tapes

>>> This chapter compiled by Paul <<<

Monday 5 October 2015: Parkour

This is Paul, and admitting that might be a mistake. I'm an engineer, so I could calculate the exact angle that would work best to retrieve the tape. Then get the execution 110% wrong. But, on the other hand, there might be cute girls. Which there isn't in engineering.

The Mission Impossible theme plays in the distance. No, it's just in my head. But it helps to imagine it. The idea was that we sneak into the TV studio and steal the tapes, then destroy it before it can be broadcast. I suppose the first step is to get Raj to admit he fucked up. Which wasn't going to happen, although I suspect he already knew. Daniel had known Jerry for fifteen years. I had known Raj for a similar length of time.

If you get in trouble, yodel really loud. That was the advice I was given, and following it was probably a mistake. Would only use it in extreme circumstances, for instance a yodelling contest. It can, in some regrettable situations, cause awkwardness when having sex.

All right, all right. Let's get back to the main point.

An impenetrable fortress. An object we desire. The impossible heist. And only me. I'm the only one that wants to do this. So I have no choice.

The team would help me, as much as they could through communication devices. But when push came to shove, as had happened when it was decided that I would perform the heist, I was on my own. In fact, that whole ... thing resulted in a minor food fight. Okay, major food fight. There were still gravy stains in the curtains.

<EDITED>

Communication plugged in and ready. Then I fitted a harness even though I wouldn't need it, and a surreptitious black leather jacket. Okay, the most conspicuous-looking leather jacket that doesn't have plastic explosive wired through it. Yes, I went there. Getting in through the door was easy, but that receptionist wouldn't let me into the building proper. I suppose I should have seen this coming.

Went outside and regrouped. If I couldn't get past the receptionist, there really was no point even trying. Would I try and flirt with her? Or was there another way? Yes, there was another way. Because the eaves overhung a reasonable amount, so it would be easy to get up onto the roof, and then navigate the building on the roof.

Anyone who's desperate or a stalker, take notes.

Got up onto the roof and regretted my decision immediately because I'd forgotten to leave my fear of heights on the ground. Now what? No idea. I couldn't see any skylights or any way of facilitating a straight drop into the right room. No idea where that room even was.

"Um, hello Mike?"

"WHAT." Mike wasn't yelling, in fact he was probably being very quiet. Default volume settings and suchlike.

"Hold on," I replied while fumbling with the device to lower its volume to less than beam-directly-into-my-skull levels. "Um, where is the archive room and how do I get there from the roof?"

"The roof? I thought you were roofless?"

"The receptionist threw me out so now I'm on the roof."

"Powerful throw. Right," there was a click-click-click of a mouse scroll bar working, then Mike continued, "so it looks like the archive is smack-bang in the center of the building and there's no skylights or windows."

“Ah. So. What will we do?”

“Should have done a drill run.”

“Meaning?”

“You should have gone up on the roof a week ago with a drill.”

“But right now?”

“Sneak in someone’s open window, then befriend them and get into the archive, maybe?”

“Yeah that would work.”

No, that wouldn’t work. Well. I mean it *would*. But then there’s whole ‘I’m not here to hurt you, just steal things from your archive’ thing. So that’s what I did. After about half an hour of walking up and down the roof like a scuba diver on sand, so as to make as little noise as possible. There was a window open about halfway up the building that I selected as my entry point, and I aimed my descent so that I’d slip straight through. And, like I had forseen, the girl sitting at the desk (called Alice, as I found out much later – I never go for names first) screamed and threw a pair of scissors at me.

I should perhaps explain that because I was wearing a harness, people on the ground thought I was meant to be there (on the roof). I maybe should have, in an ideal world, worn a high-vis vest.

After I calmed her down and got her number (just in case – shush), I convinced her of my plan. Turns out she’d seen the interview be recorded; she was an assistant director or something, I wasn’t paying attention. We made our way across to the archive room ...

... and I was confronted with a warehouse full wall-to-wall of tapes and no way in hell of knowing where to find the right one. Mike had handed over the comm device and the rest of the guys in the team were currently talking about how I was going ‘round the baes’. She couldn’t hear though, and I switched it off so as to stop the incessant noise.

She knew the system, so I found the tape in no time. Tricky bit was getting out. Well, it would have been, but Alice’s lunch break had started, so we just walked out the front door. Then went for lunch. Because what else was I supposed to do?

While we were on our date, Daniel phoned me. He said that the studio had phoned him, and they knew what the team had done. We had 24 hours to return the tape or they’d press charges against us. I assume that means a court case, and not random electrification.

The bigger and, in many ways, more important question was; how had they found out so quickly?

Chapter 10: Break The Bank

>>> This chapter compiled by Catherine <<<

Tuesday 6 October 2015: Lights, Camera, Oh Fuck I’ve Dropped It.

Do you remember the banking system? Yeah. It was around until 2009; a place you could go to steal some pens. Then 2009 happened and like a massive black hole, WUMPH. Mikeet-based economics went up shit creek without a paddle. Catherine here.

So, long story short; we had about a thousand dollars. Cracked into it by buying a nice lunch at a restaurant on the viaduct. Beautiful day, beautiful food, and quiet enough that we could properly plan our attack.

“Action!” We weren’t even recording, Paul was just desperate.

But seriously, Simran and Daisy had moved the office furniture back while Luke and Hassan set up a camera and tripod, and Jerry and Mike did the set dressing. So the setup was crisp and clean but ... looked horrific. I’ll leave that to your imagination. Yes. You. *Points finger into your soul*. I sat off to one side taking notes for this. Mostly because being out of the way stops the guys from pissing me off.

Hassan had moved on from the setup, and was learning his lines for his five minutes in the spotlight. Well, three minutes, and it was a desk lamp.

“I don’t think I can do this.” Hassan was nervous. I think it (rather counterintuitively) did something for team morale to see Hassan be anything less than relentlessly and annoying chirpy.

“Yes you can. Mostly because you’re the only one of us who can act.” Jerry tried to be supportive. Tried.

“Even that’s suspect.” Mike sawed Jerry’ attempt to be supportive in half by muttering under his breath while

moving a desk. Hassan reached out and thumped it, and the thing fell on Mike's toe.

"Calmer now."

"Karma, did you mean?" Daniel interjected.

Then, like magic, they were ready to film. Even though the desk was in the wrong place (although Mike was adamant this was not the case), and Mike found himself pinned to the floor due to the desk on his toe. He made like the One Punch man and smashed the desk in half. No, that didn't happen; but I'm doing an anime joke if it flipping kills me.

"Quiet on set." I calmed the ruckus by yelling that through a megaphone. Well, rolled up refill cover, but the same principle applies. Nine pairs of eyes shifted towards me. Too many. Uh oh. And I totally forgot what I was supposed to be doing.

Luke took over, he'd probably been thinking about how to set up the shot for about the last ten minutes, since he unstuck Mike from the desk.

"If you," he said, gesturing to Hassan, "would go over there," he pointed at the centre of the set-up, "then I could set the camera up here," he said; moving the device, "and then we can get cracking," he finished while the back wall of the set-up cracked a little and one of the lighting rigs fell off the wall and hit Hassan on the head.

Luke paused, and surveyed the damage. "Or not."

Raj vowed to edit the project on his computer. Which was cool, because nobody else had the time. We could see, even while he was doing it, that the interview would look better for the party than its predecessor. Although, admittedly, that wasn't at all difficult.

He had finished it by a quarter to six. A representative from the studio came to collect it, and Daniel made the mistake of using the phrase 'call off the hounds' when referring to the lawyers. This meant that Hassan sang, quietly, 'who let the dogs out' when the guy left.

The interview transmitted with minimal problems, except for the obvious 'but that isn't the correct presenter' problem. In fact, it really helped. The social media campaign was well above the suggested benchMike. Well, a number we agreed was reasonable. We seemed to have voters and swathes of supporters in the general public. We might, maybe, just possibly, have a shot at actually succeeding.

Chapter 11: Autocracy

>>> This chapter compiled by Hassan <<<

Tuesday 10 November 2015: One Man, One Vote.

I'm Hassan. But you knew that.

Plane food is horrific. Well, that's a slight lie. It's not atrocious, just ... reheated. And it's certainly no picnic. Except that it is a literal picnic. Which is amazing! And Exciting! And SQUEE. Because PICNIC. Not the chocolate, the event. Except it's on a plane. Which I guess helps to distract from the FACT THAT WE MIGHT DIE.

Ding dong.

"This is the pilot speaking. We'll be flying to Wellington today from Auckland, which means a flight time insufficient for a cup of tea. So try to relax, but I promise you won't be able to while we're in the air. Because we'll only be in the air for ten minutes."

He stopped talking when there was a loud rumble from the floor of the plane.

"What was that?" Confused, puzzled. A little scared. "Oh. Right. I farted."

The flight started off a bit bumpy. A slight turbulence situation.

Daisy shouldn't be leader. It should be me. I'd be so good at it. First thing I'd do, I'd – I'd – I'd – well, it hardly matters. It's not like we'll win any seats.

The campaign hadn't let up in the last month and a half. Sleep would be welcome, preferably for about a year. But, for now at least, an hour would have to suffice.

You know what that means?

TIME TO CALL FOR A VOTE!

<EDITED>

They weren't really prepared to listen. But then again, half of the team was trying to sleep. Simran and Luke hit me with their plane-cushions. Paul and Mike told me to go away. Catherine and Raj punched me in the face. I think that was accidental, but they never actually said. And they were half asleep.

But I pestered on. And on, and on, and on. Eventually I had coerced the whole team into mumbling their votes through their plane pillows. They were all still trying to sleep or something.

The problem with what I had just done was that ... the vote was tied. Tied like my hands behind my back in a straight jacket. Oh yeah, that happened for a week after a campaign ad where I interrupted Catherine and Simran's serious political message by juggling lemons and falling into a cheesecake. Admittedly, the fact that the police were called was a little of an accident.

I tried it again twenty minutes later, just before landing. Everyone was asleep though, so I won by a landslide. Hahahahaha.

No.
Because this time, they were so incensed by my intrusion into their naptime that they actually asked me to name some problems with New Zealand that I'd fix.

"Problems facing NZ; poverty, rape culture, wage gap, rape culture, House prices, Rape culture?"

"Goody." A distinct lack of excitement.

"And did I mention rape culture?"

I don't think it needs saying that the second vote goes as well as the first. Deadlock.

One more attempt. And everything to play for.

Did I just make being an MP sound like a game show? Yes. Yes, I did.

Ding dong.

"We'll be landing in about ten minutes. Don't worry, I passed the six-week crash course. That choice of words was poor. But you can trust me. Or at least that's what my room-mates diary says. Cabin crew prepare for landing. I'm sure as hell not ready."

<EDITED>

The plane landed with little more incident. Except for a lively game of I spy. Which you'd think was difficult in a plane with no open windows. But apparently not. After landing, Paul must have said something to one of the customs staff because I got detained for an hour or so in a room answering stupid questions about an imported wooden axe. Something about not being allowed biological matter or weapons in the country ... so just imagine the size of the red flag that a mix of the two would make ...

I got to the voting party venue an hour late. It wasn't the day of voting. Yet. But we had to plan how we'd set it up and the kind of things we'd have on offer on the night.

Also, actually, it was the day of the vote.

I asked the team to cast a third vote. Third chance lucky, I guess. It was either this or nothing. Mostly because I'd had death threats by this point. And expulsion. But mostly death.

The team of what was now nine members voted. Four voted for me. Four voted for Daisy. And one. Raj. Was playing for tension. Like this. Waiting. He paused. Looked up. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then raised a hand as if he were going to point at a candidate ...

Chapter 12: Bureaucracy

>>> This chapter compiled by Luke <<<

Tuesday 15 December 2015: People Who Cast Votes Have No Power

Luke here and this is ... hard to write. Because I can't do anything for fear I will miss developments. Even though there won't be any results, as such, for another four hours.

Panic. But muted; like anticipation, except not as optimistic. In fact, I was positively terrified.

Could I sit still? No. I couldn't sit at all, actually. I couldn't even stand still without feeling sick with nerves.

This is ridiculous. It's not even me on the vote form. Why am I so worried. I don't even know. But I can't stay here. Oh no. I can not.

"Luke, Luke. I need help with some –"

"Sure!" I was up and had shoes on and standing beside the courier man before he'd even finished the sentence. He

was probably a little freaked out by it.

The actual moving of boxes took about half an hour. Which was ... underwhelming. Although at least I returned to the office to see that ... nothing at all had happened. People were still voting, and some of the Northern provinces had returned. So it would be a while before the Mount Roskill result we were all waiting for would be available. Probably a similar amount of time I'd been 'available'.

Our offices needed tidying and nobody else even wanted to. Normally there was a vote for this sort of thing. But no. Cables, paper and some used – actually you don't need to know about that. It wasn't pretty. Or straightforward. Or sanitary. But it filled some time, so I can't complain. Another half an hour. Well, half an hour of tidying and another half hour of washing my hands.

They got me to get some coffees after I finished the tidying; which would mean the tidied area would just be where the coffee cup rubbish would end up. Coffee run, easy, and it filled another fifteen minutes.

Tuesday 15 December 2015: People Who Count Votes Have All Of It

Sat down at the office. No. I still can't do this.

"Oh and Luke, there's actually more –"

Up, shoes, Out the door. Boxes, move, stairs, move. Was I thinking about the election. Well, technically no but I am now. Please make it stop.

Shifted papers off one of the desks in the vote party venue back-office.

Went on a coffee run. Not really because anybody wanted one. But I was still nauseatingly ... err, nauseated. The woman at the coffee kiosk looked slightly pitying. Don't judge me.

Sat back at my desk. Three hours to go. Nope, I need something to do.

Rinse and repeat. Two hours to go.

And again. One hour to go.

This was almost like torture. It felt like YEARS. And the worst bit was that despite the apparent passage of time I felt like I was getting no closer to my destination. Much like a traffic queue at 5:30 PM. But with a sudden flick at the end, like a Godzilla attack.

But where, you might ask, was the Godzilla attack?

Well, ladies and gentlemen. Here we flipping go. Nice pun on the word 'flipping' when you take it in the context of a Godzilla attack.

You see, on the last coffee run, Daisy decided she wanted to accompany me. Now, I wasn't used to this amount of attention, and especially from her. I – I – I mean ...

Anyway. Went for a coffee run with ten minutes until the vote would be revealed. This was perhaps the first inconsistency in my tale; because due to my anxiety, you would think that I would want to be in the room ... but, as it turns out, no. I'd rather spend the last ten minutes of my freedom from the public eye on a coffee run talking to perhaps the most powerful woman I know.

Ten minutes, that's the number to beat. Probably with a stick or something.

Return trip, five minutes later, and things start to go wrong. I get a text, and the vote's come in early. OH NO. THIS IS NOT GOOD. The metaphorical roof of my anxiety is blasted off its latches – if indeed rooves have latches – by the sheer force of the anxiety itself. Daisy might have felt a similar increase in adrenaline because her legs wobble, but she carries on. I take the coffees, obviously. On the stairs, she received a text that caused another wobble. The observant amongst you will be able to pick out the problem with this little scenario; stairs are not the ideal place to go weak-kneed and fall. But she did. She fell right backwards. Down, and down and down and down. By the time I got to her she was unconscious. I could see in the shattered surface of the phone a text. It said 'You're the new MP for Mount Roskill'.

"Oh crap. Now I have to carry her *and* the coffees?"

Chapter 13: Democracy

>>> This chapter compiled by Daisy; much later than it ought to be <<<

Luke here again. This next post was corrupted somehow, so the date and title data was lost. I recovered the rest of it though; here it is.

Date Withheld: Title Unknown

A cool breeze, I think a door was open. I didn't look around. Not yet. Didn't want to wake up. The world becomes too real too quickly after you wake up. Can't I just sleep forever?

No. I can not. I have to look around. I am – wait, what? In the cabinet? But there’s nobody else here. No. That’s wrong too. There’s Raj spinning around on his chair, Jerry testing the microphone by yelling ‘penis’ into it, Hassan is rushing around tidying up. Simran and Catherine are reading copies of the same book, occasionally swapping copies for no reason. Then Paul would come by and try out a shitty pickup line, and one or other of the girls would slap him with the book. Mike was wandering slowly around, taking the whole room in. It was basically a hall, about five metres from floor to ceiling, that had been kitted out with desks and microphones. The speaker of the house had a massive table in the middle, with a ... speaker ... on it. Massive boombox.

"Paul Sue, constituent for Mangere". The speaker blared out. You can take that to mean whatever you like.

He stood up and made a gesture, then 'Turn Down For What' played. Strobe lights came on. Catherine, who'd taken up the role of Speaker, seemed exasperated. She'd put up with this kind of shit for far too long.

“Do you have any actual policies.”

"Here's my insurance one have a look," Luke interjected from one of the seats in the top-lefthand corner. So, way at the back.

“Will someone please be serious?”

“NOPE.” I heard that before I saw it; then Raj rounded a corner on rollerskates, and rolled across the whole Parliament.

Catherine gave up trying to moderate the session, and settled for staring at an imaginary camera like she was on *The Office*.

No, this can't be right. What idiot would let this happen? How is it that we've been allowed into Parliament when nobody else is around? No. And that doesn't even count the unicycle that appeared from nowhere and disappeared there again, or the motions that glitch in and out of existence.

It was almost ... dreamlike. But wait ... that makes a certain amount of – sense. I remember the coffees, the text, the fall. Down and down and down. Then nothing.

<EDITED>

Luke here. Just interjecting. Into someone else's post, for the second time. How rude of me.

See, after Daisy fell down the stairs and I got to her, I managed, with difficulty, to get her back to the rest of the team. She was probably just unconscious. With bruised ankles from whacking them on the stairs, but just unconscious. She'd be awake soon. Simran stepped in and suggested this was not the case and that someone should actually call an ambulance. Daniel did that even before she'd asked. Paul sat and drank his coffee. He had, after all, ordered it.

Ambulance came, flashing lights and all. Turned out the fall had messed her up, big time. High chance of brain damage (major or minor, they weren't sure), and they'd need to put her in a medically induced coma until she improved.

We sat there for a while, waiting for something to happen like people watching the opening day of a cricket test match. But nothing, like (as I've said) people watching the opening day of a test match. Well, nothing external.

<EDITED>

What the fuck, Luke. I mean, cool and everything but this is my flipping post. Don't interrupt. Come on, dude.

<EDITED>

Me back. Then nothing, until this. And even this, apparently, wasn't real.

The question was, of course, how to get out of it. Would the dream end if we passed a resolution of some kind?

Piles of files. Everyone had suggested things we could try to get rid of the dream. They seemed reMikeably eager to get rid of me, actually. Rude. Jerry took the top motion and read it out.

"All in favour say AIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE", Jerry had taken up speaker position, and doubled over as Raj punched him in the stomach. A modest number of hands. But not enough to pass the bill.

Waited for a while. Nothing happened. That hadn't finished the dream.

He tried again with another bill.

“All in favour say I.” He started, then mumbled under his breath, “would really rather be somewhere else.”

This bill passed by two votes. Specifically, Raj and Paul’s. #IShipt. By which I in no way mean I ordered them online.

After the bill passed, there was a tense lull. Silence. Waiting. Anticipation.

Nothing.

“Well. I can just walk out the door. That should finish it.” I started walking, then jogging down the central aisle, then a full sprint at the door, pulling it open and walking through and --

Into a wall. The door wasn’t actually there yet. I hadn’t unlocked that level yet, it would seem.

So. I wasn’t ready to leave the dream. By inference, that would mean my body was still fixing itself up. So one day, perhaps, I would be free to assume office. Or so I assumed.

In the meantime, who would take over? Hassan certainly wanted to. But six year olds want lollies. Giving them what they want is often a mistake. They’d probably elect an interim leader from the nine current members, then I could take over when the dream decided it had finished with me.

So close to fixing the world, and I’d fallen short. That’s a pun. Laugh or I’ll pass a resolution that makes not laughing illegal. I can do that, you know. I might even wake up especially.

Chapter 14: Five Days In Wellington

>>> This chapter compiled by Daniel <<<

Saturday 23 April 2016: Interlude. Duration – Four Months.

Bing bong.

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking. And by that I of course mean the guy that’s slightly in charge with a superiority complex. Yup, it’s me; Daniel here. About four months have passed since we won the election, so allow me to catch you up ...

Get drunk, get rich, no issues. That’s what the ad for Parliament might as well have said. If Parliament made ads and was allowed to lie in them. Because that is ... so ... not what it’s like. Of course, it could be argued that the campaign was the easy bit ... or the most difficult; depending entirely on your perspective. Then our candidate went and put herself in a coma; which is, frankly, rude. So we had to pick a new delegate and couldn’t decide. Like a ‘1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1’ vote, couldn’t decide. Eventually decided through a random number generator in Python. Desperate times, etc. I think that’s about it ...

And continue reading ...

Saturday 23 April 2016: For Farce Sake

7am waking up in the morning. No. I will not, I repeat; WILL NOT, do a Rebecca Black impersonation, even though we are similar ages, and have broadly the same vocal ability. Also it is literally seven on a Saturday morning and I should not be upright at this time. Not like I’d been out drinking ... I learnt my lesson from that one a while back. You know, when we created a political party? Do you remember that? Because I flipping don’t. I remember what fucking happened afterwards. But you don’t need me to discuss all of that ... the post archive can tell you more than I ever would.

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On the plane; it just took off. Filling time. Aaaaaaand, that’s it, we’re landing. No, I jest. I’m heading to Wellington for a conference, because as an MP I kind of have to do that now. Fun times. Or that’s what I say when something’s fucking boring. Like sex with Donald Trump, I imagine. Anyway, I got sidetracked. Plane story time; the pilot left his tannoy on and you could hear the ATC struggle to understand the pilot’s accent. That’s not an ideal situation; really it’s not. Not quite as bad as the classic ‘four candles’ sketch, but close. Then just before the plane started moving there was this judder and creaking sound, and the guy next to me leant over and said “that’ll be the landing gear”. He hadn’t thought it through. Because, frankly, if that had been the landing gear, we’d be flipping dead.

<EDITED>

Wellington's normally windy, but it wasn't today. Beautiful autumn sunshine, birds in the branches of the trees, leaves lining the roads, etc It took a full minute just to acknowledge this scene. So. Right. Conference. Where was I in relation to where it was? If that makes any sense ...

I had \$500 to spend. Which was promptly snatched out of my hand by a running twat when I stopped to count it up. Then a guy with a hat on ran past, and his friend, another guy with a hat on had just enough time to stop and yell in my general direction; "What're you doing standing there? Get after him!" I was, of course, still reeling after the betrayal from the random stranger.

Get after who? Me, I'm just going to a conference and I don't have any money anymore; who're you --?

That's what I thought. Then I saw it. The hat, you see, wasn't a standard hat. It was a police hat.

They thought I was a cop. Or at least I was expected to try to be.

What. The. Fuck.

So I did the only thing I could think of in the circumstances. I ran with him.

Saturday 23 April 2016: A Surprise Induction, and Very Small Feet

Holy fuck it's been a busy day. So, let me walk you through it now I have a chance to sit down and write it up ...

"Look, I know you're not a cop," the officer said as we rounded a particularly square-looking corner, triangulating on the perpetrator.

"Then why did you expect me to follow?"

"And you weren't going to? He stole your five hundred dollars."

"That's true." In the meantime, the perpetrator had stopped and was looking back at the policeman and giving him the fingers. Which refers to a series of gestures and not what he was eating from an oily-looking bag.

A random and insignificant old woman saw this and looked with disgust in both directions. "Oi, you, officer. Are you going to arrest this man?" she pointed back at the perpetrator, who removed a particularly well-placed scarf to reveal she was, in fact, not a man.

"... woman." The old woman corrected.

The criminal made a move to run, and I rushed forward and tackled the fucker.

"That's better, officer. Although I see you're in plain clothes." The old woman was digging me a hole that I would have to sit in.

I say this because another proper policeman walked past that exact second.

<EDITED>

Been a busy day. I've solved three murders and interrogated at least a dozen criminals. As far as things being said that have unintended and horrific consequences, that woman seems to have said most of the items that top my personal list. It's my break now, and I should perhaps break the story to catch you up in terms of where we left off. So Daisy's in a coma in the hospital, and nobody's sure when she'll wake up. We know she will though, eventually. We held a vote the day after, and I was elected the MP for Mount Roskill by a landslide vote. And by that I of course mean that the same meeting also contained a vote for a landslide. Then I needed to go to Wellington for some waste-of-flipping-time conference. Which is why I'm here, I guess. That should catch you up ... I think.

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"You. Plainclothes. Nice job. You interview?" He wasn't familiar with full sentences including all of noun, adjective and verb.

"N – n – n – n – no, I gotta ... go." I didn't even look him in the eye before spinning on my heel and bolting out the door. Or at least that was the plan. What actually happened looked something closer to an uncoordinated person spinning too far in a circle and running into a wall. After I'd recovered and relocated my nose, I got out of there, leaving a policeman baffled, which I consider a person achievement.

I ran to the conference venue ... and wasn't able to get in because the guard on the door refused to get down off the top of it to check my ID. Which you'd think was kind of his job.

Conference in about two hours. My internal clock alarm was ringing and mild OCD playing up.

How am I gonna get into the room?

Hmm ...

TO BE CONTINUED ...

... IMMEDIATELY

I know what I'll do.

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It turns out there's this thing called the Sun. And also a parallel concept known as 'heat'. Dressing in high-voiced overalls was a mistake. But at least I could get into the conference room by pretending to be an electrician. Or that was the plan ...

For about five minutes until a sixty-year-old woman flagged me down before I'd even got inside, and asked me to fix her pipes, which sounded like some kind of euphemism. Trust me, it really did.

Fast forward just under an hour. Pan down from powerful midday sun to the very hot and slumped guy in overalls. That's me. After fixing some wires, and getting electrocuted. More than once, which was a little humiliating. She paid me five hundred dollars cash though, so that would be a decent lunch here. In Auckland, that would probably get one Starbucks coffee.

Forty-five minutes to make it to the conference on time. And I needed a new approach.

I've got it!

<EDITED>

These chef's hats are uncomfortable, mostly because the top of the thing goes boof against the tops of doorframes, but hopefully I'd be able to get into the conference by serving some people coffee then doing a Shakespearian 'you thought!' reveal. The only problem with this version of the plan is that I can't cook. Well, that's slightly untrue. I can do my mother's Shepherd's Pie. Which is called "Down With The System" because she's an anarchist. Not a problem in and of itself but the names of each dish and printed on a label on the front of the dish, and a dish called "Down With The System" is probably inappropriate for a Model United Nations conference. While I'm on the subject; I'm not quite sure how this happened, but the conference abbreviates to XMUN. I think the organisers all have superpowers.

Half an hour to get in to the conference. I think the head chef (which in no way is meant to imply the cooks were employed to serve human appendages ...) noticed I was looking at my watch every twenty seconds.

"You look like you're trapped here."

"Kinda feels it a little."

"Oh? Why?"

"Need to visit a friend in the hospital.:"

"Ah. You can go after we serve lunch."

BOOM. I didn't even have to try, and I already knew exactly what would happen.

<EDITED>

Didn't quite work out and I'll tell you how badly I fucked up.

You see, I cooked the food; such as that I could; and then we served it. Found it easy to kind of limbo underneath a serving tray and sneak into a seat. Or, drop the tray and hit your head on the desk. Either one, but the universe conspired to allocate me to the second option. Some people wouldn't be able to recover from the humiliation, but I did okay. By hiding under the desk for the next ten minutes then hitting my head again when it finally became time to get out.

I hear you asking (from my imaginary representations of my audience in my head); 'but when did it *become* time to come out of hiding? There were clear signposts. The fact one of the delegates brought out a compass was perhaps the main indicator that things were about to go South. Then an old woman burst in and pointed squarely at me, then moved her finger around in a circle; "There's Officer Hopkins – he knows who stole my handbag."

The whole room shifted in confusion. Myself included. Officer Hopkins? Where'd she get that from? The tension and confusion in the room were broken by the lights flickering then going out. The woman I'd helped out stormed into the room; "sorry about the interruption, and disruption. We appear to be having power iss –" She stooped as her gaze reached my seat.

"You! Alex Jenkins! What did you do?"

I gestured at my hair, which still softly sizzled from my earlier encounter with the mains. "Whatever it was; probably badly." Still no idea where they were getting these names.

The woman stared so intensely at the desk just in front of me, and it caught fire.

Actually no, that would probably have been a shorted out wire, but either way there was a small fire slowly eating through the desk.

“Bill Cutaway! Your shift hasn’t finished.” A guy in a chef’s hat yelled from the now-permanently-open doorway.

“Oh yes; that’s right. I should warn you – your ‘shift’ will probably finish in about a week.”

“What do you mean?”

“At perhaps the most convenient moment, about five of the delegates excused themselves to the bathroom, and the chef got my pun.

“Look, everyone listen.” I paused, then; unable to stop myself; “and touch and taste and hear”. They did, which I admit was a bit of a surprise.

Through the deafening silence in the room now, I looked across at a guy with a camera plugged into the mains (which I now see was a mistake); “do you happen to have a recording of the conference?”

The facilitator had had enough by now. “Officer Hopkins; Alex Jenkins; Bill Cutaway? All of these names refer to you?”

I started speaking without knowing where the sentence would end; “Um ... yeah ... those are all pseudonyms I use when staying in hotels to avoid being swamped by screaming girls. What? It is possible.”

The next Wellington city council meeting would be a fun time. They’d have to explain how an electrician nobody’s heard of promised total reform to the power grid, then vanished into thin air. They’d have to deal with the suit (clothes as well as legal stuff) from a man who’d been given severe food poisoning by a chef seemingly employed by the city who then totally vanished into thin air. And then they’d have to assure the public that a random stranger couldn’t just walk into an XMUN conference and hide under one of the desks, despite the fact that this had happened. They would not know these events were perpetrated by the same person. They would not know that person was me. This would probably not impact the political atmosphere too much, but ran a slight risk of totally toppling the local government.

“Go with Alyssa, she’ll show you out of the building.” The security guard was not amused, which was kind of fair enough. A woman waved, and I walked towards her as she turned and left the room. There was another woman over the other side of the room who looked slightly confused; and, thinking about it, I was definitely to blame for that. I followed the woman around the corner and to the waiting car, a concierge ran behind. About five seconds too late, I heard him through the closed car door yell; “He’s with the wrong girl!”

Then the woman jumped as she realised I’d followed her.

“Oh My God! What are you doing in my car?”

Oh shit. She’d been waving at someone else. Oh shit.

Chapter 15: The House Fool

>>> This chapter compiled by Daniel <<<

Tuesday 7 June 2016: This Week In Parliament

Winter morning cup of coffee. Need it to wake up your body and frozen hands. We hadn’t yet moved to Wellington permanently; I suppose that day was coming; getting closer and closer each successive day we weren’t chucked out of Parliament. Jerry and I got coffee at the same place. For the record, it was not a Starbucks and we did not get pumpkin-spice lattes. Pumpkin spice is a good name for the sixth Spice girl.

We’d sit with coffees on bollards outside of Parliament, and talk about policy and other issues that we’d have to deal with – which, because of our revised occupations, covered almost every issue plaguing mankind. Sorry, I meant humanity, because ‘man’ can be very unkind.

From our newly-acquired vantage point we could spy on the politicians walking into the Beehive, and; in one case, tripping over flat ground and falling into a puddle. The Leader of the Opposition – typical Alpha male, thought he was cool, popular and ‘Mr Sex’; would walk past at ten past eight precisely, and wave like we were supposed to give a shit.

Now, this might seem a little bitter; but all popular people are ... dicks. Yes. And then when they reach the age of forty they’ll have sagging skin and ... egos, and then we, the nerdy-speccy unpopular idiots will have our revenge ahahahahahahaha.

... okay, that definitely seemed more than a little deranged and bitter. It's also somewhat beside the point. So that's kind of it for now.

<EDITED>

The House was noisy. I suppose, it hadn't gathered in two months. There was a lot of catchup to do. One guy from the Labour party had brought in McDonalds. He had a lot of ketchup to do. Geddit? Not funny? Rude.

Now, look. I've been told some absolutely massive lies in my life. You can be anything you want to be ... you'll fit into Parliament just fine ... and that Dad would be back soon. That's probably my top 3 in order. Or maybe reverse order. A new job is always hard, but showing up to Parliament on the first day and expecting they will at least acknowledge that you **are** an MP, and instead having your ideas ridiculed and hair ruffled kind of stings. My hair was ruffled more than once. I mean how insensitive are some people? I say this as a guy whose gut response to the statement 'I love you' when said by almost anyone is to say 'ew go away'.

So when I say there was a politician eating McDonalds and that nobody else seemed to pay him any mind, it's out of sheer bitterness (again) because I couldn't get through my packed sandwiches without at least four MP's asking about my mum and whether or not she'd made them (or was single). But I tell you the thing that really grinds my gears. The Leader of the Opposition sounds exactly like how my over-dramatised and bitter impersonation of him would be. Basically he's the kind of guy that has ego and just **gets** women. Possibly after a bank transfer. Seems to have that drive that 'nice guys' have that makes them shoot up sorority houses due to a belief that they should be getting dates and are not. I don't have that and I have the inferiority complexes to prove it. Today's gonna be hell.

<EDITED>

My totally open-minded attitude that earnt me favour among my peers has done me credit because I was ABSOLUTELY RIGHT. We were debating this Private Member's Bill that was suggested by an Opposition MP, that would strategically limit the voting powers of certain MP's ... yeah it sounds like a trainwreck. Actually hold up I'll start a new post for this.

Thursday 9 June 2016: Did You Get The Bill?

"Daniel Lewis, stand-in MP for Mount Roskill." The Speaker always felt the need to say a politician's name before they spoke.

"If I can address the Leader of the Opposition, relating to his Member's Bill ..."

"No you may not," the Leader of the Opposition interjected. Apparently his name was Richard. How fitting.

"I feel that the Bill will disadvantage certain MP's more than others, and that the House should at least consider ..."

"But I won't be disadvantaged, so why should I care."

"But ..." Sometimes stupidity is so palpable you can't fight it. His logic, although fundamentally flawed, was actually somewhat sound. So I had to make him care. And the Speaker of the House stepped in.

"Would the Leader of the Opposition kindly stop being a monumental twat."

"Your mum's got a monumental twat." This earned guffaws and giggles from the Brony and Crony side of the House.

<EDITED>

[This was relayed to me by Jerry while I composed this post. And by that I mean he opened a window and screamed out what had happened while I looked at him in shock and horror].

Raj's phone rang.

"What fresh hell is this." Raj answered the phone in an extremely flat manner, and the person he was speaking to didn't quite know how to deal with it. Some time later he put the phone down by angrily and dramatically pressing the 'end call' button. Replacement to the lost art of slamming a phone down after a conversation.

"It sounds like Daniel's getting his arse kicked in Parliament. Is there anything we can do to help?" Simran always focussed on others first, her second.

"Damn Daniel – " Hassan tried to be funny and got hit with a textbook as a result.

Raj stepped in, and answered Simran's original question. "Not exactly at the moment. But what we could do is send him a bit of encouragement. They're debating the sketchy as fuck Bill, right?" Raj continued to talk for two minutes. By the end, everybody was on board and listening.

"I do have a question though, Simran," Raj wondered out loud. "That night when all of this started, were you even drunk?"

“Oh nah, I stopped drinking a few years ago. Turns out I’m allergic; break out head to toe in acting like a fuckwit – whaddaya-mean-I-can’t-piss-here-in-this-cactus; that sort of thing.” She turned towards him with a dramatic hair flick.

“Ah. So you could’ve stopped us.”

“Tried, and I thought I had because I’d tied Daisy to a column heater, but it turns out she’d got away.”

“So you want this set of mistakes to be fixed?”

“Or at least made to be ... not mistakes.”

“So could you type up a letter for me. Daniel’s gonna need step-by-step instructions. And put it on letterhead paper. He has to trust me but I can’t tell him that directly.”

<EDITED>

“So that’s why we can’t pass the Bill,” the fuckface was saying.

One of my assistants rushed into the room and handed me a piece of paper then left. I read it without speaking, got up and went to the bathroom. The paper had been a relatively long letter from Raj. But the most prominent word in large letters at the top of the page was ‘FILIBUSTER’.

“Mr Speaker, I wish to speak on this issue.” Had to be done, but I dunawannadooooiittttt.

“Will the MP yield his time?”

“Nooooooooooooo, I will not. You’ll have to drag me outta here – don’t you fucking dare, Richard.” A slight pause, then I continued; “although please could someone else speak on this issue?” The this-isn’t-a-good-idea part of my brain took over.

“Oh yeah?” The other guy taunted, “and who’s gonna speak for the two hours?”

Nobody stood up for ten seconds. There was total silence. Could’ve heard a pin drop. In fact, I think I did hear that. Not entirely sure what was happening or what I was doing.

Fiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinnnnnnneeeee. I’ll doooo it.

But my legs seemed to and I found myself standing up.

Continuing the trend of normally-thoroughly-attached body parts ceding authority and declaring independence, my mouth started speaking.

“Uh – Uh I will.”

The rest of the House turned to me. I had everyone’s attention now. I couldn’t hide as the guy who struggled to fit in with teenagers even though I was one.

My outburst had suddenly got my own attention; which it sometimes does happen that I lose it). I had to construct a two hour speech in ten seconds. Sorry, I meant improvise.

Stuff up, and I’d let the whole party down.

Chapter 16: The House Speaker

>>> This chapter compiled by Mike <<<

Friday 10 June 2016: For The Record(ing)

A CCTV feed sat open on a laptop, and it glitched every so often, and looked set to die before the end of this sentence. But, somehow, it pulled through. Not that the people watching it missed anything. The CCTV stream was of parliamentary debate, and the people watching were ... anxious. Daniel had proposed a filibuster; and none of the observing analysts were sure he could do it. Because they all knew him.

Okay, fine. It was us. The whole team sat around one tiny laptop screen. Surely, the filibuster would be compelling viewing. Surely? After all, politics was ‘sport for nerds’. There’d probably be a YouTube channel somewhere that was live-streaming a commentary alongside the original video. The full sporting experience, except without the scoreboards and random fistfights. So not really a sporting experience at all. Daniel had started speaking five minutes ago, and a kindly old woman MP was asking a question. He wasn’t even in the chamber anymore, he’d ducked off to the bathroom to prepare. Speak for two hours (unless, as has already happened, someone stops the flow of monologue to ask a question). Can’t lean against anything or eat or stop talking for the two hours. I’m absolutely sure he’s not gonna make it to the end.

He came back and answered the question with a wave of his hand telling the woman to sit down, then he said; “I’m sure you don’t need me to explain how changing the balance of power in this Parliament, and our Democracy as a

whole will affect the world? Well too fucking bad because I have two hours ..." And he was off (by which I of course mean he stopped leaning against his desk).

Friday 10 June 2016: Parliamentary Supremacy

While Daniel talked about power, corruption and how plugging an SD card into the mains would corrupt it and probably blow it up, we as a team had to research facts and factoids for him to use so that his assistants could hold up paper as cue cards.

"All the good ones are taken and all the single ones are no good." Simran seemed contemplative.

"Nonsense," Raj yelled across the room while he attempted to juggle three mandarins, failed; then ended up on the floor along with inexplicable duck feathers.

"... yeah."

There was an electronic buzzing sound from the CCTV stream, followed by Daniel, without breaking his stride or flow, commenting "this isn't Operation!"

"It absolutely is," came the reply. "Strike one, you touched the desk."

"Only for a second, though."

"That's how Operation works. Anyway, you were saying ..."

<EDITED>

[This is an extract from the monologue Daniel gave for two hours, it might give some form of context].

Neh neh neh neh neh. [This was said in a very mocking manner while making the associated hand gestures at Richard. There was a silence for a minute]. My mother's very proud of me.

The world's run on power. And I don't just mean the sort running through the mains that the Prime Minister is plugged into to charge when he's switched off in the evenings; I mean the sort of power arising from political and social circumstances. I think the idea with democracy is that everyone has a say (and there's certainly merit to that argument – I mean the Legalise Cannabis Party is a legitimate thing). But the reality is that the power in a democracy rests with the people in control, and that seems logical. There are certain people who argue that we of the Don't Stop The Party shouldn't be in office; I mean I'm now on a working group to help establish an independent sustainability leadership group. I haven't a sodding clue what I'm meant to be doing...

Anyway, this Bill will over-privilege the already privileged and disadvantage the disadvantaged, and can you see how fair that is? Look at the world we live in. How are we meant to fix all the problems created for us by past generations when those same generations continue to hold positions of power and make decisions that are to our detriment; and these people fail to acknowledge there are real, human victims. Not just us, any disadvantaged group that wouldn't have the resources to deal with sudden changes. If these things are problems for us now, and democratically elected parties are controlled by those people who pay for them; then can you see how this just perpetuates all the current issues of the world in the interest of ... earning more interest. It doesn't help that even in this country there's no law that is absolutely locked in; which in some ways is a good thing but does mean there is a lack of security and predictability of the law. This further skews power to the powerful and just exemplifies all the problems I have with this bill ...

Friday 10 June 2016: Get Informed Before You Vote

Our on-off method of supplying Daniel with facts had got him to the last thirty minutes, and he looked tired. I mean the most tired that I've ever seen a human being that was still upright and making sense. You could see the 'nobody else is gonna fucking do this' in his face, body language and tone. Even though the reedy speakers didn't do his voice any favours.

Luke and Catherine had gone for a coffee run, while Simran worked on the closing remarks that we'd send through just at the last minute. Everyone was nearing a caffeine-induced crash, and if Catherine and Luke weren't quick ...

[This conversation was interesting enough that Luke insist I put it in].

"So you got all the orders for coffee?"

"In order, yeah."

"Daniel's done really well to speak for so long, I think."

"Yeah, but we should speed up. Don't want them to be kept waiting."

"I have thought of some jokes he might've been able to do ..."

"... yes? Am I going to hate these?"

“... maaaaaybbeeee. Anyway, I was thinking if he wanted to cut down his carbon footprint, he should stop stepping on pencils.”

“No that was shit, I’m going.”

“Aww, please stay. You know something that really gets me; people that do something brilliant but genuinely don’t see that they are brilliant, that just makes me really sad.”

“And you think Daniel’s a bit like that?”

“I think we all are a bit. But I feel like Daniel’s too ready to give the team credit and not prepared to take it when he can.”

“Aaaand we’ve arrived. You pay the man, and I’ll take the coffee.”

“Why am I paying?”

“Isn’t that the rule for outings?”

<EDITED>

“... and the next person that interrupts and tells me to sit down, or stop talking, or did I want a biscuit – there’s a good boy; they can ram their overprivileged and power-driven opinions up their asses. And then fight me. Maybe some of the residual current might shock them into doing something useful. And it might mean I can win the fight.”

“Do you want to fight?” Richard had been dormant for two hours and wasn’t used to being quiet for that length of time.

“Sure. Square up.”

“You’re already square, so that makes it easy.”

“Stop that. You have five more minutes,” the speaker intoned. I do literally mean a speaker, because the actual man was out in the carpark, and had wired up a microphone.

I don’t exactly remember what Daniel said in those five minutes because I was too busy waiting for the assistant to show up with the associated burn we’d written as a closing remark. This had only just happened, and Daniel was gearing up to it when the CCTV crapped out.”

“Fucking technology.” I lashed out at the floor, and absolutely nothing happened.

“That’s like a Skype call with your girlfriend, right? You still see her?” Paul cut in.

“No, we meet up for real, and yes; I do still see her. In fact she’s around the corner.”

Paul looked around the corner and screamed in an over-dramatic way.

We wouldn’t get to Feel The Burn (that had been the mic-drop at the end of the speech – or the basic gist anyway).

The feed came back due to my outburst. Just in time to see Daniel falter. Fall at the last hurdle. He used up his last strike, then somehow there was a blur of activity in which the speaker called a vote on the Power Bill and cast it with the camera recording it to be counted later, after the Speaker had extracted himself from his car. Daniel stood in shock as one of the older MP’s slowly got up and ruffled his hair. So. Close.

Paul, our resident ‘techie’ looked at the feed to try and see if there was a way the problem could be fixed, or if the footage of the last minute had been sped up. It hadn’t, they were just that efficient. The kind of efficiency that Daniel would normally kill for.

Chapter 17: Owning Land

>>> This chapter compiled by Hassan <<<

Saturday 11 June 2016: It’s Like Exam Results Day

Let’s be clear, I didn’t go into work for this. Didn’t have to, it was all over the news. I could watch the world fall apart while sitting in my pyjamas eating cereal. I don’t know if I’ve ever enjoyed news of the oncoming apocalypse more. The vote returned at 65-55 in favour of progressing the Bill. It would go to a Select Committee and the public would be able to submit reasons on why they thought it was wrong (although honestly they needn’t bother, everyone who’s ever read it knows it’s wrong, but the way in which it’s wrong benefits some people while disadvantaging others. I could see Daniel beside himself with shock (yes, so shocked that he asexually reproduced himself). Daisy would be speechless too, if she were awake (although to be fair she was speechless while asleep). Roll on the end of the world ...

Monday 13 June 2016: Negligent

A seagull swooped down and grabbed a small fish out of a lake. Flew away, for about a minute, then ... something. To the untrained eye, it might well have looked like the bird stalled. Straight down and ... splash ... into the lake. It would float on the top of the water.

A boy, squinting against the brightness of the morning sun, looked out from a collection of wooden huts arranged around a larger meeting hut. He saw the bird lying in the water of the lake but knew not to fetch it in. They'd stopped being able to use the lake for anything about a year ago. Two of the village elders had to get jobs just to buy water. Selling water, ironically.

The boy rushed to the meeting hut. He'd had enough.

"Excuse me, you do know that you could ... sue?"

The elder looked up; he'd known the kid all his life and the use of unfamiliar language by this specific child wasn't especially uncommon to him.

"Who is this ... Sue?"

Wednesday 22 June 2016: My Mother Tort Me

[Relayed to me by Daniel.]

"It's not even like we have much of a say in Parliament anymore. Would it be such a crime if we just gave up? Daisy, you'd know what to do now."

She didn't respond. Of course not, she was in a fucking coma.

Jerry entered the ward with two coffees.

"One for Sir, and one for Madam." He bowed with the coffee still in his hand before passing it off to Daniel and placing his own down on a rolling table by Daisy's bedside. Depth perception slightly let him down, and he spent the next five minutes wiping up coffee from the floor.

"Got that about right." Daniel showed no reaction. "We're about done here, should we go?" They left the room and walked slowly through the whitewashed maze of the hospital.

There was a newspaper stand, where Daniel could make out a front-page headline about some trial about corporate negligence.

"Huh, what have the corporations done now," he mused.

"No, Daniel; they've said that politicians that passed the Bill are also liable."

"Oh. Shit." Daniel hurried off, leaving Jerry to follow.

<EDITED>

I think I've discovered my least favourite way to drive to work. Well, ride. Got stuff thrown at me by pedestrians and I'm now wearing a cream pie (don't you fucking dare) for a hat. Daniel wasn't in but Simran had leapt straight into happy-helper mode, so there was a coffee waiting and the shower had been turned on for me. I can only imagine she'd known to do this from ... personal experience. I dried off and sat down, then Catherine stood up to speak.

"Hassan, if you make stupid comments in this, I will hurt you."

"What? Me? Never!"

"Fine. So. They don't seem to like us much."

"You don't say."

"Neither will you if you interrupt again. Now, the problem with the media is that it is ... the media. They just run with things, there won't be much we can do today to stave off the negative attention, so I reckon we shouldn't even bother."

"You mean just get a blanket and read?" Raj's ideal day at the office.

"Basically, yeah."

Daniel burst through the door "guys, we need to get on the phone to some lawyers," he said breathlessly.

"How old was she this time?" Raj didn't even look up.

"No, no, no. Come on, this is serious. There's a negligence case, and the plaintiffs are saying we're partly liable. We'll probably have to help gather evidence or something. So, get on the phone to the lawyers. Now."

"And either way, this is a worse public relations nightmare than when I dreamed I got caught rubbing myself against a statue".

"You've dreamed that?"

"... no?"

"Simran, were you still selling your old Surface RT?"

"What use would you have for a Surface RT?"

“As a paving brick.”

That did seem odd – why’d he bring it up? Oh well, thought for another day.

Wednesday 22 June 2016: Duty of Care – Right Now I Don’t

I could have sworn I heard three gunshots. I would have been wrong and charged with perjury; but I could have done it. A strangely apt metaphor because I was in a courtroom.

A courtroom isn’t a good place to fall asleep. Especially if it’s your trial and you’re guilty. But, there’s nothing like a judge’s gavel for waking you up again.

One of the lawyers was speaking; “And there was a duty of care to the village because you would think they could use the water, and they’re proximate to the damage so that they were directly affected by it.” Our side, I’m pretty sure.

“But the company wouldn’t have been able to foresee damage on this level that would affect the village. Surely they’d just get a new water supply?”

“Where? The international market? These people aren’t exactly swimming in money...”

“They may as well be after we fix up the lake. And how are they paying you?”

“They’re not, I’m pro-bono.”

“I think he’s a pretentious twat, personally.”

“Rich coming from a lawyer.”

“Yes I am rich.”

“Gentlemen, get to the point please.” The judge had been happy to sit and listen to the banter, but enough was enough.

“And the duty of care – ”

“If there is one.”

“ – if there is one, was breached when the defendant let the lake be contaminated with chemicals.”

“And this is our responsibility to clear up?”

“Well, who else would be responsible? You’re a corporation working in the global environment. Carry on this way and there won’t be much environment left. That’s like saying ‘my cat doesn’t seem to mind sleeping against a wall, so I don’t see what the homeless are on about’.”

The court case went like that for the rest of the day, as Jerry and Catherine made their way to the village. We weren’t really needed in court today; it would be when session resumed tomorrow that we’d make our case. Jerry had the bright idea to get a taxi out to the village to try and make peace in the morning. Catherine went with him and they set off straight away. They arrived at the village just after midnight and slept in their transport. An expensive and uncomfortable motel, I’m sure. I assume there was no funny business, except if Jerry tried to make Catherine laugh.

The next morning, Daniel phoned out to Jerry that press were on their way to watch the negotiations or grovelling take place. I only know directly what Daniel’s last line was, the rest of this I saw on the news.

“There are rumblings that the judge will find there’s no duty of care.” That finished the phone call to Jerry as he arrived at the village.

But it seemed to be too late as one particularly gruff native moved a spear so that it blocked his exit path.

So bewildered by this, he failed to notice the other four doing the same on the other sides of his body (which is a pentagonal shape so anyone keeping count ...).

“What? What’s going on?” Spinning around frantically in his hastily constructed cage. If he tried to break it, the natives would try and break him. They’d probably be more successful.

News cameras flashed, as Catherine started writing down things on a clipboard. She didn’t look happy. Jerry thought he was deadlier than a deapan deadperson. That last word might be made up.

“Problem question; so there’s this guy and his firm makes paper. And, over time, this firm gets carried away. Eventually, chemicals from the factory found their way into a lake. Everything in the lake was poisoned, and it got so bad that anything that even touched the lake was contaminated. Question; is the firm liable for negligence?”

“You left out,” countered Jake McMurphy; prosecution, “that there was a village nearby that had to stop using the water because it was tainted. The question then becomes ‘does the corporation have a duty of care to the village it has affected?’”

<EDITED>

“Excuse me, what the hell is happening?” Jerry raised an arm, ready to just knock down the hastily made barrier. “I would stop, if I were you.” He heard a voice from behind, then turned. There was a flash, bright but a small dot, like a camera. In fact, it was. “You’re on the world stage right now. Do that and you will most certainly lose political capital your political party has accrued. You have to stay put, at least for now.” Or at least that’s what Jerry thought he heard. The guy’s English wasn’t that good, but Jerry obeyed. They were right anyway, the political climate had ... he wouldn’t say ‘gone up shit creek’, because in the context that might have been insensitive. But it had. The sun was setting over the lake, and but for the noxious green fumes rising off the surface of the water, it might have been a beautiful sight. It looked like Jerry would be trapped here overnight, and with no way to contact the team, they wouldn’t know he hadn’t made their case.

A bright flash made Jerry sigh with relief. Thank God. A camera. They’d be able to see and then they’d know where he was – oh shit. Oh shit ohshitshitshit. This was bad. Very very bad. As if the party’s reputation wasn’t already in shreds.

“But didn’t they hear about the filibuster?” He said quietly to nobody in particular. Obviously they hadn’t.

“Tea?” One of the Maori villagers approached Jerry, with an elder watching in the distance. “So sorry about this. Just making a point, really..”

“You must be the one that said the village could sue.”

“How’d you work that out?”

“Your English is pretty good and you know how to make tea. So you’ve probably lived on your own at Uni – which now I say it out loud is a bit of a leap.”

“If there’s any thing I can do ...”

“Let me go?”

“Except that. Can’t help you there, I’m sorry.”

Other than being the single remaining reason why Jerry was still trapped, the kid seemed nice. Everyone here wasn’t too bad, except for the whole you’ve-messed-up-our-lifestyle thing. Which was a fairly large deal, now he thought about it.

<EDITED>

“The trial’s going as well as expected. Have you heard from Jerry?”

“Yeah, he’s on the news. Apparently the village people –”

“Y – M C A.” Hassan yelled from the sidelines before the judge told him to shut up.

“ – didn’t like the arrival, so they trapped him with some of their weapons.”

“Oh my God, this is so bad.”

Then their lawyer burst out of the courtroom after he’d been updated by his legal staff.

“If they can prove there is no duty of care, we’re screwed. But they’re not doing anything else this evening and we’ll have the night to prepare a rebuttal.”

“And we’ll have the night to fix our mess.”

“You and me both, brother.”

“Are we related?”

“No that’s not what I –”

“I know.”

The trial wrapped up early and everyone went home. They’d all be back tomorrow, it’s not like this was anything nearing ‘over’. While the legal team had to firm up their case, the political team had to firm up their resolve. Basically this involved sitting around a table and figuring out how to save Jerry. At one in the morning, we had a solution.

<EDITED>

Michael, the defense lawyer, got a phone call just after midnight and he let Daniel know he was going to a meeting with the other lawyer in the morning to try and sort out the whole messy business. I offered to help by attending the meeting and writing notes if that was needed, and Michael said it was. So I guess I'd better get some sleep.

"We know how this case is going to go now."

"Yes, you have a duty of care and there was harm caused. You're going to be found guilty. So the question is, how much do you want to pay us?"

"Let's be absolutely clear – you say harm was caused. How?"

"They lost the use of their lake and water supply because of pollution, and this caused them harm because they had to find a non-poisonous source of water. I think someone did get sick, but they recovered."

"And would it be reasonable to assume we have a duty of care and sue us?"

"Stop that. You're guilty. Admit what you fucking did wrong, pay them some money and then we can all fucking go home. There's a kid trapped out there because of us. Because of you. So get your head out of your ass and claim some social responsibility for a change. You fucked up the lake. It should be your prerogative to fix it."

"Fine. I'll offer you a hundred million to fix it –"

I stopped listening. Zoned out in fact.

Admit what you fucking did wrong, pay them some money and then we can all go home.

Friday 24 June 2016: Atonement

I spoke to Daniel the following morning. We needed to apologise to the village and pay them reparations as well, they'd probably let Jerry go after that. We couldn't take the high ground. Fuck, we'd tried, and it hadn't worked. They couldn't be reasoned with because all politicians were complicit. Or at least that's what they thought. Daniel arranged to make a statement in the afternoon, as soon as someone could get out to the village.

<EDITED>

The cameras flashed as we stood there on a small platform on the front of the marae in the village. We'd had to beg to speak there; and even as it stood the locals had threatened violence if we stepped out of line. So we were stood in a line and scared stiff of moving. Even though I'm 95% certain that wasn't what they'd meant. Fumbled the words in our speech. But got them all out in broadly the right order. Made a promise to repay the tribesmen for their loss. Went home. All in a day's work, well, two days.

Saturday 25 June 2016: Chemicals in Water

Sat on a pier by the ocean, waiting for Raj, like we'd agreed. It was just coffee. Just ... hang on. That guy in the distance ... that's the other side's lawyer, isn't it? What's he doing here?

I walked across to talk to him, would have been rude not to, and we stayed there for ten minutes or so. He must have got slightly the wrong message, and he seemed to be making a move but then Raj showed up, so I excused myself. Thank God. Didn't like having to turn guys down. Why couldn't they just be ... nice? Or was that a foreign concept? The idea of just being a decent person without the expectation of sex. I mean, seriously what the fuck (if you'll pardon the pun).

Raj and I went to get coffees, then didn't go back to the same spot. He must've seen that the lawyer's interest had freaked me out. Funny he'd notice something like that. Normally he's totally clueless. Certainly he'd make a terrible detective. Maybe a slightly better boyfriend ...

We chatted for an hour or so. I kind of knew Raj, but we hadn't had the time to chat outside of the office much. There hadn't been much out-of-the-office time.

"Wanna be friends with benefits?"

"Benefits like me getting you milkshakes?"

"Sure." So that wasn't gonna get me anywhere. Not a huge problem, just a long term ... project.

But wait. What if I could ...

He walked me back to my bus stop, like a gentleman. The lawyer, called Michael if you remember – which I hadn't at the time; was waiting there (bit creepy). He asked me out, and I said yes. Then gave him a fake number. All was going according to plan. Now I just had to not get kidnapped on the way home. Raj must've remembered from before, because he got on the bus with me even though it was heading in completely the wrong direction. We never discussed that, though. There would have been no point.

Chapter 19: Get Out

>>> This chapter compiled by Luke <<<

Monday 29 June 2016: Before It Breaks Me

Dodgy screens pissed me off. I'd actually hit this one with a hammer, then a chair. Realistically, that should have been the other way around. Oh well. It sputtered and flickered to life with a hum. It wasn't perfect, but it'd do. I'd have to take the screen after I left – someone would probably get shocked.

The screen was showing a version of The Amazing Race with pensioners. I would think that meant they raced to the top of a high rise apartment block or something. But no, apparently there was this 85-year-old woman in full outdoors gear trekking up a mountain. Total badass. Hopefully she'd win. There was a slightly younger man keeping pace with her and holding a water bottle. Emasculating?

Now, let's pause for a bit. You've probably noticed a different style to the last time I spoke. See, I'm distracting myself from a verdict from the Governor-General. Fuckface has pushed a Bill through Parliament, you see, and even though this has made the progression more difficult, like when anything is pushed somewhere that it doesn't belong and is not supposed to be; but push he did, and so we're waiting anxiously for the foreign object to be extracted from where it shouldn't have got to. Which sounds like an immigration metaphor.

I always seem to get the 'can't sit still' stories. Social media's an absolute gift in situations like this, I tell ya.

After The Geriatric Race, the news came on. First story talked about house prices in an area affected by sinkholes going through the floor. It might just be because it was in Palmerston North, not the country's capital of Interesting. I unplugged the screen to take it away, and realised my mistake when mains current grounded through my body. Fun times. Or Fun-zazazazazazazaz timezazazazazaz. And then I fell down.

Tuesday 30 June 2016: Don't Fix What Isn't Broken

This next bit played out like a news story, mostly because it became one. You see, the voting session on the Bill that all the MP's colloquially refer to as the 'Power Bill' was tomorrow, and the House assembled to make sure the Bill was up to scratch before voting on it would begin.

Actually hang on, lemme start that again. *Ruffles imaginary coat and takes out a script, then does a newsreader impression*.

<EDITED>

We begin with breaking news, tonight as Parliament rushes to prepare for a vote on whether or not to change our democratic position. I would personally have thought they could see how ridiculous and short-sighted this would seem but hey-ho worse things have happened and we'll all be fine and Hitler happened in Europe. Right? But I digress. The debate progressed relatively smoothly until the halfway mark, when a back-bench MP suggested dropping the Bill on its head, to which the Leader of the Opposition, Richard Johnson, insinuated his challenger had been dropped on his head when he were a baby. The back-bencher had no comment for this, presumably because a fellow member of his party had turned the microphone off. Probably for the best, I can only imagine the arguments. And indeed, I will do that.

Well, that was fun. Parliament reached a decision by which there would be a month to campaign for either side of the vote, and an opinion poll of the public would determine Parliament's position on the Bill. Richard Johnson was seen in the House jumping up and down for joy, and gleefully posting memes on the internet. Upon spying an MP from the other side using his phone, however, he was less pleased. "Young people always on social media," sneered the fifty-year-old man while he finished uploading another meme. When asked by a co-worker how he'd prepared his profile on these sites, Johnson was overheard saying "I always say I'm 25. It's not like they can check." Fancy misrepresenting yourself on the internet.

So that's all we have for now, more news as the story develops. Hahahahaha develops, so old school. More like is uploaded to the internet through Richard fucking Johnson's fucking memes.

Tuesday 30 June 2016: If Fixed, Break Anyway

It turns out people don't actually care what experts have to say, as long as the alternative is funny. Or more interesting. The whole Parliament had to defend or promote the Power Bill and it would be passed in to law at the

end of the week if there was no serious objections from key players (people who stand around fiddling with their keys).

This week was spent with varying politicians doing interviews and news pieces and tiptoeing and backtracking; and at least one instance of a fumbled sentence that seemed to ‘crash’ a politician into bouts of ‘uh, no, uh, I, uh um ah, you see; what I meant was ...’

The week finished after the kind of long, slow descent into madness that only patrons of a broken rollercoaster will understand. Parliament passed the Bill despite much protest from MPs and protesters (who’d have thought ...). And then the Bill fell at the last hurdle.

The Governor-General made like Gandalf and decided the Bill couldn’t be passed (that wasn’t the exact wording although I can’t for the minute remember what it was). He said the Bill was unconstitutional, that if this Bill were to be allowed to be passed there would be a serious threat to the democratic status of the country. He questioned the Parliament as a whole that allowed this bill to pass. Well, that’s what I was told. The report was well over a hundred pages; and I didn’t read it. He dissolved Parliament and called a fresh election. In the Parliamentary session when the Bill was read out and dismissed, Richard took exception to this and the parliamentary record descended into a ‘your mum’ fight between him and Daniel, with the following actual extract contained after the Speaker got annoyed with the banter; *RICHARD: Your mamma’s so fat she’s both a front bencher and a back bencher. SPEAKER: Both of your mothers are so fat that when I shout ‘order’ they both yell ‘two kebabs and a cheeseburger’.*

<EDITED>

As you can probably imagine, we saw some of this through the CCTV feed, but not all; due to sheer unreliability.

“Guys.” Paul was unusually downbeat after one section of the CCTV recording, “we should actually start looking for other jobs, shouldn’t we?”

“I think that’s wise.” Mike, who’d begun to care about the team a lot more.

“But what would we do? Go back to Uni and finish our degrees?”

“That’s certainly the easy option ...” Catherine butted in.

After a half hour of this back and forth, the meeting broke up until Catherine and I were the only people left at the table. I think there was some sniggering from the guys as they left.

There was silence for a minute, then; “what?” Catherine looked up at me. Well, through. To be fair the glare felt like a laser beam. Then she looked back down.

“... nothing ...” I replied while playing Angry Birds on my phone (which is ironic, now that I think of it).

“Luke – ” Catherine started to say, as I collected my stuff and left the room, leaving her sitting on her own. I hadn’t really heard until after the door had closed and I didn’t turn around because I would most certainly have smacked into the wall.

<EDITED>

Daniel looked more ruffled than he should have been when he returned to the office. Me and Paul were the only people still there, with me having no life and Paul having been stood up for a date (which happens remarkably often).

We both tried to get the details with our typical lack of charisma. Daniel fought back and told us shit all. This continued in a back and forth that would make any sea-farers seasick with seasickness.

“Fucking tell me what happened in Parliament.”

“The Governor General dissolved it.”

“With acid?”

“Dude ... He’s called for an election immediately. It’ll be in a month.”

“They want us out, don’t they?”

Chapter 20: Stay Out

>>> This chapter compiled by Catherine <<<

Saturday 30 July 2016: Shut The Fuck Up

Daisy, I don’t know what to do. Pretty much every week this was one of us sitting here. Daniel did it most of the time, I think he really missed her. But he wasn’t available, and I had bigger issues to sort out. Boy troubles, in fact. Or buoy as we’re trying to stay afloat. And the fact that I didn’t have a job anymore. Those should almost definitely

been around the other way. My approach to both issues actually is to close my eyes and pretend it's not happening ... my apologies once again to Mr and Mrs Smith who broke my fall.

"What would you say to that? You know, if you were awake?" I said to the unconscious woman.

<EDITED>

Watching the government websites was sometimes therapeutic, in the least therapeutic way imaginable. But today it was a mess. The approval ratings for the party, and the Government as a whole dropped like a stone. The Vote of No Confidence motion had been filed, even though this wasn't necessary because the Governor-General had already disbanded the Parliament. Did we have any street cred as a global entity anymore? I would suspect not, given that we let an extremely dodgy Bill get very far in Parliament. Now we'd have to feel the consequences, and I do literally mean *us*. Because we sure-as-shit would lose our jobs.

<EDITED>

I hadn't really thought of this as a viable career, as such. But now I'd got hold of it, it'd be hard to let go. I sat on the roof next to the water tank (there used to be two, but Hassan had taken one out and replaced it with a sheltered bean bag. The showers on floors 3-10 of our office block didn't work, but they weren't the floors we were on so apparently who cares). Luke was already up there, on this particular occasion, when I arrived. We sat together (on the bean bag, obviously. Also it was quite large).

"Thinking about a plan B?"

"And C, and D, and E."

"That many, huh? Wow."

We sat in silence for a while. I think he knew that was what I wanted. Then ...

"Why are you up here? Thinking about your options too?"

"Sort of, but I'm freaking out about how to fix this if we still can."

"Freaking out? You seem put-together."

"So would a lego construction beam until you stepped on it."

"Am I ... not allowed to step on you?"

"As a general rule, yeah, I would think."

"What are the options you're considering?"

"Well, anything. I could go back to Uni, or move away or ..."

"Oh, right. I suppose you should do whatever you think is best."

Or you could decide for me. Jeez, you're clueless.

<EDITED>

The rest of the month passed in a haze of hollow activity. Busy work. Doing things just to do them (which is NOT how you should select sexual partners). Then the vote came and went. But none of us were really bothered anymore. We knew we were done and outta there. We were called 'Don't Stop The Party' for goodness sake. We deserved to lose out on this one. Luke tried, and I really admire him for this, to spin the media's comments and keep us in the game. But to no avail. The new election gave the Mount Roskill seat to the Opposition Party. The current party in power remained there. Nothing else really changed, except for proportions of the respective parties.

Sunday 31 July 2016: Closed The Fuck Down

Facebook helps with boredom and laziness. But, and this was definitely a surprise to me, it's also a monumental pool for negative energy and the backlash from dissolving parliament was immense and aimed directly at us (which was unfair, I thought. The death threats rained in.

The girls of the office had a group chat on Facebook. Right now it was just me and Simran because Daisy was indisposed. But we still used it every so often, and it had got both of us through long walks home at 2 in the morning (not recommend) and a moderate amount of boy troubles (not recommend). I talked to her about Luke on there as well. And she talked about her lawyer boyfriend. I think his name was Michael. Thought he was a bit of a dick. Seemed the kind of guy that would threaten to publish nudes after a breakup. Mind you, I'd never met the guy. Mustn't judge. That was his job. Ba dum tss. We'd talked about Raj too, but not so much recently – there seemed little point when she wasn't actively interested in the guy.

<EDITED>

Survey the damage; Simran and Raj were both with the wrong people; ie. not each other. Jerry and Daniel's coffee dates appeared to have stopped because of pressure from the team ("haaa gay"); or maybe because they don't wanna get egged by the idiot public, and Daisy was still in a coma. I had stuffed up with Luke. Hugely. At least I think he wasn't interested; and he no longer respected me as a professional member of the team. Problem. Big.

Some files went into a box. We had to leave our offices; hadn't been re-elected in the ensuing election. Our offices were bare now; there was a giant fibreglass Grizzly in the middle of the floor – the next firm that will move in after we move out, I think.

Then there was a bleep from my computer and I polevaulted across the office to get back to my desk.

He typed; *We need to talk.*

I replied, slowly, carefully. 'Fuck it. Fuck this. Will you go out with me?'

<EDITED>

As Daniel put his computer into a box to leave the office because 'obviously our political careers were over', his phone rang. He answered it and his face went white but it clearly wasn't bad news at all. He didn't say anything, almost like he was so excited he couldn't speak. Hung up after mumbling a goodbye, then he turned to the rest of us. "Guys. I think I know how we can get back into office."

"Why? What? What's happened?" I don't like not knowing.

"That was Daisy's nurse. She just woke up three hours ago and she saw the news. She wants to meet us and maybe when she's better ..."

"You could consider trying again."

Wait. What. That wasn't one of us. I'd been looking at the nine faces. None of them had moved. So that means ...

"Take your time, I'll just lean against this doorframe."

"Daisy? I thought you were ..."

"She said three hours ago, didn't she? Can do heaps in three hours. Got bored, got released, came here. So let's get our fucking seat back."

"But what about Richard –"

"The rest of the Government can fucking fight me."

Chapter 21: Four Seconds After A Gunshot

>>> This chapter compiled by Luke <<<

Saturday 10 September 2016: Picking Up The Pieces With a Vacuum That Doesn't Work

They say sometimes you have to start again from absolute rock bottom. Which is kind of where we were now, and had been for the last month and a half. As far as I know, nobody in the team had done much. Except for Daisy, who'd gone on three holidays and Simran who'd slept around, and around, and around. She'd fallen asleep in a Ferris wheel. Parliament had been reassembled after a shock election, and even though very little had changed, we had still been kicked out [edit: not re-elected]. I suppose it's like a cat walking around in circles until they're put outside and away from where they were. I guess I think that makes some form of sense. Which is better than me because I still don't have a job. None of us did, as far as I know. But I hadn't seen anyone either. Stuck in a room with my feelings. About the whole thing. About Catherine, about Richard, about politics, about the whole team. I missed them, and I'd probably spent long enough wallowing in self-pity and sadness.

<EDITED>

Turns out ringing Simran was the best possible thing I could've done in the circumstances. I messaged Catherine first but she didn't reply. Probably something to do with the fact I'd replied 'cool beans' to her asking me out. Incorrect response or something. We'd talk about it when we next saw each other in person. All angsty like a teenage drama. I think? It's possible I'd made a mess, though. This might take more than a well-placed random email and a bunch of flowers. I should try and find out her Uni timetable to try and ambush her. No. Stalker alert. Also I have literally nothing to go on, which is definitely the second most important reason why not to do that. Or bus home on the same route even though she lives in the north and I live in the south. Might give it a try.

<EDITED>

Simran had managed to rent a room from the council for an hour and a half, so that we had a venue to meet in. Although, we'd done more influential meetings after having an inordinate amount of alcohol, so I'm not entirely sure why she bothered. The room was large enough that there were double the number of seats around a central boardroom-type table than there were participants in the meeting that used the room. Maybe not efficient, but at least it was aesthetically pleasing. Shush, of course I wasn't talking about Catherine in this case. Fine, maybe I was. The meeting started after everyone had been ushered in and Hassan had distributed donuts that had just sort of ... shown up.

"First item on the agenda," Catherine started; looking through relatively trendy reading glasses onto a list she'd written in her immaculate handwriting, "is the thermostat temperature. Wait, no. That can't be right."

"Yep, that's crack on." Raj liked the office like he liked his women. Hot.

"Not this again. You can't just put the temperature at thirty-five degrees without consulting anyone."

"Which is why I'm consulting you about it right now."

"All right, fine. Do you have a starting figure in mind?"

"Well my ideal figure is --"

"Hourglass, with a positive bank balance," Paul intercut while scrolling through something on his tablet. Possibly Tumblr.

"Let's say thirty degrees." Raj ignored the unwarranted intrusion.

"That's a loooong time at University," Simran intercut, jabbing Raj in the ribs.

"Hah hah yeah like how Raj has done all the stage 1 science papers cos he can't decide his major." Paul tried to contribute again.

"I just did, just now."

"Oh?"

"You. You're a major ... pain in the ass."

"Is that the best you can do?"

"On short notice, yes. Give me time and I'll do better."

"That's what she said," Hassan launched the insult across the table in a similar manner to a trebuchet flinging a rock; which wasn't particularly relevant, because the insult was shit.

"Who'd you mean – actually NO."

"Twenty-five." Catherine probably had noticed all of this, and decided to ignore it.

"Twenty-nine."

Catherine wrote a number down on a piece of paper and slid it across the table. Raj picked it up, looked at it as if it were a card and this was poker, then placed it face-down on the table and flicked it back across. It would then flip back over because of the misplaced force, so why he'd bothered to place it face-down so carefully, I'll never know. Eventually they settled on twenty-seven and a half. Catherine taped the knob on the thermostat, ending any future discussion on the matter.

The meeting moved on to discussing actual business.

"We need to convince them that, somehow, Richard doesn't deserve to be in office." Sometimes Hassan had good idea, but generally only the beginning bit.

"How exactly do you intend to do that?" Simran, intrigued. Also she'd never disrespected anyone in her life.

"I'm not sure yet. Probably leak a story to the news or something. Make some shit up. For politicians that's good enough. Once people think something about a politician ... that's generally it."

"Unless we get it wrong, and what we want people to think is actually also what they choose to believe."

"But we want people to believe that Richard's a horrible man that has no moral compass or compassion."

"But he doesn't seem that bad ... we met the guy, once." Daisy spoke up.

"That's ... the ... point." Hassan thumped the table after each word.

We didn't know this at the time, but it was being recorded and transmitted through a receiver stuck under the desk. To Richard.

<EDITED>

He showed up later on, mid-way through drafting the story we'd anonymously tip to the Herald (not that people would believe it ... the Herald's a joke nowadays).

He sat down, calm as an electrocuted spaghetti.

"You ... need to stop drafting the story." He could barely control his rage. Pity, anger made him look unattractive. He should smile more. Although maybe not. He would probably look like one of the sharks from Finding Nemo, and he

didn't have enough hair left to pull that look off.

"What story? I don't even ..." Raj looked down, then leant down to unplug a laptop from the wall. Or that's what it was supposed to look like. He was actually looking under the desk and he saw the bug straight away. It was next to the corpse of a fly.

Daniel had continued speaking; "We were in politics ... once. But in the year we were in power, how much work did we actually get done?"

Richard laughed. "You got no work done, and I made sure of it. You're kids, you know nothing about life at all. You don't know what you want or what it could mean if you do what you're planning. You don't know what real work is. You're unemployed. On social media. Wasting time because you have nothing else to fill it with."

"You know I've always thought you could understand a lot more about a person if you interpret everything they say as a self-description," Daisy cut in from the other room. "and I suggest you leave. We have a story to publish."

"All right, fine, fine, I'll go. Wouldn't want to be beaten up by a girl," he smirked. "But seriously, what have you done?"

"We might have possibly decreased the cost of catering for Wellington City Council ... for about a day and a half."

"So that's why we've started up a two dollar shop." What? We hadn't done that?

"More efficient way of achieving change in the world." Ah. Shit joke.

"And then making sure that other people receive it. Probably by handing it over." Joke carried on for too long, no longer funny.

"Politics doesn't necessarily have a 'right' answer and a 'wrong' answer. Sometimes there's a bad answer and a worse answer, and you just have to pick. If you're even allowed a choice ..." Hassan had dived into the deep end of a metaphorical pool.

<EDITED>

The meeting carried on and we finalised the story. Figured out some details, sent it off. That was phase one. Richard wouldn't be back. He was an old man; bark but no bite because all his original teeth had fallen out. Daniel and Daisy went off to discuss the plans for re-entry (which, now I think about it; could have been a euphemism). Closed door meeting, etc. I would say they were discussing how to use the story to maximum advantage now they'd sent it off. We stayed in the main meeting room and passed the time by playing hot potato with an alarm clock. No, seriously. I got some note paper out and wrote Catherine a note. She'd find it ... lying around, somewhere *subtly* (placed, but looking like it wasn't). '*We need to talk*', it said. Not aimed at you, I'm already talking to you in this medium. Tarot cards. Ba dum tss.

The games moved on so that after an hour had passed we were playing Never Have I Ever, which we'd never done before.

"Never have I ever ... randomly been on social media at 3 in the morning." Jerry addressed the question to the room at large, but this was primarily aimed at Raj; who it was well-documented did this. Raj drank, as expected.

"What? You didn't think I'd duck out of my responsibility as a member of the team, did you?"

"I dunno, I'll message you about it."

"Do it in the early morning. I'll be on then."

Then someone asked for coffee, I dunno who it was. I went, because I quite like taking walks by myself. I'd be half an hour or so. Half an hour where I didn't have to worry about the useless idiots who had, by this time, taken to prank calling politicians. Midway through trying to sell the Minister for Climate Change a solar panel, Paul made a realisation; and in following calls, the team would badmouth Richard to the respective (and, in many cases, respectable ...) politicians, in an attempt to gain political leverage.

Just before I left, I put the note I'd made for Catherine in her desk, just as Daniel and Daisy opened the office door at the conclusion of their meeting.

Paul and Raj were midway through planning their call to the Prime Minister.

"You have to go 'while human equals true' when talking to the PM," Raj was explaining. "He's a machine so he doesn't understand ..."

"What's this?" Daniel asked in a bemused fashion, which was then followed by an intense and excited minute where you couldn't hear anything that was being said because of three competing explanations from Hassan, Raj and Paul.

"Ah. Right." Daniel looked worried. "You see, we'd kind of cooked up a plan not to need the story, and we'd make a deal to stop it being published. But obviously we can't do that now."

"Right, I'm off to get coffee. See ya." Holy crap, the shit will hit the fan now.

"Nah, me, Jerry and Raj'll go. You always go to get coffee ... just before something really bad happens."

They moved so fast they were out the door before I'd had time to object. In fact, the door nearly slammed, but luckily my nose got in the way.

<EDITED>

The meeting had finished and we'd all been dismissed to go home for the week. Not because it was the weekend, but because the plan required Daisy and Daniel to work on it and nobody else (or that's what they told me).

The guy sitting behind me had a moustache and an old-looking jumper. And a loud voice. A very loud voice.

"Not gonna stand here and talk shit about an old friend. So let me just sit down...", there was a thump as he sat down. Either that or the seat broke, I didn't look around.

"Just came out of a council meeting. Not *in* it; out *of* it; jeez man. Yeah, it's totally gone to shit. Stop talking about the queue for the bathrooms. It was that kid, the one that pretended to be an electrician and a chef and a delegate. Yeah he fucked things up. Stop trying to be clever, it doesn't suit you; you're like a tiny little dog going yap yap yap. Clever's my thing. Hey hey, that was one year in high school, cool it. Anyway, problem is of course, that reforming the power grid is just not something a local government can do. Too much control from the power companies and we rely on their infrastructure anyway. And there's no reason to do it because there's a natural monopoly on the power grid – especially when you multiply prices by four and ten. Yeah, that was a shit joke." There was a lengthy pause, then he picked up speaking again, "the council managed to settle the food poisoning case after a particularly strategic movement ... no, not like that ... and the questions about security of the Parliament buildings were swept under the rug because they designed new rugs that didn't allow people to enter because they were made of spears. Then the council couldn't agree on anything anymore so two opposing factions formed; a moderate faction that tried to maintain the upper hand, and the FRAT party; Far Right Activism Taskforce. Guess which side I'm on," he leered at his phone's handset. He stopped, for breath, then carried on; as loud and obnoxious as before. "I know this is long, you shouldn't have asked me how my day was. I have to deal with all of this shit. What? That was a month ago? Well, fuck. I have really good long term memory, and really shit short-term, that explains it. Interesting? What's interesting."

Then I buzzed the buzzer and stopped at my stop. I left the guy and could hear his loud monotone fade into the distance through the closed door of the bus as it drove away. Should probably tell Daniel what he'd been saying ...

<EDITED>

[Daniel here. Bored and waiting, basically I wrote this for Luke's post then emailed it to him in a non-confrontational way that said 'I'm your flipping boss'. Probably while also performing acrobatics.]

"Is this the way you like your coffee?" Raj handed over the cup and I inspected it.

"I like my coffee like I like my men. Black and with boiling hot water poured over."

"Ouch, and racist."

"Only racist if we're talking about cars. Where should we go to sit?"

Eventually we'd made our way back to the bollards Jerry and I always sat on just outside the main entrance to Parliament.

"Huh, I normally sit here with Jerry."

"Where's he now, eh?"

"So, you and Simran ..."

"Touche. Now stop that." I think I won the round, he shut that down so quickly. There might have been something actually there. I might get back to that someday.

[Okay I'll just hand back over. If this is still included in the message, Luke hasn't even read it and just copy-pasted it into the blog. Wait ... yes. Send. Well, Now.]

<EDITED>

I had bussed home for the week, true to what I said I'd do before. You do remember before, don't you? Or do I just talk white noise to you people? Are there even any of you out there?

I'm sorry. Having an existential crisis onto some paper. Not a good look. Neither is this face, which is why it's probably best you're reading words and not actually seeing me speak.

My phone rang, and it was Daniel. He sounded ... fake-calm. Like he was holding it together. But for who's benefit?

"Daniel, what's been decided back there?"

"We don't need you to get the press anymore, so don't worry about it next week. There's another way. You should come back now. And ..."

"And?"

"Catherine wants to talk."

"I thought she might."

A commotion broke out in the room. Static interrupted the call just for a second and Daniel's voice became fuzzy so I couldn't really hear. Something was happening though, that it may have been worth listening to.

From what I could hear, it sounded like someone had come back to the room. At a guess Richard, and nobody wanted him there anymore. Then there was a bang that I could hear unimpeded and the line went dead, but not before I heard Simran yell out "Daniel!"

What the fuck had just happened. Oh my God, what the fuck had just happened.

Chapter 22: Bed (Part 1)

>>> This chapter compiled by Jerry <<<

Saturday 10 September 2016: There Are Some Kinds Of Flashing That Are Oddly Okay

Bright lights and highly competent people yelling at me to get out of the fucking way. Daniel was in shock, and lying on a stretcher. Blood. Everywhere. Richard wasn't anywhere to be seen, anymore. We'd just kind of let him leave. That tends to happen when he's just shot one of your best friends.

Oh. Yeah. Right. Um.

So, let me fill you in, like one of those colouring books you had as a kid. Richard showed back up and shot Daniel with no warning or anything, just ... bang. The ambulance had been surprisingly quick and Raj and I were in it with Daniel, going to the hospital. Daniel was kind of awake ... but really out of it and losing a lot of blood. Luke told us later on that he thought Daniel had shot Richard because of the fact that he was unwanted in the meeting and that Simran had yelled out. But no. Other way around. More logical way. Senior politician gets angry about the potential publication of a damning story, shoots the junior. Well, that makes more sense to me, anyhow.

<EDITED>

The ride was uncomfortable, but what did you expect me to say? At one point there was a slight problem with Daniel's oxygen machine and the nurse looked to me (as a young man) like I was supposed to know what I was doing. Without thinking; I said, "Have you tried turning it off and on again?" The nurse just looked at me in shock, and I realised what I'd said, then I continued; "oh my God I'm so sorry."

"Jerry ..." Daniel croaked, then lapsed back into unconsciousness. I stayed attentive to him in case he woke up; which he did about five minutes later. "Jerry ... this is it, isn't it?"

"N – No, I'm sure it's not."

"I just need to tell you ..." Daniel trailed off and passed out for a bit. I was shoved aside (in the nicest possible way, if such a thing exists) by a nurse who applied more bandages and reached into a drawer for defibrillator. By the time she'd got it out, we'd arrived at the hospital.

"I need to tell you the plan ... and Jerry; I want you to know –"

Cut off by the doctors again as they rushed the stretcher he lay on out of the ambulance and into surgery. I'd find out his plan later. He'd tell me. And if he dies ... I'll kill him.

<EDITED>

Got to the hospital just after six o'clock in the evening. Felt like later; that ambulance ride had been hell. They took him off to surgery, and left us in a waiting room. The others arrived not long after. Mike had some girl attached to him. I think he introduced her as Steph; but I can't really remember. Apparently they'd kept in touch from something from before. Weren't dating. As if that mattered. My best friend was nearly dead so who the fuck cares if yours is the opposite gender?

Not much to do in a hospital waiting room, although surveying the team of ten crammed into the small space and how they responded to each other (and the fact that Luke and Catherine specifically were faced in opposite directions from each other) did pass the time. Paul tried surreptitiously answer a text without anyone else seeing.

That was odd. Something of note for a later date. Eventually the silence got too much for them, and Catherine cleared her throat.

"Luke, could I have a word, please?"

He wasn't really willing to move, because Simran had laid across his, Paul's and Daisy's laps in lieu of finding a seat. So they just had a discussion where they sat. Not looking at each other. At the same time, they both cut in.

"Luke, I want to –"

"See the thing is, it can't work. It could never work. People think my self-deprecation is just joking; and even then I've earnestly been told to stop doing it by people – but the thing is that I genuinely believe it. So that's why a relationship would never work. I look too far into the future – short term; we'd probably be mostly fine, but as soon as you look further ahead ... you'd get sick of me. I haven't met anyone that wouldn't. So I do want us to work – really I do. But it just couldn't. Not now, anyway. I'm ... so sorry." Luke looked down; I'd never seen the kid so sad before. Catherine just sat there, stunned. Then she slowly got up and hugged him.

"I'm ... sorry I asked."

"... Maybe someday." I realised Luke was shaking, crying. Wow, this day was an ass-kicker.

<EDITED>

Daisy and I were waiting by a reception desk for information on the surgery. Started talking about Parliament and what the atmosphere was like. Daisy had the office for about another week, then her notice period would expire and she'd have to move out.

"Love my office. You never said how great it was!" Such a beacon of positivity.

"Yeah; I thought it was all right. The chairs needed replacing though."

"Oh yeah, the two; one that folds up as soon as you sit on it, and the other that spins around and around."

"That's just the two types of politician. And it only spins around because you're making it. It's not magic!"

"Well, I can't help it, can I?" Joking, still beaming. I forgot where I was when Daisy smiled. It no longer mattered. Especially now. I needed this.

"Has anything else been happening?"

"They let me off to deal with this," she made a vague gesture and I remembered where I was with a lurch.

"But they like you? They didn't like Daniel much at all."

"I think that was because he was unelected. I mean, they don't 'like' me. But they didn't make me filibuster like Daniel did."

"You saw it?"

"On the news website. It was beautiful. Especially the wall socket gags."

"And was there any talk about why he'd done it?"

"The story. He wanted it stopped and didn't care how. Or that's what his party said. He wasn't actually there."

"It'll go to the press at the end of the week. I don't care what he has to say anymore."

"He'll sue us, and shoot us. I probably should've said those around the other way."

"Then he can threaten to sue. We aren't lying and I have a rebuttal if he does."

"What would that be?"

"It would basically be 'Fuck off'. You know, the standard."

"So, we're doing this."

"We are, and damn the consequences."

"Yeah. And if we can get all that done before your notice period times out, then you might not even have to worry about moving out at all.

The receptionist came back to her desk, and told us Daniel was back in the ICU. We could go in, all together. It wasn't looking good.

<EDITED>

The team filtered out after saying their goodbyes, until only me and Raj were left next to Daniel's bed.

"Guys ..." Daniel croaked. "... This is it, isn't it?"

"Don't you worry ..." Raj was crying, I'd never seen that before. Mind, so was I; so I could've been making shit up.

The doctors looked at Jerry, then us, and one of them said; "are you ready?"

Nodded, couldn't really speak. They pressed some kind of button.

Then a whole lot of the machines beeped and went off at the same time. Daniel coughed and then settled down a bit, wheezing.

He breathed slowly for about another half hour before it stopped. We couldn't stay much longer after he died because they needed the room, so me and Raj just huddled outside. The team came to join us, and we just stood there, not saying anything.

Saturday 10 September 2016: Addendum

Shhhhh. Be quiet, now. This is not Jerry, it's Paul; and he doesn't know I've hijacked his post just before it's uploaded. They'll find out then I'll get lynched, but for now ... I just feel like you guys should know what happened after I replied to that text.

Went to the bathroom. In a hospital, that's about the best you can do for privacy without being more dramatic than necessary. Saw a hot nurse, too; but nevermind about that. She probably had too many jumpers on. The original text was still on my phone's screen. Pulled it out and replied. The text had come from an anonymous number.

Them: Want 2 be in Cabinet?

Me: Who are you?

Them: Want 2 be in Cabinet?

Me: Can you think of a way?

Them: I can help you.

Me: But how can I trust you?

Them: You'll just have to be patient. Can't elaborate now.

Me: Stop being a dick. Who are you?

Them: Can't stop being a dick.

Me: Just tell me who you are.

Them: I already did.

But that would mean ... I stood with my back against the cubicle door, shaking from adrenaline. There was only one person, now I thought about it, who had the connections to help us. I was texting with Richard.

Chapter 23: Bed (Part 2)

>>> This chapter compiled by Paul <<<

Saturday 17 September 2016: A Dream Journal Of Sorts

Loud theme music plays as six people sit at desks. There's a voice with an American accent blaring through some speakers. "Hello and welcome to The Big Issues; with your host Richard Johnson!" The voice cut out suddenly, leaving the room in total silence.

Crickets chirped in the distance, as Richard walked down a gangplank to his seat in between the two teams.

"... And now let's meet tonight's players." Richard recovered from the frosty welcome quickly, and put on a fake showbiz persona. Or that's what it looked like, although he was kind of like that all the time, so not really able to tell. Richard started from left to right.

"Our first player this evening – Paul. He isn't a team captain but he is one hell of a playaaaaaaa."

The audience laughed at that. I'd forgotten they were even there.

"Next up it's Raj. As a team captain, he's fulfilling a dream he's had since high school – not being picked last."

More laughter. This would probably get annoying.

"And finally on Raj's team; it's Catherine. I saw Paul pass Catherine a note earlier ... wonder what it said. She's leaning as far away from him as she can, so actually I think I do know."

"And facing them tonight; it's Simran. I like being able to flirt with two girls easily through the course of the show."

"Do that and I'll fucking deck you." Simran had no time for any shit.

"... ooooookay. And Jerry. I'm not saying Jerry's not used to getting attention and he won't be able to cope with being a captain, but at school apparently he thought the cool kids all had access to a walk-in fridge."

Laughter, although that joke was almost nonsensical.

"And finally tonight, it's Mike. Sorry, dude, can't hear you. Need to turn on your –" he stopped, listening into his earpiece. "Oh, apparently that joke's too basic so I'm not allowed to do it." There was a pause, then Richard continued, "let's get started!"

The lights all changed, and the game begun.

"The first round is called 'what the fuck is happening'. The teams will have thirty seconds to summarise what the fuck's been happening over the last week."

"So this is topical?"

"No, it's being recorded on the beach, so it's actually tropical."

Huh. Hadn't noticed that; or maybe the background had changed. Never mind. But we were definitely on a beach now. Some guy had a beach volleyball balanced on his nose. But, no; it was a coconut. Wait, what? This game wasn't very consistent. Like a dream ...? That would certainly go a reasonable distance to explain how Richard appeared to have grown a full beard and now looked like he'd been outcast for at least a month on a desert island.

Simran went first for Jerry's team. She stepped forward, to a microphone that had magically appeared in the floor.

"There once was a massive man hunt, for a gun-toting, arrogant cunt. Police showed up late, when he shot my mate; he just thinks he's pulled a cheap stunt."

"Limerick? Hard to beat." Richard was impressed. I almost let myself be impressed by that. Then I didn't. Because Richard was a dickhead.

"I think I can do better though." Raj stepped forward.

"A rightward shift in the House [...]"

I'll be honest, I zoned out. Still thinking of ways to remove Richard from his position of power. If I was gonna work with him, I needed a plan. Plan, plan, plan ...

The audience loved the rap-battle atmosphere; and this would carry on until each member of the teams had battled. Finally, Richard declared Raj's limerick the best. Pity I couldn't remember what it even was.

In between rounds, the game lapsed into banter; "I turned up to a contract law exam naked once." Richard trying to prove he's smarter than us all. I mean, he's fifty. He has experience; why feel like that was necessary?

"You're naked now, actually." Raj countered; trying to win the banter match.

"... Fuck. I hadn't noticed. Let's just ..." Richard ducked under the desk then popped back up. He was now dressed fully in clown attire. I reached across and honked Richard's nose.

"Anyway, this round's called 'Sticking a Knife in the News'. I'll need a representative from each team."

Tributes were offered forwards. Simran for Jerry's team and Raj for the other side.

"Each tribute will attempt to summarise contract law in under a minute. Then the other will try and pick fault. While you do this, I will attempt to knock you down with a wrecking ball."

Raj went first. "There has to be an offer between the parties that is accepted, in clear terms. And that offer has to be supported by consideration; where one party promises something to the other party as part of the deal, and – whoa dude, not cool, you almost took my head off – a contract can't be entered into as a result of a misrepresentation or threat. That's about it – fuck off and stop trying to hit me. Why's the wrecking ball even a thing?"

"That's for threatening to publish the story about me in the paper."

"Oh yes, how much would you pay us to forget about it?"

"We shall discuss it," Richard turned away from Raj and faced towards me, "later, when we can arrange a proper time."

Simran countered Raj's broad summary by specifying that some negotiations are so complicated that there are actually multiple contracts and a clear offer and acceptance of the entire deal can't be identified. Although she didn't get any further than that before Richard bowled her over. Needless to say, Raj won the points for his team.

The next round seemed to have special features. Richard's showmanship increased as he intro'd it;

"He doesn't actually work here anymore but he shows up anyway. Daniel."

There was a loud bang, then Daniel floated down from what I can only describe as the 'sky' although I would imagine there was a loft somewhere in the studio's roof. Everyone was wetting themselves laughing. Or maybe the tide was rising. Then a cannonball plopped into the wooden floor. Well, passed straight through it. Eventually Daniel picked himself up off the floor and removed all the splinters from his head and body; moving to stand off to the side.

"Um, how's things, Daniel?"

"Not gonna lie, got one hell of a headache. Had it since last week when you shot me, you penis."

Richard recovered from that ... somewhat lacklustre burn. "This round's all about consequence and how some of us don't have any." A slightly robotic sounding ba-dum-tss played through speakers in the studio.

"You will have thirty seconds. In that thirty seconds, you will attempt to eulogise Daniel. Even though he's not dead because he's ... uhhhhh ... standing right there. There will be a bag of knives." He paused, as the bag appeared on his desk. "If you succeed, try to stick a knife in me. If you fail, I will stick a knife in Daniel. If you've just tuned in, we've all gone insane." He paused again, then looked up and continued; "Jerry – you go first."

“Gosh, um, well, I don’t, um, really know. I guess he’s okay? You should have given me more time to actually write something out I’d be able to think more careful – ”

“And you’re out of time.” Richard grinned cruelly, like an egotistical shark that had just been to the dentist. Or just ‘like an egotistical shark’; which would have sufficed. He walked towards the bag, then groaned.

“There’s only plastic forks in here. I mean seriously, come on guys. Who read the outline for the round and thought ‘you know what will still work? Plastic’. I guess the points go to Jerry because he’s the only one who tried. Life’s not fair sometimes.”

“Is Daniel gonna just stand there? Or can we, umm, talk to him?”

“You can talk. One minute. Go.”

A really loud ticking noise, that suggested all the time pressure in earlier rounds was imagined, broke out in the background.

“What do we do?”

“Well,” said Daniel as his first posthumous word, “you need to make a deal with the story. You have power there. Use it. Hopefully once you use it you’ll be able to get back into Parliament and Daisy should pick up where I left off. They’ll thank you for it eventually, although they might try to kill you first. And ...”

“Ten Seconds.” Richard bellowed over the top of Daniel.

“And what?”

“And you have to get used to living without me. I suggest you start ...”

The stopwatch went off loudly, and I woke with a start. Without finding out who’d won the panel game. How rude. And it was only 4AM. Getting back to sleep would be tricky even though I was tired. Writing up my post for the blog would kill some time until sunr –

<EDITED>

The last bit replayed itself in my head as a new dream. Well, kind of; it was in the office instead of on the studio set and Daniel and I were the only two there.

“And you have to get used to living without me. I suggest you start ...”

A low rumbling reverberated around the frozen office landscape.

“No, please ...”

“... Now.” Then the world unfroze, and the gun went off.

BANG.

I woke with a start. Daniel! Oh. Right. But ...

My phone buzzed again.

RICHARD: *Meet in Hamilton on Saturday afternoon. Can start negotiations.*

ME: *I don’t have the power. Daisy would have to come.*

RICHARD: *Bring the whole team, see if I care. I just want that story taken out of the media.*

ME: *I’ll see what I can do.*

My phone buzzed a few times after that. But I didn’t reply. Didn’t want him to think I liked him. Basically I intended to treat him the way I typically treat girls. I tried to get back to sleep. Back to that dream. Daniel would know what to do. He always had. But he wasn’t here anymore.

Chapter 24: Hitting Things By Accident With A Van

>>> This chapter compiled by Catherine <<<

Monday 19 September 2016: We’re Unemployed, So We Need Something To Do

Tyre squeal. I really regret letting Hassan drive. It wasn’t even a proper car; the closest we could get was a transit van that Hassan had so far used to nearly take out three parking bollards and seven motorcyclists. I think he had a points system; ten points for cyclists, five points for a bollard and no point for being in Government. Which is a worrying worldview, when you think about it and what we were trying to do. And his music taste was suspect. By which I mean we were listening to a noon news broadcast in which the newsreader called for Richard’s arrest. We’d heard he had holed himself up in a farmhouse while he was in hiding, but the DJ’s didn’t know that.

“If you hear anything about this man, the police will issue a \$300 reward.” Then the radio station moved back to DJ’s talking shit. Hassan turned that off; we get enough of that in ... real life, apparently.

“You said a council flat, but where exactly?”

“OH FUCK.”

The conversation continued after both men looked around briefly.

“Anyway, we need to meet up and hammer out some terms.”

Paul looked around, and saw Mike nearby. He would pass this on to the others. That was his style.

“Oh, shit.” Paul turned grey and spun himself around, away from Richard.

“Why’re you being so coy now for?” Unexpected and slightly sexually aggressive.

Richard had a phone out now and was doing something, although Paul tried to stop him. I think I heard him request an arrest warrant for some teenagers (although we weren’t even teenagers anymore but so what?)

Richard lowered the phone and removed his baseball cap, throwing it from the second floor window as he slunk down the stairs of his safehouse. The police arrived, kitted out in riot gear and belts overloaded with keys, tasers and guns (the keys for if a suspect wanted a vicious unlocking). As the police converged on the house and Richard left through the back door and dived without dignity into a ditch in the back yard, we pulled up out front in two cars and the cops turned their attention (and by that I do largely mean their guns) to face us.

Simran was the first out of a car, so she bore the full force of the interrogation, such as it was.

Basically she got flattened to the ground by a charging riot shield, and kept there by a steel-capped boot. The idiot cop then made the mistake of trying to taser her.

“You’re under arezzzztztzzttttzzzzzz”. Then he fell over convulsing from electric shocks. Simran wasn’t in much better shape, but she hadn’t been speaking. Raj went white with rage (which, for him, was an achievement).

To his credit, Jerry chose this moment (as the team’s ... current token white guy [sorry Daniel]) to step forward and try to explain. The cops stopped and listened to him. Then Richard moved from his camouflaged position and made everyone’s lives easier (and by that I do literally mean solved our current problem for us) by shooting a cop in the head.

[PS: I now acknowledge what Paul had posted before. Mind you, at the time of writing, we know a lot more than we did when these things actually happened. I mean, I don’t approve. But I don’t approve ... less ... than I did before.]

Chapter 25: Hitting Things On Purpose With A Hammer

>>> This chapter compiled by Simran <<<

Tuesday 20 September 2016: Contractually Obligated to Go on the Run

Chaos. There were about four shots within two seconds. But we’d already seen somebody innocent get shot for no reason, so we had all dived for cover and lay prone on the cobbles of the driveway outside a relatively expensive-looking free-standing two-storey townhouse.

Eventually, the cops had fled with cars and sirens and guns and tasers and drama, following after Richard as he snuck through fields and bush in an effort to evade the cops.

But the thing is, we knew where he’d go, even if he didn’t. Because he still had contract negotiations to complete. He was downgrading, to a smaller house; and we’d meet him there. We couldn’t be exactly sure what his plan was or whether or not he’d actually wanted us to get caught. But by now we knew that he at least had thought about it. So we followed his tacit instructions and waited for half a day, then we’d follow.

A fair amount of hurrying about had taken place by this point, as we settled (as much as can be achieved) in the back of a transit van. Paul sat against one wall, and the rest of us were on the other. Simran would occasionally stick a foot out and kick him in the kneecap. The rest of us couldn’t quite believe it.

“You ...”

“I’m just doing what’s best.”

Paul had probably better not spoken. “Best?” Hassan spluttered. “Best? How in the fuck is that the ‘best’ possible thing to do? He KILLED Daniel!”

“I ... mean ... it seemed like a good idea at the time ...”

“Having unprotected sex seems like a ‘good idea at the time’ until you get herpes.” Hassan exploded, the violence of it shaking the van.

“But he can get us back into Parliament ...”

“I don’t give a water-coloured fuck what he can do. I want to see his head on a shooting range as a target!”

“Calm down, I have a plan ...”

“Yeah! And that plan will maybe get us one seat in Parliament but will almost certainly get him off a murder charge!” Jerry hadn’t said anything.

Paul noticed.

“Jerry?”

“Could ... could you stop the car?” Jerry murmured, almost imperceptible. The car was halted, and Jerry just got out. Couldn’t deal.

“Guys?” Paul stood, exasperated, as the rest of the team followed after Jerry.

“You’d better have one hell of a plan,” was the last thing I said to him before I exited the vehicle, leaving him on his own.

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There wasn’t time to stop moving. The cops would surely have heard the gunshots and arrive with reinforcements, and that didn’t even account for the arrest warrants that had been issued for the team. I could hear a siren in the distance, and they seemed to be coming from multiple directions at once. We had to get out of there. Hide for half a day, then meet up with Richard.

Hassan wired up the radio on his phone and seemed to suddenly just ... have ... the frequency of police radio transmissions. His brother was a cop; that’s what he told us. Although I’d bet there was someone tied up in his basement who knew the channel. We could listen to police radio and stay ahead of them, in theory. In practice, we ran into an unrelated roadblock almost straight away. It was to do with drunk driving, I think. The cops had been there since three in the morning and weren’t really paying attention to anyone that could speak in full sentences. With a brief glance at Daisy’s driver license and a brief round of ‘it wouldn’t be you, would it? You’re so sweet’, the cops moved on.

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We parked the van in a park, and sat down under some trees for a bit, just to change the scenery.

At this point, Paul got a text from Richard, and Luke freaked out when a cop car drove past. Wasn’t even on duty, just driving; and Luke still nearly had a heart attack. Dude needs to calm down.

The text from Richard said ‘there’s a dairy I’ve arranged can hide you away. Be careful.’

We moved back to the van and tried to look for the dairy, even though we’d been given no instructions as to where it was.

Hassan had passed the radio to Mike; who was listening with no regard for the outside world. Apparently the roadblock had, in fact, registered that they’d seen us and the cops were relocating to this area. They’d found the house ransacked and those charges were stacked up against us.

We found the dairy just after 3 o’clock when the team was thoroughly demoralised and in need of pointlessly expensive chocolate. Lucky. Expensive as in costing \$2,000. By that I mean we paid him off to not report us, because he’d heard about us on the radio as well.

We sat down, then Richard called. He’d made a contract with a staffer in Parliament; “If you make sure I don’t lose my seat in Parliament, I’ll pay you \$4,000 for the afternoon’s work.” It wasn’t immediately obvious how this benefitted us, but he explained he would hand the seat over in the event we could negotiate properly. Daisy scrambled to write this down and established that it was binding. As that was basically what would have been discussed in a meeting, we agreed wouldn’t need to stay for a meeting, there was no need to stay in Hamilton. Sadly, the police radio revealed they’d sealed off all exits to the city, so we couldn’t leave.

But we’ll try anyway.

Tuesday 20 September 2016: Just Need To Hammer Out Some Details

That was a mistake. Daisy, Mike, Catherine and I were in the first car to get pulled over. The second car wasn’t silly enough to even attempt it, so Paul, Hassan, Raj, Jerry and Luke were still free somewhere in Hamilton. Probably being chased around by the cops while Hassan played the Benny Hill theme.

Some guy in a hood entered our cell as a guard slammed the door behind us. If I’m honest, there wasn’t a lot of room. Richard removed his hood and was immediately mobbed by everyone except Jerry, whom Raj had knocked unconscious so that Richard wouldn’t be murdered.

“Hey hey hey, if I’m dead you won’t get back into Parliament.” That stopped Daisy, Raj, Catherine and Simran. Although Daisy stood in one of the corners of the cell growling like a pissed off terrier.

“Why are you in a cell and calm? Shouldn’t you be on charges for ... I dunno ... I seem to remember you committed a murder?”

Richard looked thoughtful. “I guess that’s the point. I still have significant control over the cops. I can find you wherever you are. Consequences don’t exist for me.”

“Seeing as we’re here, we should discuss the deal.”

“Oh yeah, I made some progress on that; if I give up my Parliament seat, you guys have to get it. There’s a contract. But you guys will need to turf me out and you won’t be able to do that in prison.”

“Why’d you give us half of what we wanted, but the wrong half? Like a mermaid with a fishy face and human legs. I suppose you do have a fishy face, so it makes sense?”

“And in return for getting the seat in Parliament, you won’t publish that story in the paper.”

“You mean,” Raj pieced together, “that we need to turf you out of your seat to get what we want but you’ve already made a unilateral contract you legally have to deliver on if we turf you out ...”

“Well, shit.” Richard looked beaten for about ten seconds. Then he snapped his fingers and a guard opened the cell door for him but none of the others. “The thing is, though, that I can get out and you can’t”.

About an hour later, Mike heard a faint ‘psst’ from outside the cell. Knocking on the door to show the message had been understood, we moved to the edges of the cell. An almighty screeching noise filled the air for about a minute until someone knocked the roof twenty times with a hammer and a large circle fell in. Paul dropped through the hole on a wire, and said “I can take one of you at a time, so who first?”

Slight pause. Then Raj spoke through Paul’s phone. “Nah, I’ll just come around and unlock the door. Dressed as a guard after some casual sex. Then we can land the chopper and get you all on board.”

“Chopper? You rented a chopper? How? We have no money.”

“Casual. Sex. Just trust me.”

The team managed to get out of the cell before the guards’ next round; that same guard being confronted with an empty cell, an open door and some damaged roof, as some guy rose through the hole on a wire. He’d done that all for show. Paul would probably have called the cell ‘roofless’. Richard wasn’t going to like this.

Chapter 26: Become a Back Scratcher

>>> This chapter compiled by Paul <<<

Friday 23 September 2016: Just a Jump to the Right

People seem to think the fact that Daniel gatecrashed that conference and made some radical suggestions, then the world just fell apart at the seams. And I really like to think that’s true, so it slightly pains me to be the reason this retraction is being written; or the guy who’s writing it.

Here’s some letters because I don’t wanna write this but I need to look like I’m writing it.

<EDITED>

So apparently I can’t do that.

It turns out that voter apathy fucks shit up. Mind you, we knew that; how else would you explain how we’d gotten elected in the first place? It happens every so often in a democracy like this; things stay the same for too long. And when things stay the same, people with higher levels of power can entrench their power, and thus, gain more power. Then people start to notice (or they start to think and create rumours that ‘prove’) that the electoral system is flawed and rigged because there is an elite that acts in its own interest. What people fail to see is that everything acts in its own interest anyway. The question then becomes ‘how rigged am I prepared to let the system get?’

Then people start to lose hope and faith in the system. Sometimes that is a force for ‘good’. Other times it leads the world down what some people might call the ‘wrong path’. But the anger’s there now, at a system that doesn’t work. And your mother probably told you to never make decisions while angry.

Saturday 24 September 2016: Like A Black Hole

Nature abhors a vacuum. Which explains why all household cleaning devices are man-made. The Prime Minister had announced resignation from Parliament over some expenses scandal. There would be a new leadership race. Probably a hundred metre sprint or something. Seems fishy that the shock resignation of the PM seems to have

eroded confidence in the current leadership (mostly because there wasn't any?) Far too coincidental. Also a cheap exit. I mean, how dare he?

The Prime Minister's office had one door either side with the name "N Sharma" on. The joke probably was they weren't at all related, but I suppose at least my OCD was calmed. Knocked on one of the doors, and the other one opened.

"Yes?"

"Nadia Sharma?"

"Oh, yup, that's me. And you're ... Paul? Your reputation precedes you."

"All good things, I hope?"

"I have HR on speakerphone in the office."

The office was essentially a mirror of the PM's. No, sorry; it had a mirror through which you could faintly see the PM's.

"You say you can call an emergency vote to re-elect a seat because Richard's gone on the run? Is there a way that could be us?"

"Well, yes. And that's what I wanted to discuss ..."

I shut the door, as Nadia started talking.

The team met in a hotel conference room, later that day. We had given up our old offices and hadn't yet had the time or money or ... reason (as we hadn't actually been elected) to rent new ones.

"What do we need to do to be taken seriously?"

"Become like servants to the people we want to impress, I should think."

"That would make sense, I guess. But do we still work on publishing the story?"

"Yeah, if we do both at the same time, that should work best."

"Paul, you be in charge," Daisy delegated the group into two teams; PR and press. One team (Luke, Raj, Catherine and Daisy) would work on the story and try to get it to the press. The other team (Hassan, Simran, Mike, Jerry and I) would work on the internal politics and try to get the actual seat back without needing the story to be published in the first place. We finished the meeting at that point, then set off to our individual tasks.

Saturday 24 September 2016: Every News Story Needs A Good Headline

[This is Luke. Testing, testing, one, two ... Okay.]

The story looks good so far. There's like five hundred words, and the reality is we'd only need around seven hundred. Daniel's started this off fairly well by explaining Richard's continual backdoor dealmaking and backstabbing that made him not a good choice as an MP or a PM (see what I did there ...). Luckily, now, we also could add the word MURDERER is big, block, capital letters with an exclamation mark border, because of ... Daniel. The team wasn't functioning at maximum efficiency yet, though. Still felt his loss like a sinkhole in a motorway overpass. But luckily there wasn't too much work to be done. The story was finished in about an hour, and we sent it off just after 2 o'clock. Hopefully the damage would be done by the end of business today.

[Handing back in three, two, one ...]

Saturday 24 September 2016: Every Politician Needs A Good Reason To Do Their Job

On our end, it was slightly more complicated. For one thing, we had to actually move. I mean, can you imagine? Walking? Around Parliament? To get people's signatures, and talk with people – some of whom thought we'd lost our parents after some weird iteration of a Bring-Your-University-Aged-Child-To-Work Day. But we managed to meet with every third (well, sort of) person.

These meetings didn't really have a set topic or agenda ... they just ... happened. In one, Jerry had to clean some 85-year-old MP's shoes, while Mike was required to wash an ex-banker MP's windows (and presumably also look into his tax records, but I didn't ask about that).

After about three hours of this, most of the other staff that had occupied the Parliament building when we arrived had gone home for the evening. Overall, we agreed; we thought we'd been successful.

The only question is whether that's good enough. If the others have done their damn jobs, we should find out before we leave this evening. Which wasn't, it should be noted, the same as Luke's estimated 'before the end of business' timeframe. That one had passed.

Saturday 24 September 2016: Hustling In The Night

The story hit the papers in time for the 6PM news cycle. We'd taken to sitting in the (now-deserted) Parliament while we waited for the fallout from our story. The TVs in the room were all switched on to the news channels. We'd hear it there first, then MP's would presumably find us in here. Especially Richard. We were waiting for Richard.

The story broke at 5:30, and the first calls for Richard's full resignation came an hour later. Richard himself texted me with a simple 'What the fuck, mate?' just after seven. I didn't reply, because what did I have to say? But by seven thirty, Richard had gotten impatient, and he called. I would've put him on speaker, but I didn't need to. He just absolutely blasted the speaker on my phone. We arranged a meeting for eight o'clock; a sentence which sounds a lot calmer than it actually was. I believe he used the words 'spaghetti' and 'dick' in the same sentence. More than once. But I'm not really sure because my phone speaker was dying at a faster rate than consumer law generally accounts for. For some reason.

He arrived at Parliament in time for Simran's explanation of a new office game. Dishevelled and half asleep, but still angry as hell.

Simran said; "We have a version of snog, marry, kill for Raj, Paul and Mike.."

"I would like the results of this."

"There's two kills and one marry."

"But that's not how –?"

"I think we're dead, Raj."

The whole team straightened up when they saw Richard.

"Right, to business." Raj led the negotiations.

"You will retract the story from the press and contain the fallout, and in turn I will give you my Parliament seat. Which I will resign from because I kind of have to now, don't I?"

"How do we know this isn't a double bluff?"

"Because you can still publish the story if it turns out to be."

"So do we have a deal?"

"Actually, could we put a pardon clause in; where after you're out of Parliament, you're not allowed back in for a while or to contact any of your contacts?"

"But if I don't wear my contacts, I won't be able to see?"

He was catching on to our humour, even if this wasn't necessarily an appropriate time. Then he replied properly.

"I'll do that when hell freezes over."

"Oh, good. So, because of climate change, that'll be in about three weeks."

"Oh, by the way, what the hell happened at that safehouse?"

"I phoned it in, then escaped through the rear window. That suit still has brown smudges on it."

"When you gotta go ..."

"Oh that's how you did it ..."

"How did you guys escape? The cops never saw you?"

"Chopper. Dramatic as hell."

"But we do need that clause in the deal."

"Fine."

Richard put out his hand.

"Then I guess we have a deal."

I put out my hand.

"Welcome aboard. Again, I guess." Then we shook and the deal was done. Although, of course, the details would be finalised in the next business day.

Chapter 27: Become a Back Bencher

>>> This chapter compiled by Jerry <<<

Sunday 25 September 2016: Can't Sum It Up In A Limerick

How do people think Heaven works? If you were a recently deceased person would you be watching one person all the time, or everyone you know all the time or do you just get an executive summary of all the people you know? Because there's some stuff I've done that I'd rather he didn't see.

“Daniel Stevens – a eulogy; [line goes here].”

I wrote by reading aloud first – including the blank line placeholder. It was the only way that really worked. My voice echoed around the empty flat. I’d taken the day off work; the others had only taken the afternoon off for the funeral. Fun-eral, if you’re Hassan. I think he had streamers or something to put up.

They ran around like headless chickens trying to secure the seat in Parliament. The one on wheels that had gone rogue. No, the one they’d been promised by the shadiest person we knew (apart from that one time Paul stood underneath a tree – but he’s shady even on his own).

I was hearing all this through the party’s private groupchat. Setting that up had been a mistake. You’d end up just muting the notifications so you could get work done. Writing a eulogy, for instance.

I’d really like to say I was suffering writer’s block. But that wasn’t it. There was not an absence of ideas – I was having too many. And I couldn’t do justice to any of them. Not a writer. None of us are, don’t know if you’ve noticed.

FRAT had achieved a majority in the House, by now. Daniel would have known what to do. The question is; would we follow his non-existent advice? I probably would’ve. I reached this conclusion while discussing it with Daniel’s urn; a specifically designed replica Magic 8 Ball that would tell me if I made a wrong decision. Hopefully it would share Daniel’s brain, given it was filled with his ashes. I’d carry it around like a psychic, consulting it about thrice a day. Because that was the same, wasn’t it?

I’m sure Daniel had insights about life he hadn’t told us. Must’ve. He’d probably figured out the meaning of life and that was why he had to die. Because God wills it. If there is a God, I want him to beg my forgiveness. How could you, as a powerful, all-seeing deity, look at the world and decide to just ... watch as bad things happen. How could you ever decide to just let life happen at all; but especially if you knew there would be suffering and people would die. Daniel basically took this message and enacted it. Stepping in to represent our party in the Cabinet when Daisy was in hospital ... knowing instinctively that she would eventually take her rightful place. And lose it again. But he didn’t know that bit.

I stood up and walked around for a bit, lost in thought but none of it articulate enough or ... good ... enough to be worth writing down. None of it fitting. None of it perfect. None of it complete. Then I tripped over because I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going. In my pacing, I walked past the urn, asked it a minor question about storied to include in the eulogy. Got answers I disagreed with and shook again. Then I went back to my desk, and sat down in front of the keyboard. Still had nothing on paper. Nothing. Not a thing. Not a fucking ...

... You know what ...

You know what? This. I’ll just use this. It’s what he would’ve wanted. Because I don’t even have to tell you the impact he’s had on us – I just spent the last six hundred words showing you.

Sunday 25 September 2016: Funereal

They’d done the church up nice. I mean, they hadn’t changed much. It was a church; not like it would’ve been in disrepair or anything. The team had put about equal amounts of effort into making the church look nice and messing around and being silly. By which I mean Simran and Catherine had taken full responsibility for organising the church and Hassan and Paul were attempting to bounce a stress ball off Luke’s shoes. Luke looked like he was slowly building up to a stress induced meltdown. Mind you, it had been a long two weeks.

The service itself ran relatively smoothly enough, but the hearse crashed on the way to the wake venue ... so that wasn’t quite so smooth.

Wake highlights; the vicar’s opening remarks began with ‘we’re gathered here today because SOMEONE,’ then he paused and glared at the coffin, ‘didn’t have the decency to stay alive’. Mike or Paul must’ve written that. Hassan camped out by the coffin and for every guest putting flowers on the coffin, Hassan would lean over and whisper ‘shhh don’t wake him’. Raj took a phone call and returned after an hour or so with a photographer, which he justified by saying ‘it’s just like a wedding, right’. At some point I saw a small coffee and scone next to the photo of Daniel on top of his coffin. Raj must’ve done that, so the guy did have a heart. I also saw Mike sitting at a chair crying so hard he was pounding the desk. No, wait. Laughing. Paul must’ve said something.

I tried to talk to everyone at the funeral. Although Hassan was running around with a streamer and some party poppers. Trying to put the fun in I’ll just stop.

Couldn’t see Simran though. I had seen her at the church ... obviously. She had kept the whole event moving.

So had she arrived here yet? Must be stuck in traffic? Or something? Um, we should alert the police or something.

<EDITED>

I got back to my desk just after seven o'clock. Checked everything, like I always did just before I left the office at work. Didn't expect to find anything ... but there was an email. It was from Daniel. Which didn't make any kind of rational sense. I clicked it. He must've written it before he died.

Jerry. I wrote this the night after we worked late trying to plan out what we'd do because Daisy wouldn't be out of hospital for a while. I kind of realised something; there'll be pushback from Richard, from other MP's, from the team as well, sometimes. Just don't let it drive you insane. We're not worth that. If it's too much just leave. Your health is more important than our message, and only people who actually know you will ever tell you that. Any supporters we have will expect us to die for them, because people tend to think they'd be as committed to a cause when they are championing it in 'real life' as they are when they can write about it from behind a keyboard. Don't do that, because you'll never please them. In my experience the phrase 'the customer's always right' is unbelievably around the wrong way. They're always wrong, we just can't tell them that. Not sure that I have any other life advice; I wouldn't be arrogant enough to offer it even if I did. So. Um. See you tomorrow, I guess.

There was a bleep and I jumped, the spell broken.

Text alert on my computer, from Simran.

Help.

Wait, what?

Then another email came through, with a video link to a live stream (if you'll pardon the ... no no this is NOT the time for that joke). The video showed Simran sitting in a dimly-lit room with a lamp in her face. It was odd, seeing her like this.

My phone went, as well. "Uhhh, chaps ..." Hassan's slightly nasal voice quavered. He'd probably seen the video. Or there was a spider in the corner of his office.

"Let your bosses know," the unseen cameraman boomed through the terrible speakers on my laptop. "That if you do not respond to this message by giving us a billion dollars in cash and the most prominent positions in the cabinet by noon tomorrow, this girl will die. Pity, she looks quite nice."

"Prominent position in the cabinet? I can sit your ashes right alongside my wine glasses. Fuck, I'll make a set of wine glasses from your ashes. Actually good God no I won't do that."

The guy had finished speaking, and without skipping a beat, Simran burst out "Raj! Help!" Then she was slapped really rather hard and the video cut out.

Chapter 28: Three Skype Calls In A Fortnight

>>> This chapter compiled by Raj <<<

Sunday 25 September 2016: Locked Outside And Inside At The Same Time

Mostly darkness with flashes of white light. She couldn't see anything. Not the ground in front or behind, or where she was going ... who she was with. Like a rollercoaster, but decidedly less fun. She'd been gagged, not that anyone would have heard her screams. She'd think about this part quite a lot later on, after waking up with a cold sweat in the middle of the night ... at least she thought it was the night. At least, she thought it was cold sweat. She'd try to figure out where they'd taken her and why when she had time to think. She'd have loads – in her future, that is. She ended up in a dingy, rusty, disgusting room underground somewhere with a single, low-hanging bulb mounted to the roof. The roof, which shook every so often loosening rubble and dust on to the floor. She kept thinking she wished it would fall and suffocate her. It was probably underneath a railway or something.

There were men with balaclavas on. That much she knew for certain. They'd bring her food, if you could call it that, and make sure she hadn't tried to escape. She hadn't. Yet. But it had only been two days at the time.

This is all stuff she told me later on. Wow, it's dark, isn't it. Apart from the low-hanging bulb that is. Ahahahaha-ha-ha. No, you're quite right. This isn't the time for jokes.

By midnight the whole team had seen the email and associated video link, then re-assembled outside the meeting room, like a Rubik's cube where all the sides had to be as different as possible.

I think I was in some kind of shock. Although to be fair, I think we all were, to an extent. They told me I was rocking backwards and forwards slowly. Hassan was seriously considering pushing me over, apparently. I'm not sure he'd grasped the gravity of the situation (something he would inevitably do if he did manage to push me on to the floor).

Daisy went off to one side and took a phone call; to the Opposition's admin guys, presumably. "We can't make it," she'd be saying. "More important things. Please leave the opportunity open for us; we're still very much interested, just not exactly today."

They said they didn't need a physical presence to start the paperwork, and a vote in Parliament would confirm their election anyway. So basically, we didn't need to do anything and nothing was being asked of us, yet. But they said they understood, and that we would assume the seat when we could.

But, they warned that Parliament would continue operating without us, so to assume the seat as soon as physically possible. Daisy said she understood, and hung up the phone. Then she told me all of this. I'd pass it on to the others after we got Simran back. Because we would get her back.

Monday 26 September 2016: Emergency Security Meeting

A single torch beam lit a narrow corridor, as a team of four prepared to break down a door. They weren't on a mission or anything, someone had just lost the keys to the briefing room. With a powerful kick, Paul broke down the door and embarrassed himself in front of the ten people already sitting in a relatively well-lit room with a long rectangular table in centre-stage. Oh, yeah, and the floor was elevated, like a stage. The guy at the head of the table had the keys next to him. We may as well have just flipping knocked.

"So," the intelligence guy at the head of the table began, after the four intruders had sat down and stopped ruffling about; "The plan to retrieve Simran is very simple. You're also ... not gonna like it."

"Oh no."

Raj hadn't slept much. Mind you, I'm saying that as if everyone else had managed to sleep fine. Basically we all struggled the way through that security briefing, collectively agreeing to keep all the others awake; which resulted in an obscure version of pass-the-parcel, with a cup of coffee. There was a general discussion of whether we'd all received the original video. I think a General had prepared that speech. Then the security guy droned his way through discussion of how they'd find where Simran was. They'd use drones. Then a member of the team would be sent in as a spy and hopefully they'd lead 'proper' backup into the situation. Then Simran would get rescued. Simple, right?

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There were already geographical maps of the whole area, so they just needed to find out which building precisely she was in. So they settled on a tried-and-true method; dressing as Jehovah's witnesses and going door-to-door. We watched this happen on video. By the way, this was the next morning. The meeting had dragged through the night, although it was distinctly possible we'd fallen asleep and thereby missed it. Their door-to-door façade didn't go particularly well. The well-trained and highly specialised SAS agents we'd employed to do this job proceeded to get coffee thrown at them at the worst case, and doors slammed on them in the best case. One house remained silent. I think the theory was that it was this house that was of interest. The not-Jehovah's-Witness SAS guys (called Gerard and Butler, apparently – but I suspect that's just their nicknames) busted down the door and stormed the house. Watching from the screens in the meeting room, the whole team was undeniably awake for this bit.

However, they found nothing of note.

Well, one woman was asleep in one of the rooms. Somehow she hadn't been woken by helicopters passing overhead, or the guys banging on her door; OR breaking it down, or storming through her house.

"She's a sleeper agent, I bet you." Hassan had been awake far, far too long.

"You hate everyone," he turned on Raj, "what is it you like so much about Simran?"

"I don't hate all people, it's just that we wouldn't lose that much in a nuclear holocaust."

"Oh, right. You seem to smart for us, anyway."

"I could've been a doctor ... but I didn't go to med school. Decided to be a mathematician. Mistake."

"Same, but I committed to a life of pain and suffering by testing nine-volt batteries."

"That's a real job?"

"It's possible my cousin just wants to torture me."

We turned our attention back to the video. Gerard and Butler had given the woman some money. She'd report back if she saw anything new.

A voice came through the TV speakers, louder than any of our caffeine-addled brains were expecting, so we all flinched; prompting odd looks from the experienced Intelligence guys.

"Boss, we got nothing. Send in the chopper to get us."

One of the guys in suits okayed this request and radioed for a helicopter. Ten minutes later, through Gerard and/or Butler's eyes, we saw it on the horizon. Five minutes after that Gerard and Butler were aboard. Mission failed.

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"So what now?"

We sat like that for about another hour.

"We could probably use the video IP address to track its location which would then give us an idea of her location. Probably not exact."

"But the older video is hours old. They won't be at that location anymore because they think that's what we're already doing. So we'd have to wait for a new —"

The computer connected to the large TV screen we used for surveillance bleeped. Well, a robotic 'bleep' noise blared through the speakers.

"New video?" Raj was extremely hopeful. Almost contagiously so.

"Get ready to analyse the metadata." The guy in the suit humoured Raj; mostly because he was probably right.

"We have heard you let the authorities know," Simran's voice could be heard through the speakers. Loud, but not panicked. Forced calm though. She wanted to scream. How had they been treating her?

"We ... would like to remind you," Simran quavered, "that if you give us the position in Parliament we so desperately want, your hostage will be returned, unharmed. But the longer we wait, the less likely ..." Then she faded into a sobbing fit and the video cut out. We sat in silence for about a minute.

"We need to analyse this whole situation carefully. We will get her back," the suit guy looked at Raj, who had gone back into shock, "but it won't be immediate. Because erroneous action will mean she dies equally as much as no action will. So we have one move. Zero sum game. The Nash Equilibrium is a careful move after a wait."

"Nash Equilibrium?"

"Our move when we account for their move."

"So we'll wait out the week, then let them know we're coming ..."

"Or at least that we still intend to; before they kill her."

Thursday 29 September 2016: What's The Deal With The Deal

Been a busy few weeks. Been a busy life, but especially these last few weeks. I personally didn't know why they waited for so long. It'd be three weeks before we rescued her. Now more than ever, I understood how the Sherlock fandom felt. There wasn't anything for us, as a team to do. So we pulled the back bench off the back burner and decided to actually do something about it. At roughly the same time, Mike had an idea; we could use Richard to help get Simran back. So the quiet Tuesday we'd planned got thrown roughly through a window, and we scheduled two meetings; one with Richard for 10AM, and one with the Labour admin people for after lunch. Maybe if they were half asleep, they'd let us into the party without realising their mistake.

The team split into three; one third to meet with Richard, one third to meet with the admin people, and one third to process the information from both meetings and deal with it.

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First meeting. Richard kept us (Jerry, Mike, Hassan) waiting for two-thirds of the allotted hour-long appointment. Power trip, as was his M.O. He let us into his office but there wasn't enough seats. So we all just stood around. Mike broke the silence.

"It's occurred to us that you have connections ..."

"I swear if this is another fucking power socket joke ..."

"It's not. But could you please help us get Simran back?"

"Ah, so they have your attention now and you've come to me because you want something? Is that how this works?"

"I don't see you as a friend; if that's what you mean. I see you as the murdering bastard that killed my best friend. But you're of use to us. So you're still alive."

"Well, you remember," Richard said, fairly confident the twenty-year-olds in front of him would not remember, "the deal you signed that said I would leave you alone after the transaction concluded? Call it the you-help-us-then-fuck-off clause."

"Oh, fuck."

"Yes. See, I can't help you because you yourselves have legally locked me out of helping."

"But you know where she is?"

"Well ... no. I know who has her. But I don't know where they are. Somewhere in Wellington, definitely. But beyond that ..."

"Well, fucking thanks. You've been very helpful." Mike retorted sarcastically, as he stood up to leave.

"The one thing I would say is that this isn't over. Even if you do somehow get her back, this is just the beginning."

"Go back to being an irrelevant old man." Hassan spat in an unnaturally hostile way, as the team filed out the door.

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"And the phone lines are open," I announced like a radio DJ to Catherine, who was the only other person in the room. The phone rang just after 11. Not strictly early, but probably earlier than expected. I listened to Jerry passionately recount the events of the meeting which I won't repeat because I don't need to (see above). He was yelling about the 'DICKHEAD RICHARD' so loudly that the phone was nowhere near my ear. Catherine intercut with a ... valid point which only made Jerry angrier.

"Technically, any change in a contract can be agreed to by both sides and then the contract would be changed. So the only reason he didn't vary the contract is because he didn't want to."

Jerry sat in stunned, furious silence for a minute, then hung up. He may have punched Hassan. Nobody ever said, so actually that probably didn't happen.

"I guess you should never give people any power over you. They'll only use it."

"Problem is, this is politics. That's how it works."

"But the idea is that you get equal power over all people you deal with, though. Not that you give people power over you all the time."

"But we have to, because we're young."

"That's true, I guess."

"Speaking of people with power over you, how's Luke?"

Catherine didn't answer, and just glared at me.

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The other meeting started dead on time.

"Nadia Sharma said she'd spoken to you a while back."

"Yes, she did. But what do we need to fill in?"

"You just need to fill in a few forms," the administrator meeting with us was called Colin. He gestured at a thirty-centimetre stack of papers. "It's worse than it looks," he said as if that was a good thing. As each of the three of us took a third of the stack for the rest of the team to sign, Colin continued.

"So the unavoidable circumstances have finished?"

"No but we need to do this."

"Yes. Richard is gaining power. He's been on charge for too long."

"I've heard versions of that joke before. Must get boring being in politics with the same jokes."

The meeting carried on with minimal interruption from any of Luke, Daisy or Paul. Just basic details and paper-filling-in. Daisy was allocated an office in the Labour area of the Beehive. Some lower level floor, but that made sense – she was only a back bencher.

"When we saw Nadia, there was another N Sharma on the other side ..."

"Her sister Natasha. They do the same job but for opposite sides. Imagine the Christmas dinners ..." Colin responded while half-heartedly filling in a form.

"We need some proper admin power on our team."

"But once you get assimilated into the Party, you won't be your own team anymore. You'll be part of our team. So you're right, in many ways, but you won't need your own admin. Because we have ours."

"Aah, assimilation. Now I see why immigrants hate it."

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"Here we go again ..." Catherine was done with this by now. We'd been out to get lunch in the interlude. Pizza, and she still hadn't said anything about Luke. Wasn't going to, I don't think.

The phones rang again; the next batch of callers came through. I transcribed the meeting and mentally braced for filling in the stacks of forms that Daisy had said was coming our way.

Then Catherine and I looked out the window in our office, and thought about how we'd make life better. "When things calm down," Catherine said wistfully, "then I'll talk to Luke about ... us."

Sunday 2 October 2016: One Week Later, And Still Nobody Gives A Shit

[Simran here. It's just easier this way.]

Never negotiate with terrorists. That was the official Government policy on the issue. And the people I was with were definitely terrorists. They'd left me for a week. And I was probably gonna die here. I mean, I don't blame them. But I'd always thought I was different.

The cell I was in would maybe be ... about three metres square. There was barely room to move, and I was never allowed out. A guard would bring food twice a day. The first few, he'd say how sorry he was. Which I'd probably have been able to manipulate, except that I'd been in shock back then. I'd sort of recovered; but the guard had definitely stopped telling me how sorry he was that they were treating me like shit.

Every day was like this for the time that I was there. There was just nothing going on, nothing happening and nothing to do. But then they pulled me out to the room I'd recorded the videos earlier in the week and set me up to Skype with the team. In another video, but this time they'd kill me straight away if I made a wrong move or the team gave the wrong answers.

There was a little delay with connection which I found worrying. Wasn't sure if that would mean I'd die. Or not, these guys were just extremists, they weren't animals? Right? No. I want these fuckers to die in flames. Literal, actual, proper set-on-fire-with-kerosene flames.

But the chat connected, and I heard the voice of the main leader guy that had been in charge all the other times.

There was a brief talk amongst the other side, and Raj's face filled my screen. Not a euphemism.

He didn't say too much, but he did look like he'd been crying. I wonder what I looked like to him.

Eventually, he got a grip on himself, and asked me a question that I'm sure the balaclava'd fuckfaces thought was the single least productive thing to ask in the situation.

s"Will you ... marry me?"

He was making weird ... ring finger ... gestures. Like sliding his left thumb up and down his right ring finger.

Wait. He's trying to tell me something.

I nodded, even though I wasn't precisely sure what he was doing. That seemed an appropriate answer most of the time with Raj. Then my phone chirped loudly, sharply, just as they cut the video. Message received, and they now knew where I was. Again. They could add that to their pile of research.

But that wasn't even the main thing. They were coming. I had started to think they weren't. And now they knew where I was. Oh yeah, and I got engaged.

Monday 9 October 2016: A One Day Mission Following Two Weeks Of Preparation

Guys. I think I fucked up. No, this time's the worst. And that's saying something given the other times I've spoken on here. I just asked a girl to marry me. I mean, why did I do that? And then she said yes. I mean, why did she do that? And I suspect the answer to both questions is 'because I don't regret for a single second what I did'. Now I just had to find the woman I'd semi-inadvertently made my wife. Not quite in the way your parents mean when they use the phrase 'find your soulmate'. I literally had to.

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Sunday evening, and the mission was about to begin.

The Mission Impossible theme played in the background. Then Paul's voice burst through the headset. "Gosh, that's just my ringtone, sorry about that."

"Let's just get this done."

"Okay, right." Paul shuffled his notes around to see what the plan was. I heard a crash as he shuffled them so hard they spread all over the floor.

He picked them up, then carried on. "Phase One: Finding the right building. The analysts say it's in a business district just off SH1. So you'll be looking most likely for an abandoned warehouse."

"With a sex dungeon underneath" Mike called out from the sidelines, with mild laughter.

"The writing's on the wall."

"Well, that's kind of the idea when you show up at a place like that where you know you're gonna get –"

"No, literally." I'd seen a sign with the directions to a warehouse and carpark like what Paul had described as the

necessary location.

"This feels like a shitty spy movie in some ways."

"More of a heist I'd have thought. You can have your high-functioning anxiety as a superpower if you want, though."

"I'm not even gonna respond to that." I replied jokingly. "I said I wouldn't cry ..." I carried on walking, glad of Paul and Mike's company-not-company.

When outside the building, however, I wasn't convinced. A massive warehouse loomed before me, with a large carpark out front. Like they'd have visitors. It probably was mostly empty. Like my self-confidence at this moment.

"I'm not sure I'm good enough to rescue her."

"The self esteem support group meets on Thurs at 9PM. Please use the back door."

"No, but seriously. I can't just walk in there."

"We called you backup. And you're right – you'll need to find her first."

"But ... how?"

"This is why I called it a spy movie. You need to dress up. Nevermind the crap you normally wear."

"Who told you that?"

"Simran."

"She likes my fashion sense, she said so."

"She's probably also told you that you have a big dick. She was lying on both counts, I'm afraid."

"All right, if you're so fucking smart," I growled at the smug bastard on the other end of my earpiece, "then what the fuck am I gonna wear?"

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There are some things you say that you just regret. That previous comment was one of them. I ended up in a security guard uniform two sizes too small, with no room for movement and no way to breathe out without popping the seams on my trousers. Note to self: never let Paul pick out a disguise again. It wasn't even a good disguise, and lasted about thirty seconds before I was captured by a proper guard with a taser. I was unusually keen not to get electrocuted, funny how that happens. He basically interrogated me.

"And you're here to see your partner?"

"Yes, I need to show her our wedding vows that I finished."

"Oh?"

"For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health. For a bit Until I get sick of the fucking sight of you."

"And you couldn't wait for her to return before you read out that ... delightfulness?"

"You're talking to me about delightfulness."

"You're acting like this is fun. Fun is all well and good but it often comes at a terrible price," he rapped at the taser I was still keenly aware of.

"Was that a threat, officer?"

"Yes. Stop the backchat or it'll become a painful reality."

This discussion continued for a while, until the guy got bored and went to get a coffee. As will become apparent in the next little while, they were not very accustomed to keeping prisoners here, and weren't yet familiar that an open door made for an ineffective cell. What I mean by that is that I ran out of it just after he did.

Now to find Simran. There would be an area of cells somewhere, or at least a dark and disgusting room somewhere. If I went downwards, looking for a basement ...

There was a cell that looked as though someone had been in it recently on what I would assume was the lowest level of the building. This must have been where they had kept her.

... And she wasn't there. There was a creak behind me, and the cell door I'd so carelessly walked through slammed shut behind me. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking." I addressed the voices in my head. "I have an announcement to make but first you have to promise not to get mad." Paul and Mike made the promise, then immediately broke it.

I could hear a guy on the other side get out his phone and frantically dial; "She got out but there's some other –". Then my backup got to him. I never checked whether the guard was killed or not. Although my backup were SAS guys. So he probably was.

Monday 10 October 2016: Gathering Intelligence

[Simran here again. Just bear with me, please.]

You may think, given what I'd been saying throughout my last post, that I was incapable of doing anything while trapped in the cell. But the fact that the earlier guard always profusely apologised was of use. Meant the people who were keeping me here (the ol' balaclava'd fuckfaces) probably weren't used to treating someone like this. Although for their sake I hope they never got girlfriends. Started small, by just asking the guards how they were. I think, at first they were confused by my interest. It's logical, isn't it?

Of course you think it's logical. You know that I want to get out of here, so I want them to help me. Need them to care so that they'll do it.

So over time I asked them things. Initially, I got no replies but after a week or so the guard would meekly answer my questions. He was a student intern for the FRAT party, so I assume that's who's keeping me here; who'd thought politics would be better than this. (Pro Tip: On the basis of the provided evidence I'd say it isn't).

He wanted to make change in the world. I suggested he go to work at McDonalds (immediately, and leave the door open when you leave). He saw through that.

After another week, he felt comfortable enough to open the door, sit in and chat; for a bit. He was a hardcore socialist. Believed we should go to war on drugs. By which he didn't mean fight people using drugs, he actually meant we should fight people while using drugs. A bit of a crackpot, but he'd clearly never seen a female before. Or, at least, not one that's been locked in a basement. A week of sob story and a baseless and unsubstantiated promise of sex in the future was all it took after that. Mind, this had taken two weeks.

Then he actually asked me why I was here. And I had to look at him in shock.

"What the hell am I doing here? What are we all doing here?" Although, I suspect my point was more existentialist than he was aiming for. I told him I didn't know, while crying. Manipulative and categorically untrue, but it worked. When he left that day, the door was open. Finally, my plan had worked, and that poor, naïve guard left the door open so I could escape. I heard a rustling behind me, but I didn't look back to check. It might have been a guy with a gun.

Tuesday 11 October 2016: Carefully Considering All Options, Then Making The Wrong Move

"She's definitely not here," I murmured into my earpiece. "And that's not even the bad news ..."

"Who are you and what do you want?" I yelled into the empty hallway.

"I'm Paul and I want you to come home," came the reply from my earpiece.

"No. Paul ..."

"It's the FRAT party, don't you know that by now? And we want a seat in Cabinet. We've told you all this." A reply floated down the hallway.

"Is there any way I can get out of here?" This time no response.

<EDITED>

Simran burst through the door of the meeting room, and every member of the team stopped and stared. For about ten minutes, nobody knew what to do.

"And he didn't even give me a ring." Simran broke the silence, which spurred everyone else into action.

"We need to go back for him."

"We'd better or I'll be a widow."

"Do you remember the way back there?"

"Aren't you going to take me? We could just use GPS."

<EDITED>

Eventually a decision was made. Another earpiece procured and placed in Simran's ear. She headed back to the prison, but this time with a gun. To rescue Raj. Because that was definitely how a spy film would work. She arrived just after lunch had been served; with Raj having to explain the situation to a befuddled yet ultimately happy intern. This didn't stop Raj from lying across the meagre desk in the cell in a seductive manner, as Simran walked in the cell door.

"Hey bab-". He got no further than that before the table broke and he had to pick himself up.

Simran ran a call through to Daisy, who was sitting in Parliament. On speaker, so we could all hear.

When the other MP's realised what she was doing, they started to chant. Unfortunately this noise alerted the guard who'd been here before. Simran turned around, and, not for the first time, saw a balaclava'd man level a gun at both her and Raj.

I could hear a faint ‘lock her up; lock her up’ in the background of the phone call. But that really wasn’t my main concern.

“Guys?” The earpiece minders (Paul and Mike) were panicked now. Oh God, this is a mess.

Chapter 29: Two Months Worth of Backwards Progress

>>> This chapter compiled by Hassan <<<

Wednesday 12 October 2016: Retelling Other People’s Stories

“Lock her up. Lock her up.” The whole right-hand side of the house were slightly less than happy with Daisy. Last day of Parliament before Christmas, and I wish this was an irregular occurrence.

Richard wrestled his way through the mass of noise. “Guys. Calm down, calm down. It’s not like she’ll be back here next year.”

Some guy from the FRAT party yelled over the top; “I propose an emergency Bill”.

“You still have to pay for the dumplings we went and got last week.” Daisy couldn’t resist yelling.

She said that day had been the worst day of her professional life. Although given this job was basically work experience, that wasn’t too hard. The Speaker took an issue with the backchat and kicked Daisy out. He was no less a part of the rampant cronyism than the rest of the FRATheads.

The door of the House slammed behind Daisy as she was kicked out. Okay. Kicked out of the Cabinet. Just another day at the office.

Daisy found herself still holding her phone.

“So that just happened. I take it you’re doing about the same?”

The team at HQ struggled to cope with the rate of change in this hostage situation.

“And you’re right outside where they’re keeping him.”

Wait. A. Minute. Simran?

“Um,” Hassan grabbed the radio from Paul’s unresisting hand. “Raj?”

“I’m probably gonna die,” came the reply.

“I should probably explain what happened ...” Simran tried to talk, but Raj’s captors (can we just say Richard? Yeah, I think so. I mean it **was**. But he might sue us. (And it’s been established we don’t cope too well in legal trials).

“If you want to see Raj again ...”

“Nah, I just married the fucker; I think I’m good.” Simran did something and Richard’s voice disappeared from Paul’s headset.

“What’d she do?”

“Probably punched him or something. She’s badass like that.” I cut in from the outside.

“Don’t get too attached dude. She’s Raj’s wife.”

“But what’s gonna happen now?”

“Raj will have a plan. He must do.”

<EDITED>

[Raj here. I didn’t have a plan. Yet.]

The guy in a balaclava had a gun levelled at Simran. I feel as though he would’ve been able to move the gun to point it at me reasonably easily.

“I don’t like having an enemy I can’t see. Like the political system, huh?” I paused, waiting like a standup comedian for laughter that wouldn’t come. “Take off the balaclava so I can face you before I die.”

I was calmer than I ought to have been. Then the guy took off his face shield; it was Richard! The least surprising reveal ever!

“Give me a reason not to shoot. Or I will.”

“You mean bargain for our lives?”

“Jesus, even at gunpoint you’re infuriating. Five seconds.”

“Okay, um,” Raj recovered quickly, then said “you said you wanted the seat in the house, right? Well, if you let us live you can have it. That would give you an overall majority. Lord knows that isn’t what we actually want, but I’d very much rather not ... die, you know?”

Richard considered this. “Fair enough. Because if I killed you, there’d be no way in hell they’d let me have the seat,

and that's just messy." He lowered the gun and stepped away, as he received a text alert.

"Seems like Daisy's been kicked out of Parliament for the day. Hard to come back from something like that." He said with a sly smile. Then he spun on his heel and walked away.

"What did you do that for." Simran was less than pleased with me. I mean, sure, I'd just shat on the last 18 months' worth of work. So that's fair.

"I didn't think. But hey, we're getting married so who's the real winner here?"

"Not me, it turns out."

Making our way out of Richard's compound was more straightforward than you'd think. We did get lost in the carpark, though. No idea where it joined the road. But eventually we had time to talk, while briskly walking away down the road and hoping we weren't being followed.

"Do you have a plan?"

"Plan? To stop Richard? How would we do that?"

"I dunno, that's why you need a plan."

"In theory, we need to let him feel like he's winning in order to trap him. The only problem with that is that we need to let him win."

"And you don't want to let him win?"

Raj gestured at the filth matted to Simran's clothes. "No. I don't, for some odd reason."

"And how does your plan work, exactly?"

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Then this is what we must do ..."

He told Simran his plan. She never told anyone else what it was, though. Eventually, the conversation swirled back to the others.

"We need to call the others."

"Oh shit. Yes, we do. And they're gonna kill me. Twice."

Simran procured a phone. "I'll probably hear what they have to say on the matter. You dial."

Raj did. "Hey, guys. Do you want the good news, or the bad news?"

<EDITED>

[Hassan here again. Get my own post back. Yasss].

Daisy had to roll with the decision to give up the seat. She wasn't happy about it, but at least she understood. Catherine wasn't on board and didn't want to talk with either of Raj or Simran. Quite an impressive spectrum of reactions ranging between the two from everyone else. Daisy would leave Parliament just before Christmas, and between now and then there was not much point being there. But she had to be. Because she'd been elected. I suppose what's been done can't be undone. Like when I drew a moustache on Jerry with permanent marker while he was asleep.

Saturday 5 November 2016: I Suppose Blowing Them Up Is A Solution

Guy Fawkes' Night. So I guess it's an appropriate time for considering how we could fix the situations we were finding ourselves in. One such example could possibly have been ... I don't know ... blowing them up. Just a possibility I'm suggesting, don't shoot me. I'm not convinced why it might work, but I have a hazy but important recollection that we might be able to try it. Then I remember the laws around ordering nitroglycerine online. As well as the fact that if we did nothing, we'd have no laws at all to come back to.

But that's not even the main problem I have with the whole thing; Daisy asked me for a favour, and while I was delivering it, I saw the current state of the Parliament in its unadulterated meanness. Suffice it to say, it made me angry. The kind of anger that has nowhere to go, so I just let it marinate for five hours, then I wrote this. Have to let it out somehow.

<EDITED>

Daisy rang me at about half past lunch. She was in Parliament, and needed research done and me to deliver it to her in Parliament. I rushed the research to her as soon as I could, which with traffic in Wellington's CBD and the fact that a printer low on ink can smell fear (of approaching deadlines), I flung the door into Parliament open at a quarter to

afternoon tea. Yeah, it had been that long. At least one of the guards looked at me like I was insane. But I am. So that's okay.

I made my way through the building of mostly self-respecting individuals who waved and nodded and smiled, then carried their papers and moved on. I have no problem with these people. It's the actual politicians themselves, and specifically the right-hand side of the House, that draw my ire in this particular occasion. You might, based on how I have built this up, expect an explosive monologue that puts the bigots in their place and solves the world's problems; both in one hit. This will not happen. You might get some sarcasm for your money. Or maybe just second (or third) hand anger at the situation. In which case I apologise.

I arrived at the Cabinet while Chief Fuckface (a nickname which here refers to the ~~Head of the Arseholes~~ Leader of the Opposition, was speaking in relation to the work they were currently doing;

"What do you mean I'm useless, Daisy? I just introduced a new Bill." Loud, obnoxious and braggish. He's exactly the kind of person I wouldn't mind dying in a fire.

"He's the Minister for finance, innit?" Daisy'd reply was on-point, and got mild laughter from the left hand side. I noticed one guy on the right with a fist in his mouth trying to stop himself. Then he was clubbed over the head by another idiot in a suit, and he stopped anyway. This was the level of politician we were stuck with, at least for the time being. The banter among the FRAT boys (OOOOOHHHH THAT'S WHY THEY CALLED IT THAT – THEY'RE LIKE PUPPIES BUT UGLIER AND WITH A WORSE UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD NO!) And it is exactly this understanding of the word no that is my next subject for discussion; because somehow, the discourse had leapfrogged into the locker room. I missed a few lines because of the inherent weirdness of the whole thing.

"That's what calling a prostitute is though? Just an organised phone a friend line." I suspect the joke was intended in good taste. But he was still a pig. Mind, pork tastes good, so maybe it all links up.

"If you ask me for \$5, and I'm too drunk to say yes or no, it's not okay to then go take \$5 out of my purse... Just because I didn't say no."

The Speaker wasn't quite sure how to deal with these radical and random changes in thought patterns, so I was able to hand off the research to Daisy and leave in the ensuing chaos. Eventually, he started kicking random MP's out of Parliament. I could hear from outside, the speaker using his microphone (one would think that was antithetical to a speaker, but eh). A relatively long line of freshly disgraced straight-white-male-send-me-nudes-type MP's filtered out of Parliament with varying degrees of anger at the inherent unfairness of white people being punished for anything at all ever. Then, the last MP out the door was Richard. And I nearly knocked him out. Except that would have been more than he deserved. He wasn't focused on me anyway. He was more worried about arguing his points to himself under his breath in a whiny voice and remarking that 'you people are stupid. Wait till I'm in charge.' Might have been ominous had it not so clearly been the result of a preschool level tantrum.

Daisy told me later that Parliament was like that most days, although the Speaker didn't normally step in to kick people out of Parliament like he had.

And that's just not the kind of thing I want to be involved in. I just hadn't realized the level of ignorance and stupidity in our Government. I mean, I'm all for stupidity, says the man with a unicycle habit. But stupidity AND ignorance? Colour me disillusioned, then let me out of here. Or at least let me fix the system somehow by meeting with Party executives. Like Nadia. She'd be able to fix this. Although her secretary told me she didn't want to talk and was 'sitting at her desk waving; 'no, no''. Not very secret, if you ask me.

I think the politics and insults was getting to Daisy. If I were her, I'd consider leaving. It was already getting to me and I'd only been exposed to it for five minutes.

Thursday 1 December 2016: My Faith In The System Is Going The Same Way As The Public's Faith In Mainstream Media

The media didn't like the whole turn of events, both at home and abroad. They went with a simple headline; ":\". This was from the one media outlet that I still trusted to report on whole stories. This is what media bias actually is, and not whatever other people seem to think it means. Media bias doesn't mean 'they don't say things I agree with' or 'they have different political views'. While both of those things are definitely factors, they're not the main concern. The main concern is whether the news outlet is wilfully neglecting readily available information in its reporting of a story. Not a matter of how they've interpreted the information they have presented, but as to actually what they present in the first place.

The other point with media bias of course is that it runs both ways. For every publication running left-oriented stories, there is one running right-oriented stories. Bias, or perceived bias, is basically only indicative of how a

publication has managed to identify and market itself, because this is the most noticeable way people determine that an outlet is biased. That's also, based on my earlier thoughts, inconsistent with what I think 'bias' is, and what it's defined as. And certainly how it could possibly be present in the media.

This is the kind of thing that's annoyed me about politics of late. I'm kind of going off the idea, and I think that's being done deliberately. Maybe not by Richard, but he's the one who stands to gain the most. Maybe I'd leave the Party. I'd have much more time that way ...

Anyway, this article I read kind of summarised the public's loss of trust in the media, and how Richard's used that to swing himself into power, even though he should definitely be in jail for murder. He would do something newsworthy every few days; or at least he'd do something every few days that would get reported on. Then he'd claim the media was 'biased' because they reported it.

Well, first of all sweetheart, that's how the news works. Something happens, it gets reported. Where bias DOES come into it, though, is whether the outlet will riff off the facts of what has happened and add their own thoughts to it. That **would** be bias. Or ... reporting the comments he makes while not reporting the fact that there are people that don't like it. That was also be bias. See. I just did it here. Now, whether or not you wanted to know what I think; you now do. Part of the dishonest, lying, crooked, fake media.

But the more distressing thing about Richard is his lack of variety. Media. Media. Media. Media. That's what his Twitter account looks like. Oh, the irony. But also, move on. Stop being a broken record. I'd far rather you were a corrupt MP3.

Saturday 17 December 2016: Things Are Spiralling Out Of Our Control

Just before Christmas and it didn't look like things were improving. Richard had used his blustering about the corrupt media to ensure nobody ever listened to the news anymore. Or they did and thought it was biased. Which it was, to an extent. There's an equal number of sites with biases turning the other way. The fact that one set of biases is more common isn't the media's issue. That's just advertising. Richard had taken to performing for the public in rallies. Easy to get his message out, he said. But he wouldn't need a message platform any more, would he? He was already the head of state. Reached the highest level of the hierarchy.

The first issue he attacked was the fact that harmful ideologies were being used against 'normal' people. Without defining what either word was supposed to mean. I suppose you could say that it's like if you were a vegan, you wouldn't want everyone else to – uh, nevermind.

He had a similar level of control over the House too. Daisy would frequently hold Executive Party Meetings that would basically consist of 'nah, I couldn't do anything because I'm a woman' or 'One of the new rules they've introduced is that you have to ... clap your hands if you're ... happy and you know it. I don't know. I wasn't paying attention. There's no point when Richard's cronies only try and sexually assault you. But then they have to ask your age because that matters but your gender doesn't; never mind whether you actually consented or not'. Admittedly that last one was long and went off track. Like my dirt road racing career, which ended when I collided with one of the stands at the side of the track. Still paying that one off.

It had been going like this for a while. And you could be forgiven for thinking it was 'normal'. But this wasn't normal. Richard hadn't been elected. Political blogs and pundits (not us, obv) all disagreed with Richard being leader.

Undemocratic. That's what they said. Protests as well. Richard responded to one of them, once. There was like ten people camping outside Parliament. The nicest, most considerate blockers of the road that I've ever met. They stayed there for about a week. Then Richard held a press conference which started by talking about how he was going to put all the Government money into healthcare and cut taxes down to zero. So we all knew he was joking. And he added in to the end of the broadcast that 'there are some protesters outside of Parliament. About ten or fifteen, and they want me to step down. So okay, will do.' The papers had a lot to say about that.

The opposition fought hard, though. We'd properly expanded our team to include Steph, who was a really good advocate for any cause you cared to mention. Like phenomenal. Why Mike hadn't said this at least a year ago confused me. She would have helped, a lot. Oh yeah, they'd been going out for a year. Apparently that was common news.

Nadia and her sister Natasha (the other N Sharma from the opposite side of the PM's office – so they were related) had also taken up political advisory positions. They'd check in with the We-Are-Centrist-We-Promise Party we'd become part of. It was actually called the Labour Party, not that you'd know from how scattered and disorganised the whole thing was. Maybe if they could sort their shit out and actually have a concrete direction, then maybe they

could pull an election and steal the Parliament back from the jaws of a shark. Richard. He's told me to stop calling him that.

<EDITED>

Daisy keeps saying she doesn't feel overly welcome in Parliament. I mean, we never felt particularly included; the only time Daniel was embraced by a fellow MP it was after he'd been booted out, and he was given a wedgie. This whole situation is worrying. For every time Richard does something a good leader would do, he also retreats further into cronyism and conflicts of interest (or it would be a conflict of interest if he had an attention span. As it stands, it's just a conflict).

The Parliament had continued to pass risky legislation. But none of it as objectionable as the Power Bill. Deregulation of the labour market meant the end for unions. Fine, and I don't like when you cry while cutting them. Oh wait, sorry, that's onions. He also privatised healthcare (which is how we all knew he was joking when he increased healthcare funding in that press conference). He focussed on controlling inflation over attempting to handle both inflation and unemployment in a compromise; so unemployment ballooned out. Rightward shift along the Philips curve, yadda yadda yadda. Rightward shift everywhere. Apparently there was a religious justification for all this. But I never stuck around for it. I googled some of his policy later. It quite closely resembled Thatcherism. So heh. Next thing we'll be taking milk from children.

Throughout all of this, Raj and Mike kept the group lighthearted with banter and memes (which are fine until they start influencing policy decisions). 'I've no idea what this person's on, but I'd like some,' was commonly said of Raj. Everyone liked Raj; especially Simran. Mind you, that was to be expected. They were sort of married. "I hope I slept with you to get that job if I didn't who the hell was that guy," I heard her say one time. Raj would look around confused, "we've not slept together though ..."

Things seemed okay for a little while, but after one Parliamentary session, Daisy looked the most shaken I'd ever seen her. I never watched the Parliamentary debates, mostly because after this I didn't have much access to the Internet. But Daisy told us all about it, and said we had to leave the country. They'd come for us, she said. We'd need to run.

Richard had stood up and declared that he had a list of enemies of the state. Enemies of him, more like. There was about a hundred items on the list. Some media, maybe twenty. Some civilians, maybe thirty. Then the other half were members of the Cabinet. He decreed that they would be killed at the end of the month. New Year's resolution, my ass. She freaked out. Screaming and crying and shaking, trying to cram her possessions into a box. We calmed her down, eventually. Only just.

Monday 26 December 2016: Subgame Perfect Equilibria [1000]

If anything's ever on the brink of collapse, it looks terrifying. From a Jenga tower, or a drunk on a night out; to the local currency and the attached economy. Not good. And also, not what we'd wanted. Well, maybe Mike had wanted that, just for a laugh. Well, nobody was laughing anymore. Even the newsreaders frequently opened broadcasts with mascara running down their faces. Economic analysis cut itself back to 'we're fucked'. All the automated stock market prediction things had charted downwards sloping graphs, and the whole economy braced for impact. This kind of preparation wasn't at all normal. Indicative of the kind of change that would happen here, maybe.

We sat around our meeting room, taking in the details. It'd be a while before we were back here, if at all. Had to decide what we were all going to do.

"I'll go and live with Steph. They shouldn't know who I am, anyway; so I should be safe." Mike opened up the proceedings.

"Who are you again, and how did you get in here?" Raj replied quickly. Too quickly; he'd probably known about that in advance. "I'm not sure you'd be as safe as you claim; but if you're confident in your decision, I won't stop you."

"I think I'll become a juggler." I went next. That Parliament 'debate' I'd seen totally put me off. "Somewhere. Probably with family in Southern China."

"Safe and out of the way. Good plan." Daisy cut in. "Paul?"

"I was thinking become a professional Stud."

"You mean those metal things that go in walls to keep them upright?" Confusion from Jerry, mostly because he'd met Paul.

"No, I – nevermind."

Catherine went next as the closest person to Paul that hadn't already spoken. "I was thinking visit family in China over the summer. Hopefully we'll be able to come back after that."

"Luke?"

"I don't have any family at all – my parents died in a car accident about five years ago." This was new information. Maybe we should've properly sat down and actually got to know each other. But the stresses of modern life, you know ... even while we were at uni together.

Jerry went next. He'd stay here, and try to get 'in' with Richard. We'd need someone on the inside to let us know when it was safe to come back. Potentially a valuable source of intel? Might turn out to be useful –

"To Richard and Judy, merry Christmas you pair of twatheads", Raj read aloud as he wrote a Christmas card to send Richard before he left. Why he even bothered, we'd never know. He was going to go with Daisy and Simran to the UN; not necessarily because he suited the work, but because Simran was going. So he had to. (But secretly he wanted to be in Europe in the Winter). They would stop by Las Vegas on their way (even though it is nowhere near) and get married in the lowest-key ceremony they could. Although they could've done it here in the office (that isn't what I meant), but I think they just wanted to go to America.

And Daisy revealed her plans last. Which I've already told you. Champagne glasses were procured from ... somewhere. She either had a stash in here or was ... magic. She wanted to toast; and it was quickly pointed out she'd brought out the wrong utensil. Maybe a toaster would have been more appropriate.

"Guys, I just wanted to say that the last 18 months have been literally life-changing, and I do hope we see each other again at some point; although I'm not yet sure when that will be. So I guess I just hope you guys all have good lives and make excellent decisions, as opposed to waking up after three drinks in a gutter using an old newspaper as a blanket."

"One time. That was one time." Raj had gone through a drinking phase at university.

The toast was completed and the drink finished. But only the one, we had rules on this sort of thing.

After a not insignificant amount of time, the team broke off to pack and book flight tickets and ... have more sex. Dammit, Simran. Luke, Catherine and I were the last three.

"Look, I don't think I'll get another opportunity for this," Luke began and I thought he was gonna ask me out. No, wait. Not me.

"I suppose we could give it a try," Catherine was relatively fast off the mark here, while I slunk down in my chair and pretended not to exist.

"And if I have no family, then I could come and stay with you in China."

"You could ... but maybe book a room or something to start with. I'll work on my family, then you could maybe stay with us later on. Or something like that, anyway. Problem solved, or at least kind of.

How long it would last, of course; that's another question.

Monday 26 December 2016: In A Crowd, You Just Blend In; In An X-Ray Machine, You Really Stick Out

We'd all booked flights for Boxing Day because of the crowds of people leaving the country. Or at least the fact that it was peak flying time.

The flights would all leave before lunchtime, I found out after we all sat down in the airport bar, and had prised Catherine and Luke, and Raj and Simran apart. They seemed to have this awkward four-way hug going and we all had better things to be doing, like running for our lives.

I think we all knew it would be our last time seeing each other, at least for a little while. So we mutually agreed, without speaking on the matter, not to discuss it at all. We'd just sit and have a beer together before we get up, board a plane, and never see each other again. In theory.

In practice, Raj and Simran couldn't be prised apart for more than thirty seconds at a time, even though they weren't going to different places, and Luke and Catherine snuck off to the bathrooms to have sex. More than once. I mean, seriously? There is such a thing a decency. And it wasn't like this would last forever.

Eventually, the team was sat in one place and in varying levels of attentiveness, so that Raj could address the group. Simran was acting like there was a great know-all Master Plan that he'd disclose. If there was, I never heard it. He needed to talk quickly because our flights were in less than half an hour and we'd wasted about two hours drinking already. Weren't drunk though. We'd learnt from last time.

"Step one of my plan: more waffles, and another round of drinks." Raj, who had over the interim become my PA, paused while the food and drink was ordered. When the drinks arrived, he continued.

“Step two ...” he raised his glass.

Then the tannoy went off. “Flight 2020202 is ready for boarding at Gate 8.”

“Yeah. That’s probably for the best. Wouldn’t want a repeat of last time.”

He picked up his carry-on and headed off towards the gate, after downing the beer in one go.

This happened over the course of the next hour, as each member of the team boarded a different flight to a different place. Couldn’t come back, not in the near future. Until I was on my own, waiting for a flight to Geneva. So I guess the question is, can you fix the world? Or while trying to fix it do you just make it a different version of ‘worse’?

And the answer, I think, goes something like this; “I have a flight to Switzerland in half an hour. And I’m gonna try and find out.”

Chapter 30: One Year of Frantic Running

>>> This chapter compiled by Daisy <<<

Wednesday 11 January 2017: Rocky Relations on a Rocky Outcrop

A platoon of soldiers boarded a military van and left from a base in the dust. They’d been up for about three hours, planning. That was what I’d been briefed on. They headed to a small and remote rocky outcrop that they’d meet the enemy at. To try and talk. Instead of using weapons. Mind, this war had gone beyond weapons by now. Both sides had proved equally capable of bombing the other. The charred chassis of a cargo plane that had been wrecked nearby stood by the base that the platoon had come from as a reminder of their enemy’s power.

A helicopter passes over a military base. Then it stops without landing. Dust is stirred from its slumber by generated wind from the rotors. Then, a shadow of a human breaks off from the shadow of the helicopter, dangling from the shadow of some rope. Eventually, the shadow of the human would attach directly to the leg of said human as they approach then touch the ground. But for now, the human was detached and isolated.

“Hey! Hurry up!” My mental sidetrack was derailed by a UN peacekeeper. Yes, the human was me, and I was dangling from a rope. Why was I even here, I wondered, looking around at the people, all in desert camouflage, that occupied the base. Fulfilling daily routines, or rituals, or planning for future manoeuvres. This was where the magic happened, I briefly thought. Then I stopped myself. Magic? A literal warzone, and my brain would describe this as magical? I guess the whole idea is so far from anything I’d ever do in my life that it might seem magical, even though I in no way understand it.

But I wasn’t really here to understand how war works (which I think was what my brain had gone ‘ooohhh look at this cool thing’ about). No. I was here to understand how the people who fight wars work, and why they even do it in the first place. And I was here to stop it.

I should maybe explain. I joined the UN after leaving New Zealand. Their worst nightmare. I would be back. And by the time I got back, I’d have stopped a fucking war. This one, right now.

Jerry gave me regular updates on what was happening in Parliament, back at home. It was about as bad as would be expected, I think. But not as bad as I’d feared. Raj was ... somewhere with Simran. America, maybe? Nadia had fled with us, she’d ended up in India. The others had ... not contacted me. I haven’t got anything new to say to them anyway. Not until we can go home. And we will go home. If it takes me all year, I will make sure of that.

I was fitted out with a microphone and headset, and taken in a more closed-in van along the same route the soldiers had gone. We stopped about a kilometre from where the meeting would take place. There were drones in the sky and I was in range, so I could hear and see what was happening. Don’t want to get too close, they said. In case of funny business. It seemed fine though. Calm. Which was nice, I think.

The other side showed up in a similar van. They probably had someone doing an equivalent of my job.

The conversation started off slow, then I realised that was a setting on my headset and I could speed it up.

The two sides started by exchanging banter about how their wives and families were. Then they talked about the weather. No. None of that happened, I’m just being optimistic and making things up.

They talked about a shipment of nuclear weapons that the other side would return to us so that there could be a brief ceasefire. Their leader’s birthday, or something. We agreed, and the weapons were handed over; and the whole negotiation seemed to be going well. Too well. I hadn’t even been needed yet.

But it was slowing down.

“What else do they want?” I supplied urgently into my headset. The negotiator nodded, understood. Then he relayed this. There was an incomprehensible reply that I didn’t hear. Then, from my negotiator; “what was that?” “What did he say?” Confused, and slightly panicking, I spoke urgently into the headset. My negotiator said something in reply but my sound cut out so I missed it.

Then there was a bang. I heard it with my real ears in the distance. Visual and communication died instantly. They must have set off a bomb of some sort or figured out how to target all the communications simultaneously.

This is what they had meant ‘no funny business’. It seemed like this had not gone to plan.

They’d stolen the arms shipment. But it didn’t seem like they’d use it. So why? It makes no sense. To arrange a whole situation to steal some weapons you won’t even gain from because you can’t use them? These guys had long since realised bombing was the only adequate way to actually do damage that would be proportional to any damage received in retaliation. So someone else must have paid for the weapons, and it was only the job of the people in this meeting to steal them. And, presumably, cope with any retaliatory attacks, but that’s not even the point anymore.

I was called back to the UN. Not safe here anymore. Or maybe they had another job for me.

Friday 3 February 2017: The End of Winter In Europe

Snow pooled on the roof outside the office window. I’d made it back to the UN headquarters in Geneva, and waited there on holiday for a week. I had a meeting with an executive relating to the lost shipment of nuclear weapons. That happened, like, a month ago; and the bureaucracy within the UN meant that this mission had bubbled its way through the cogs, wheels and inexplicable rubber bands of the UN hierarchy of Power. Yes, power. That thing that it’s been soidly established that I hate. And we all hate. And we’d all secretly rather wasn’t there.

But what would we replace it (the current system), with?

I digress. This isn’t the time for my rampant existentialism to club you over the head. If you’re still even reading this.

Oh, yeah. The meeting that I have to go to.

<EDITED>

The woman didn’t keep me waiting. We were in Switzerland, and you know what they say about the Swiss. Excellent chocolate, although they’ve scrimped on the bars. Yeah, Toblerone. Still not over that.

“And you were there when the package went missing?” The woman was cold, clinical, and looked at me over the top of her glasses. This woman’s spirit object would probably be a knife.

“Um, yes? But that wasn’t to do with me. That was a guy with a bomb.”

“And you’d be okay with following it around the world? Because it’s moving, and looks set to continue.”

“Follow it like a lovestruck bloodhound? And how do you even know it’s tracking?”

“Every shipment capable of mass destruction is tagged. This is where the stolen shipment currently is.” She pointed at a spot on a map, as it was just leaving the Middle East and heading into Egypt.

“Okay, good. Some final information; How long since you’ve had sex?”

“That is between me and my internet service provider,” I didn’t know how to answer the question.

Then the package disappeared, and the woman had to compose an email. She did so frantically. ‘Hi Jeffrey, I am afraid,’ was all she got through before pressing send by mistake.

So they sent me to Africa, to follow a small box as it sightsaw its way around the world. Africa, as the last known destination. It might not even be there.

I also had a quick chat with Jerry, in an expensive phone call that prevented me being anything less than professional. The pay’s good here, but not quite good enough.

“I’m trying to get into the Inner Circle, but its only getting worse here.”

“Worse? Like proposing shitty legislation?”

“And threatening dissidents, yeah. But that’s basically it. Like slowly turning the world against us.”

“All the things we’ve done, and we’ve only made it worse. So we just have to carry on.”

“You will have to track the arms shipment around the world, although I dread to think where it’ll end up. I’ll keep an eye on what’s happening here.” He hung up the phone, and I packed my bag. Again.

Sunday 26 March 2017: Continental Africa Looks Good In The Spring

Jetting off to Africa with only vague knowledge that what we wanted to find was there in the first place sounds like a mission set for failure. On the plus side, renting a shitty, kind of rusted van. I could make my own low-budget safari. And maybe we'd see some sights.

But the van broke down immediately. And we had no idea straight away where the package even was.

Except that feelings of hopelessness are what I thrived on. The two weeks of aimless wander with Raj and Simran (who had joined back up with us) among wildlife, amazingly beautiful sunsets and mind-blowingly impressive waterfalls are perhaps the best moments of my life. Or at least they're up there. All while being guided by the UN to try and find those damn nuclear weapons. And yes, I did just call them 'those damn nuclear weapons'.

We'd play a game not entirely dissimilar to Mastechef every evening, where someone different would be required to assemble a meal complying with a ridiculous and arbitrary challenge yelled out by the others. A meal of oat cakes aubergine and celery and lemons resulting from the challenge 'something from the first and third shelf of the fridge and the first two things grabbed from the pantry'.

We were told the package had mysteriously popped up at a nearby small settlement. A gated community, with one house that looked to contain inexplicably rich owners. In the middle of the African savannah (and I really can't stress how isolated this community was), it seemed to positively leap up out of the flatness of the ground. Although maybe that was dehydration and I should get a drink. We couldn't get into the community, and that was definitely where the weapons had been located. Yes. We were certain. That's what they told us, and they had been wrong before. But we headed back to civilisation. Needed to get on a plane to leave.

We got to know Nadia too, although she seemed wary of us. Professional, strict with her job and work identity, and that this wouldn't cross over into her personal. She kept us on track with the politics. Not that we actually wanted to know, most of the time. Raj had a habit of turning around with his fingers in his ears and yelling until she stopped.

Before we had done so, the UN phoned (our treat, obviously) and said the package was on the move. So our destination changed from Europe to ... not Europe.

At a half past dinnertime, the van arrived back in South Africa, and we boarded another plane in hope of intercepting the nuclear shipment. If we just kept going, maybe we'd succeed. Or perhaps we're doomed to fail. But I'd rather fail after a gallant attempt than just jack it in and go back to boring life. Oh yeah, and that's the other thing. Life is boring, and this is the alternative to *shudder* that.

Monday 15 May 2017: America's Less Messed Up Than Where We Came From, And That's Saying Something

Not gonna lie, it felt good to walk around. We'd rented that piece of crap van in Africa and driven it around like the Top Gear team except one of them's female. I mean, ew; right?

Apparently America was going through a similar autocratic ... issue, at the moment. There was this dynamite reality host (by which I in no way mean someone should blow him up) who had decided that what was needed to fix the country was to get rid of all foreigners. His very own wife, for instance. But yes, it felt good to walk around, although American customs was an interesting experience. Odd thing was, they let us through; the UN must have cleared the visas and whatnot in advance for us. Sometimes I love pointless bureaucracy because it actually helps with situations. As opposed to, for example, getting kicked out of America because we were political refugees from some other state. Apparently, America doesn't like illegal immigration. Who'd have guessed.

The shipment looked to be heading for a Navy base on the Californian coast. We'd have about a day to intercept and destroy. Inevitably, we wouldn't manage it and we'd have to continue this enormous game of cat-and-mouse around the world in some other way. The UN phoned us and informed us that a) we were paying for the toll call, b) we had no health insurance (so, you know, don't die or anything) and c) that they'd cleared our arrival with the naval base staff. One of whom was almost certainly crooked. By which I mean that the sergeant had legs of two different legs so he couldn't walk straight.

We met him, and he seemed okay. A bit of a wet blanket, but he'd told us about it and we'd bought him a new one as a peace offering. The shipment had arrived overnight, and it had been condoned off, as nobody knew what it was, and why it was there. Or, one person knew exactly the answer to both questions, but wasn't speaking up.

I wasn't too bothered with figuring out what person exactly it was that had ordered the nuclear weapons, just with confiscating. The UN and the Navy base would deal with that. I was simply a twenty year-old. That wasn't my job. I radioed it in to the UN, and kept a wary eye on the box for a while. They'd come and grab it as soon as they could. Which was a posh way to say 'back of the queue, love'. But I made the mistake of getting a cup of tea, then returning

to the spot of the box, and it was no longer there. Only one solution; stow away on the only other ship and see where it ends up. Because that had never gone wrong, at all. Had it?

Saturday 3 June 2017: Which Ship Is Bigger [1000]

Sleeping on hard floors is not ideal. So we'd used bags of potatoes to soften the ground, and it hadn't really worked. Also the rocking wasn't ideal. Oh, right; we'd stowed away on a ship because who wouldn't think to do that, right?

So, immediate problems: 1) Food, in that we didn't have enough; 2) Water, in that we had too much and 3) Comfort, in that we had none whatsoever, and there was no immediate way we could thinking of that would fix the problem. Well, until Raj stumbled across some spare crew uniforms by mistake while he was looking for the toilets. Which he found, after an unfortunate incident with a torch and one of the female crew members.

<EDITED>

About a week later, and we'd been coping okay. The team? Oh, I thought you meant the voices in my head. Stolen the spare crew uniforms and used them to integrate so that we didn't stick out. But not so much that we forgot we weren't sailors. Raj found out from the captain that the package was headed to Australia, contrary to what the UN had told us; that it was headed to New Zealand. Why the difference? Maybe that its actual destination had been taken over by a dictator. Who liked potatoes, apparently. Dick tater.

We couldn't do much to pass the time we were on the ocean. When on land, we'd try and get into the cargo hold (and find out where it even was) to intercept the weapons and ... remove them? I don't even know what the actual plan was. Find them was definitely step one. But after that, the whole plan fell apart. Hopefully the weapons wouldn't fall apart as we moved them. If that's even what we're supposed to do.

But anyway, while the cargo ship was ... busy being a cargo ship, we'd (being Raj, Simran and I) sit and look out over the ocean and wonder how this had happened. 'A strict progression of cause to effect and day to the next' was the explanation Raj gave. Simran probably did a lot more actual work than we did, to stem the boredom and feeling that we couldn't get anything done here. Especially since we couldn't even find the cargo we were tracking. But the UN said it was definitely here and that they'd tracked it.

<EDITED>

"What do you even think home looks like now?" Simran asked one evening.

"Well, a ship," Raj said, gesturing around.

"No, but like our actual home."

"I think it'll look different to how we left it. I just hope Jerry's coping."

"He seems okay, but stressed. He's managed to impress Richard, I think."

"Ah yeah. That's a good start, actually. Does he have a plan of attack?"

"Attack?"

"Yeah, how we'll attack Richard when we get back."

"Deal with the weapons first."

"He's ordered them, hasn't he?"

"How do you even order nuclear weapons? On Amazon?"

"You can't even make that joke; we haven't been anywhere near Brazil."

We were sitting around on one of the evenings. Long days on the sea. Nothing to do, that's probably why. In a kind of circle, with a torch in the middle.

"Guys, I might have found the weapons today. And I think I know how we could get to them from the inside of the ship." Raj blurted this out, he'd probably been holding onto it for a while.

"Could you take us to it first, just to make sure?"

Wordlessly, he got up and led us through the ship to probably the lowest accessible point, then he stomped on the floor so hard it broke.

"See? Easy."

"Well, that's one way to look at it."

We checked the storage cupboard he'd smashed through to and it certainly looked like we'd found where the weapons. I phoned it through to the UN, they'd have people waiting at the next port. Simran and I headed back up, but Raj was just a little behind. Probably thinking about how to deal with them.

The weapons and Raj. Alone. That would go well. If he doesn't blow us all up by mistake, I'll see you guys later.

Saturday 14 August 2017: Bridging The Gap

We had waited like this for about two months, able to pass off as cabin crew because of the spare uniforms we'd picked up and the fact that underqualified shipmen meant that they barely knew each other's names. Eventually, we saw land. Australia. What? But that just meant more transport. We left the ship fairly easily by acting confident and walking very fast. Okay, running. But we'd still have to get a plane to New Zealand. And that didn't even factor what the package would do. The UN were certain it was headed to NZ.

Except that it had to stop short because nothing would enter. They were technically allowed to, but avoided it because it just wasn't worth it. Lack of trade policy or something, Richard had been hacking away at the establishment and removed a load-bearing wall by mistake. Even Jerry phoned us to let us know of the disastrous effect on the country that we'd grown up in. He didn't go into much detail because of data roaming rates. But it was bad. The UN arrived at NZ when we landed in Australia, and couldn't be bothered to wait for the actual shipment to arrive. Comedy of errors. So useless sometimes.

Eventually, we found a plane that would take us across the Tasman for a sum of money. All of our money. But the guy was nice enough so I guess that was something. We'd leave in a week, and arrive home almost eight months after leaving.

Sunday 20 August 2017: The One Place We Ought Not Go

There's something about seeing the New Zealand coastline. Well, for us it's the New Zealand coastline. Depends where you're from, I guess. A sense of longing to be able to go home and stay there. So close, and we couldn't get there. Not really. No idea why the shipment was headed here. Who would want it? We'd been following the dratted thing for eight months now. I just wanted this whole thing to be over. Not to settle somewhere or have to run from conflict. To have the conflict resolved and the team back together. I wonder how they're all doing, but I don't want to be annoying so I guess this is as good as we'll get for now.

The pilot in the plane we'd chartered (one of the only planes that would take us into New Zealand at all – this is the reason why the shipment had stopped short) was trying to be entertaining. He was sort of okay, I guess. Did all the right jokes; or at least the jokes you'd expect him to do. Said he'd taken a two week crash course. Pointed out that the ATC couldn't understand his accent so takeoff would be a little delayed. At least I think he was joking. Is possible I misread the situation. Halfway through the flight the intercom came alive and the pilot said, fairly loudly, "what does this button do?"

Way to instil confidence.

The actual flight passed without incident, and after landing we were rushed out one of the rear emergency exits and into a waiting van, where we were requested to lie facedown in the boot with a sheet over us. Secrecy. They must have been really worried for our safety.

The van drove for a while and stopped outside Parliament. We were piled out and snuck through a back door. Back in the right place but it still felt wrong. At least we didn't recognise anyone. Richard had systematically gutted the Government system and replaced anyone who disagreed with him. So most of the people that used to work here no longer did. Which was bad for us. We'd got about halfway up a fire escape headed to the PM's (sorry, Richard's – I mean dickhead's) office when a security guard coming the other way stopped us and pulled a gun. I know I was meant to be terrified for my life, but all I could think was 'don't fall over, don't fall over, don't fall over'.

There was about ten seconds' worth of silence, then the guard boomed "WELL?"

No idea how to respond. Would 'we're here in response to a nuclear war threat you ordered' work? So we said nothing for a further thirty seconds, just looking at our feet. Then, from behind us;

"They're with me, Alan."

Jerry. Wearing a full suit. Now, that's new. The guard retreated back down the stairs.

Jerry led us the rest of the way to Richard's office. But he wasn't there. 'In hiding, back after the apocalypse' was a sign on his door.

"Oh, I know ..." Jerry then took the lift down to 'Basement 3'. Which was below Basements 1 and 2, if you need convincing of how far below the ground we found ourselves.

Richard was there, as we suspected. In an arm chair with his back to us, stroking a cat. He turned in his chair.

"Jerry, nice of you to show up," he began, almost happy to see Jerry, "oh what the fuck do you want?" Changed in mid-sentence to wishing we were dead.

"We saw you ordered some nuclear weapons from the Amazon. If you have received this message in error ..." Raj began talking robotically, until Simran slugged him in the stomach, and he shut up.

"Not even from the Amazon, although they did go through there. You'd have to have been determined to follow it to get this far."

"Well, we are."

"I assume you came here for some other reason than to brag about the fact that you got here."

"Whatever you're thinking of doing, don't."

"I need to legitimise my leadership somehow, and who needs the Middle East anymore. Oil's on the way out anyway. Or in theory. President Trump may borrow from his The Apprentice playbook and return to using coal – 'you're fired' and so on – but that's a step back if you ask me."

"Yikes, even Richard thinks that's backwards," Raj mumbled.

By now, the outside world knew something was going on at Parliament. They'd begun to assemble outside.

Raj was trying to think of a plan, while Daisy tried; with her somewhat limited negotiating skills, to derail the most hell-bent maniac she'd ever had to deal with.

"Think of all the damage you'll do and the lives you ruin. Is it worth it?"

The questions carried on like this for about ten minutes. Something in Richard snapped, because he drew a gun and levelled it at Simran.

"You people will let me press the damn button, or I swear to God, she will die."

"Raj, do you have a plan?" Simran asked tearfully as Richard nudged the cold tip of his revolver (not a euphemism, I swear) against Simran's temple. Raj looked across helplessly, and shook his head.

"Let me press the button, or she dies."

The world went into standby mode, as they waited for a signal. Any signal. All the news stations were reporting live now.

The media got their signal as the rocket fired into the air.

Richard looked across at Raj.

"Fuck, I didn't sign up for this."

"You literally ordered the weapons. Shut the fuck up. And you're the closest thing to an evil dictator we've ever had, so yes, you fucking did sign up for this."

Thursday 24 August 2017: Richard's Master Plan

The rocket continued upwards. Straight up. Because that was supposed to happen. Richard didn't even bother to check where the projectile was headed. Which was good, because his ego had a similar trajectory, and actually checking the progress of the launch might give him pause.

Give him pause, and the media. Not the university students that were confronting him. The university students were enormously relieved, given they no longer had a gun pointed at them. And it turns out, Raj had a plan.

"It's been a while," Richard declared; talking about his love life, I think. No, he's talking about the nuclear warhead he'd just launched.

Raj looked up. "Well, yes. I was part of my plan all along. And yes, I may have made a few miscalculations along the way; it definitely wasn't supposed to get this ... bad. But you played exactly how I thought you were gonna play."

Richard stopped doing what he was doing. I don't even know what that was. Raj kept talking.

"I understand why you did the victory lap around the world, but it really did expose a whole lot of security problems. Like leaving it on a ship basically unattended for three months. I'm not saying we did this, but if we were to find them and remove the uranium to get it safely destroyed later, then we'd be able to do it in the resulting time. If you plan your invasion of the nutcases far enough ahead, for instance, a security team can agree to let things happen as long as they reach my specific endgame. When did this team meet? When you kidnapped one of my friends. So the weapons would launch, do nothing and come back down, to be retrieved from the ocean by people who actually know what they're doing. Nice try, fuckface."

"How long have you been planning this?" Richard seemed hideously piteous in defeat.

"Since I met you. I always thought it would come to something like this, but the level of fuckage is astonishing. We needed to get you here in this way, after the sorts of things that you've been doing for the last year or so. That way if you died, nobody would care. Because they may act like they support you – if you held a gun to their head."

"Kill me?"

"Correct."

At this point, Richard remembered the gun he'd put down on the arm of his seat, just as Raj moved much quicker than the older man, and shot him without thinking.

"Yeah. Pretty much." Raj said as he lowered the gun, and stopped Richard's lifeless body from making an undignified squishing noise on the floor.

Unfortunately, things weren't much better in Parliament.

"And you were okay with allowing them to launch a nuclear warhead into ... somewhere?" The Speaker demanded. There wasn't even a response from anyone on the right-hand side of the Cabinet. Typical. First instance of a problem and they fold up. War broke out, but with balls of paper rather than metal projectiles.

Somehow it spilled out on to the streets. The whole city went mental. Riots, and fires. This was exactly what we had protested against in the 70s. A ship had sunk because we'd been against what our Government had just done.

Explain that.

Because I can't.

Why had we let our politicians be okay with this?

How could we let our politicians be okay with this?

The answer is simple and clear, from the people of Wellington. We can't and we shan't. Burn the place to the ground.

Sunday 24 December 2017: The Men Fuck Up The World, Then Fuck Right Off So Women Have To Fix It [1000]

Sorry for the delay. Been kind of busy fixing the world.

Billboards. We've been here before. A long time ago. Almost a whole election cycle ago. Actually, it would be a whole cycle. But a fuckload had happened since then.

The whole city had gone into shutdown. First, the Government folded up like a lawn chair. Then, the public transport network blocked like an artery. And finally, the whole city clouded up like a brain that's been in lectures all day.

No more information would go in. No. More. Information.

No busses. No EFTPOS. No laws, no order, no drive thru. See, even at total dystopic meltdown, there's still time for jokes.

The campaigning period felt like a year of repetition. But it wasn't; only a month was spent on it. And at least the team tried to be funny, and warm, and interesting as we did it. Tried. They still couldn't shake the feeling, as I arranged meetings with printers and hammered nails into boards, that I shouldn't be the person doing this. Nobody should have to do this. The system should not have failed us as much as it had.

At one point, I stood hammering a billboard into the ground and I saw a small group of people clustered outside a shop. Well, it is before Christmas, I thought. But something happened and a fight broke out. And my first reaction wasn't to try and stop it. It was simply to think 'oh yeah, another riot'.

Because by this point there'd been many riots. Or maybe it's just the same ones that keep going and going and going. Three months [and a half, at the time of posting] had passed since the Defeat of Richard. And there hadn't been a single day when riots or damage or lawlessness hadn't been in the news.

We needed a system, and we needed it soon. If there wasn't one in place, people would get used to the idea that there was no system at all, and then where would we be? Queued outside a supermarket for bread, watching a fight for entertainment, probably. It doesn't bode well. But I have faith that humanity can pull itself back together. Just as soon as I can sort out the Government. And everything else that needs doing. Because I'm the only person right now who seems to care.

<EDITED>

I wasn't quite sure what the message of this blog would be, when we reached the end of it. Or, indeed, where that end would even be. But it turns out what we're trying to say, as a team, with this is that the answer to the question 'what's the worst that can happen?' is "here's a numbered list ...", and that the world doesn't owe you anything, and that no matter what you do end up achieving you'll just make matters worse. The saddest thing is that I genuinely thought to say 'at least we have each other' but we don't even have that; they've all scattered across the globe. I'm saying that like I blame them, and I don't. Having your lives threatened tends to invoke a fight or flight response. Or something.

But what now? Oh yeah, and I have to let the others know it's safe to come back. Because it is now. I mean the whole system's been gutted and is vulnerable, but in the 'we can rebuild it' way, rather than the 'too big and

confident, and needs to calm down' way it was before. This is a good thing. I hope. The system will be stronger and less able to be exploited, in the long term. But in the short term, what are we left with?

Okay, let's break it down, mostly because this'll help me write a list of things I need to reform;

1) Need a new Government. I did the base work for that one, but the jury's still out on whether it'll work. Literally, there's a judicial review for this sort of thing ...

2) Need to pick a Cabinet. From Target, or something, for my house. Oh! And the political Cabinet as well, but nevermind about that.

3) Restoring faith and confidence in the currency and media. This one's gonna take a few years to achieve. I'll need to undo all the negative perceptions of the public relating to both institutions ... somehow. Then I'll need to make sure what we replace any of it with is positive and constructive. So I'll appoint a builder as the Head of the Reserve Bank.

No, I won't do that.

So I sit here, looking at a shellshocked, damaged and blank slate of a society. I'd have to rebuild it, but the fact it's been left in this kind of a mess in the first place is saddening and disappoints me more than any other event; certainly in my lifetime. Mind you, I think that's a fairly standard reaction. And I wouldn't want anyone else to be in charge of rebuilding it. They'd just do it wrong. Then I'd have to fix it, AGAIN.

Anyway, that's it from me, and us. I have some letters to write. Or emails or whatever. I'm secretly a 75 year old. Yeah, it's been 2 and a half years and I've aged about twenty times that. Or at least that's what it feels like.

Peace out, suckers. Try not to make a mistake this big when you get drunk.

Dismantle The Establishment in 500 Words

This story's a sobering one, which is a shame because I wish I was drunk. It's also the story of the year; in an overarching narrative type of way, this story has shaped and moulded the year and the world around it so that to tell it will involve dipping in and out of almost every other news story in the world. Which I'll do now, and then run out of material for my year-in-review article after Christmas. I jest, there's still gonna be plenty.

We need to talk about white people. Not just the Trump voters. Not just the third-party voters. All white people, even the ones that think they're not racist. And yes, that includes me. Because we've all let this happen. The fallout from this election hasn't been typical. I don't agree with the protesting. I also don't agree with the gloating or KKK victory marches (in 2016? Well, this is my point, you see).

The media has failed us this time. And they probably thought they hadn't. But people were angry anyway. White conservatives anyway. And the further right who are **definitely** represented by Trump and therefore endorsed by Trump voters. Polls were also wrong, by a reasonable amount. People were probably ashamed to say the way they would vote. Wonder why. Journalism needs to recalibrate and figure out how to ctually get its points across and focus on the correct issues to achieve desired results. Mind, that's a problem with media generally. Proper journalism doesn't pay dividends. Unless you're reporting on the stock market.

To me, there is a perception that liberals are pissed off because they've lost. And there is an element of truth in that. But the protesting and outrage didn't happen a week after the vote in 2000 or 2004, so what's the difference here? Perhaps the genuine belief he's not stable. Falls over a lot. "I didn't realise how much people hated women", I read on someone's Twitter feed, "I thought I knew, but no". Which isn't how the Republican voters that actually did cast votes for Trump probably see it. They probably just think 'I agree with him more on policy' or 'I agree with her less'. Or that's what they **think** they're thinking.

The other factor that may hurt Trump (although as currently, it doesn't look like there's been too much of an impact) is his effect on the global markets. There is a theory that the global economy may crash when he comes to power, as trading partners freak out a little. But this has yet to eventuate. So we'll see.

If I might suggest some theme songs for the two candidates; Trump's would be "The Reason" by Hoobastank probably or something, and Clinton's would be "I Fought the Law" by The Clash. Definitely. This race proves just one thing; if you ever meet an American, flip a coin. If it comes up heads, they're probably a Clinton supporter. Tails for Trump, cos he can kiss my ass.

Additional material:

<https://twitter.com/i/moments/796417517157830656>

Building A Wall (of Sources)

That title is based on (I say based on; it's a verbatim quote) a section of graffiti scrawled on a bathroom door I saw at Uni. Needless to say the majority of this graffiti (of which the above quote was only a small part) were pro-Trump advocates airing their views – or the odd person whose views never came up trying to add pointlessly to an already pointless discussion in a pointless way.

I feel like I should offer the negative-five people who read this blog some context.

“But Hillary Clinton's a traitor. She let classified emails be mismanaged and possibly misappropriated to the potential detriment of the USA.”

I've heard this argument from some people (some of whom aren't even US citizens ... I mean why do you care that much? Caring about the outcome of the election, sure, but ...) and it's ... not completely wrong. There's a certain level of validity to say that Hillary Clinton isn't an ideal candidate for president on a number of grounds (most of which being related to either her being slightly shady (some of my sources), or her being quite old (do I need to source this? I think not.) The thing is, there are equally treacherous things that GOP senators have done with little or no backlash from the right-wing keyboard warriors of the interwebs (again, please refer to mah sources). Actually that statement was stacked, because there are also left-wing keyboard warriors of the internet that are ... let's be honest ... equally against Clinton being President. Because the vocal 'but she's a criminal' cry comes from people who have (either knowingly or unknowingly) let white men get away with similarly devious behaviour. If you're going to pass judgement on something, do your fucking research first. Same with voting, but that's another story.

Letting other white men away with devious activity you hang a white woman out to dry (or try to) for is just blatantly sexist. There's not another way I can put it; and I'm not saying the criticisms are wrong.

Let's be clear. Clinton isn't an ideal candidate, but neither is the melting candle the Republicans appear to have nominated. And the difference in the geo-political state of the world if one were to be elected as opposed to the other is enormous. Waxy Trump appears to want to remove the civil liberties of Muslims, Mexicans and immigrants (I think the word 'undocumented' is implied. But that's all it is, he's never actually clarified the wording). So vote for Clinton, or else Trump will win.

I hear the ghost of a call-out up the back of the imaginary lecture theatre in my mind. “But I can vote for a third party”. Well, yeah. But then it becomes pure maths and a massive, massive risk. Allow me to explain.

The Republican party is not divided and will vote for Trump by and large. Voting for a third party instead of Trump will only decrease the number of people who vote for Clinton. You might argue that you do **want** Clinton to win, you just don't want to vote for her; as in you know in your logical brain she's the best option of the two choices that are most likely to become President, but you personally can't suspend your beliefs for long enough to vote the way that will game the system to work best for you.

Have you even heard of Jill Stein? Does she have a campaign? Will she get one? No, no and no. This means she won't get many votes. Same with other ones, whose names slip my mind.

Allow me to put this in simple mathematical terms.

Take ten people ... put them in a van and drive them over the border to Mexico.

No, I digress, that was satire.

But seriously though, let's take a ten-person sample, and divide it up like this; four vote Trump, three vote Clinton and three vote for other third parties. By splitting the 60% that won't vote for Trump, you've given him the Presidency. If, however, the third party votes hadn't been split, it may well have worked out that Clinton would have the presidency after all. It may not, I hear you say; and you'd be right.

It may not, indeed.

But what if it had, though?

So ... do whatever you like for whatever reason. But if you vote Trump as a 'protest' or a third party because both Clinton and Trump are objectionable, and the vote is a close one; then you have nobody to blame but you – who didn't do everything you could to stop Trump getting the presidency.

List of things Clinton has done that are suspect:

- The Private Email Server controversy; In another investigation it was learnt emails had been deleted from a server they should never have been on, while Clinton was Secretary of State, some of which were confidential. The content of some of these emails is also controversial.
- Attackers killed 4 Americans in the Embassy in Benghazi and Clinton is thought to have inadequately protected them if she knew the attacks were planned.
- Chief of staff negotiated with the government while working for NYU, after having worked for Clinton. Various other donors and relationships working to help a donor get a job in Lebanon.
- Speeches; Since Bill Clinton left the White House in 2001, both Clintons have made millions of dollars for giving speeches. This is implied to informally influence donors.
- Clinton Foundation: The foundation is a huge global player with several prominent offshoots. It is implied money has been misappropriated, or sometimes caused more harm than good.

List of things Trump has done that are suspect

- Beauty pageant scandals (1992): Trump tried to get into the business of dealing with attractive, scantily-clad women; and while trying to set this up, made passes at a venture partner, among other sexual-harassment related incidents.
- Housing Discrimination (1973): Trump was sued by the Government because the government contended that Trump Management had refused to rent or negotiate rentals 'because of race and color.'
- Mafia Ties: Trump has been linked to the mafia many times over the years, with varying degrees of closeness. Most recently, he is thought to have ties to Russian oligarchy and threatened that Russia would hack the DNC's emails.
- Trump University: In 2005, Trump launched a university that promised to teach Trump's real estate secrets, but Trump had little to do with the curriculum. It was also never really a "university" and couldn't be called as such because it had no license.
- The Four Bankruptcies: Four times in his career, Trump's companies have entered bankruptcy. 1) In the late 1980s, in Atlantic City, Trump used junk bonds to build Trump Taj Mahal. 2) A year later, another of Trump's Atlantic City casinos, the Trump Plaza, went bust after losing more than \$550 million. Trump gave up his stake but otherwise insulated himself personally from losses, and managed to keep his CEO title, even though he surrendered any salary or role in day-to-day operations. 3) Trump bounced back over the following decade, but by 2004, Trump Hotels and Casino Resorts was \$1.8 billion in debt. 4) Five years later, after the real-estate collapse, Trump Entertainment Resorts once again went bankrupt.
- Alleged Marital Rape: While married to Ivana Trump, Donald Trump became angry at her—according to a book by Harry Hurt, over a painful scalp-reduction surgery—and allegedly forcibly had sex with her. This statement was later retracted by Ivana.
- Refusing to Pay Workers and Contractors: Contractors, waiters, dishwashers, and plumbers who have worked at Trump projects say that his company stiffed them for work, refusing to pay for services rendered.

Trump's stated policy (from his website or otherwise);

To be fair, Trump's stated policy is basically Republican standard, apart from the Wall stuff and racism.

- Against closing the borders entirely. Against accepting Syrian refugees in the United States.
- Repeal Obamacare. Replace it with something
- Global warming isn't real, unless it's threatening a Trump property.
- "Chop" the national debt using an approach that is still unclear.
- Ban abortion. Women won't be criminalized.
- Let the states set a minimum wage that's an increase from the current federal minimum wage.
- Political donations are fine when those donations benefit the Trump campaign.
- Trump says he's against violating international laws or ordering others to do so, but wants to change the laws to legalize, at minimum, waterboarding.

- Trump's immigration plan was published on his website in July: it opposed the H-1B program, which allows non-immigrant visas for specialty occupations, arguing then that it was bad for American workers.

Clinton's stated policy (from her website or otherwise)

- Taking on the threat of climate change and making America the world's clean energy superpower
- We can—and must—end the epidemic of gun violence
- Universal, quality, affordable health care for everyone in America
- We need comprehensive immigration reform with a pathway to full and equal citizenship
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans deserve to live their lives free from discrimination
- Hillary will make debt-free college available to everyone and take on student loan debt
- Every American should be able to learn the skills they need to compete and succeed.
- We should be making it easier to vote, not harder.
- America must fully commit to supporting veterans.

Worst thing about the campaign was ugliness. Not the campaigning just his face. But seriously, the fact that Donald Trump is Donald Trump and seems to have no filter and no knowledge of the implications of what he's saying affect the general public, as well as being very hard and costly to actually implement. This article doesn't even include threatening to have Hillary Clinton killed, or the lack of sportsmanship by whining that the election is fixed. Neither does it include quotes from Trump; "If she wasn't my daughter, maybe I'd be dating her," or Clinton; "Who is going to find out? These women are trash. Nobody's going to believe them," (both among others). It also doesn't include hypocrisy within the Republican party regarding choosing a new Supreme Court Justice, which is the counter I'd use for 'the Democrats are hypocritical' arguments. But the main problem with Trump is ... Trump, this is basically the only ground he has over Clinton. Although it does seem to account for a lot of ground. If Clinton were running against almost any other Republican, I suspect she would be having to actually campaign in order to lead the polls. As it stands, the grandmother from Little Red Riding Hood is campaigning against the naked mole rat from Kim Possible. At least the naked mole rat in Kim Possible was funny. The system is corrupt and neither choice is absolutely perfect, but the choices are never absolutely perfect and all politicians are corrupt. That's what politics is, using leverage to get what you want. Political apathy will not help here. Neither will moral absolutism. However, this is America we're dealing with and to be honest, I'm not even sure it matters who wins. There'll probably be riots either way because of the angry white people. At least if Trump wins there would be a stopgap before the hatred begins. It may well be that the hatred and anger bubbles over immediately, should he lose.

To get maximum value out of this article you really will have to read all of my sources. That was a fun time.

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Sort Your Shit Out

Let's be clear, this is a #late_review. I can't use this blog, in this specific case, to inspire and affect social change and allow leaders to see the errors of their ways. Because that's happened before. HAHAAHAHAHAHAHA. No it hasn't. I have an IP address tracker on this thing and it hasn't been hit on in two months, much like me (actually I haven't been hit on in far, far, far longer).

Let's be clear on a number of things; 1) I have no life. 2) I have no will to get one. 3) I haven't got an Economics degree (but I'm working on it so does that count? No? Rude). 4) I'm using the opinions of people that actually know what they're doing and interpreting them as best I can in light of what has actually happened. 5) This will be written in mind of what has actually happened, and not as an idealistic look at what should have. Well, it's gonna cover the should-have, then reject it.

So the Brexit is a referendum about whether or not Britain should leave the EU. Not too much of a problem, except that the agreements and other legislation that comprises the EU is complicated, so extraction from it will take time and money and mean that people are very confused and concerned about the future of the UK and it's trading partners and international trading relationships. That's economically. Socially, leaving the EU is seen as a rejection of immigrants and immigration; and what this means for the UK isn't precisely clear although it has been implied that the deportation of EU migrants will be made far easier. The fact that this mentality is the driving force behind the 'leave' campaign is worrying as it, like the current political situation in the US, shows a rise in anti-intellectualism; where voters reject sound logic because 'it's boring' and vote in manners more consistent with having good soundbites and snappy points, even if the points themselves are dodgy as shit ...

The final outcome of the referendum is a long whistle-blow and a red card. No, that's soccer. Britain voted to leave the EU by 51.9% to 48.1%. That's quite close actually and it does mean there is still hope. So, unto the econonnomnomnomics ...

Anywhoozles, if the UK had voted to stay in the EU, very little would have changed; this is in many respects what I expect everyone involved in the referendum or affected by it in any way was preparing for, even the people wanting the UK to leave (Boris Johnson's exit press conference seemed very odd for a man getting exactly what he wanted ...). Nobody actually really knows how a super-union of super-rich and super-poor countries would work. Basically people from the super-poor countries moved to the super-rich countries and were employed by middle-class people there because they were cheaper than the working class people, who got pissed off but were told to stop being racist ... I think it's fair to see how the problems were created in hindsight. The other major

Outcome of leaving the EU: Let's be clear, there are valid reasons for leaving the EU; the fact that the EU's Parliament is not democratically elected, and unaccountable to the people they control. Similarly, there are European laws that supercede national laws and may not have ideal outcomes for running a country exactly how leadership wants to.

So what will actually happen when the UK leaves the EU on the M4 or A5. Short-term, the world economy will probably crash (but ehhhh who cares about that), but in the long-term (I'm talking ten years or so) the UK will probably have fixed its trade situation and remade any law it lost by leaving the EU. In this long-term scenario, I suspect the UK will be better off because in the EU as it currently stands (economics alert) the bottom bit does stuff that the top bit pays for. This disparity of incomes is worrying when you consider that large financial events have greater impact on poorer countries than richer countries, and tying these countries together could feel a little like jumping off a bridge strapped to a lead weight.

Let's total up the damage from the last two days; The pound has fallen to a 30-year low, Scotland's pushing for another independence referendum, and this time I'm on their side (did I go on record last time? Probably but I can't remember – I definitely said they should stay in the UK because it would isolate Scotland were they to leave. OH LOOK, the UK's done that to itself all on its fucking own). There are talks of Ireland re-unifying so Northern Ireland can remain in the EU, and it seems a logical extension to say that this vote has legitimised a massive amount of 'YOU'LL BE GOING HOME SOON' racism in a massively multicultural environment.

Isn't the adage 'don't fix what ain't broken'? Or do snap the world economy like a dry twig. Basically the level of ire and disrespect currently aimed at American bankers should now be redirected to 'Leave' voters. Although it seems like a petition for a second referendum is gaining popularity and Parliament will have to respond to it. So we'll see. The way to rebuild trust isn't by speaking gibbertwat to people. It's by making promises and sticking to them. There's a reason Nick Clegg's a high-ranking politician anymore. There's an Autotune song, actually;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUDjRZ30SNo>. There was a quote by the leave campaign that '350 million pounds a week go to the EU and could be used to fund the NHS'. Or something like that. Nigel Farage disowned that particular statement they'd used for *years*, fairly well straight away after the vote. So who made up evidence? People didn't in this case want facts of whether to stay or leave the EU, they knew what they wanted already and adjusted the facts to suit, and entirely failed to acknowledge the other side's concerns. Both camps are guilty of this.

I'm trying to find positives, and I'm fairly sure that there will be positives to leaving ... in ten years when the dust settles. But in the immediate short-term this is a fucking mess. Funny how 36 hours can flip the world, and still blame the world's problems on young people taking too many Instagram photos. I don't know. This whole thing makes me so sad.

And on that bombshell ...

TLDR; Pitfalls of the politicking: Mostly racist from the leave camp, mostly technical gibbertwat from the stay camp. The leave camp has promised outrageous things and the stay camp has tried (and failed) to rebuild trust in politicians. Net result, they fucked shit up and it's possible this will be fixed in the long term, but for now it's just a massive mess.

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(Mis)Representation

And I'm back bitching about Trump. My piece in January was perhaps a little pre-emptive. Especially because my no-exit cul-de-sac of blog entirely failed to change the political atmosphere. Who'd have thought. So I'll try and summarise six months worth of issues as briefly and well as I can (knowing that I of course cannot fully do this). My Year-In-Review article this year will probably be quite a lot of fun. That is, of course, assuming there hasn't been a nuclear winter come Christmas.

Let's talk about representation. The idea that most people (or ideally every person, but not all the time, that's impractical) can see themselves in the media they consume or power structures of the city/country/state they live in. Even if that means the 'state' that all other people live in is a state called 'Anxiety'.

So there's kind of two things. Let's start with the less obtrusive one (and it's still divisive ...)

Fandom. Apparently it's broken. How people consume media and the characters that are in said media, and the stories that get told ... It's not a buffet. You can't order specifically the story you want to see and expect creators of a work not to deviate from your expectations (and then send death threats if they do ...), but you also can't entirely resign yourself to the reality that creators will make entirely the show they want with little or no regard for an audience. Fact is, there's a bit of both. Or there should be. Healthy compromise. Creators should be able to see the things the audience want (and DON'T want) in social media, or the news and then create products that cater to these wants without compromising the story. You see, the problem here is that sometimes a creator will see the way they've decided to tell a story as one thing, while the audience interprets it entirely differently. I'm talking here, of course, about the killing off of characters that were created to be non-conformative so as to make their stories conform to societal expectations, or for 'manpain', which is meant in the most condescending and derogatory way possible. To waste characters designed to increase representation in these unfulfilling and pointless deaths rightly angers the sections of society these characters were designed to represent. There are brilliant articles on the internet (<http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2016/05/30/fandom-is-broken>, <http://www.themarysue.com/fandom-isnt-broken/>, <http://thegeekiary.com/fandom-is-broken-not/34679>), so I won't go into too much detail because I don't really need to.

But the second issue, y'see, is the US Presidential Race, presumably of the egg and spoon variety. Clinton is egg and Trump looks like a spoon, if you're wondering.

And I think the concept of representation could explain Trump's popularity. Because shit all else can explain it. Like I mean seriously; how. And to the one guy at the back of the room (yeah, you) that is yelling at me 'Trump's not actually racist and just wants to crack down on illegal immigration', which let's be fair I've gone on record saying it's something that has been dealt with – there's the whole issue of Trump calling out a Mexican judge as being unable to do his job properly because of his race. I haven't much simplified that, that's basically it.

So here's what I'm actually saying. White men would rather have a white man in office than ... not. And I suppose this is the thing, and it's a similar point to the TV character point I made earlier; having representation and then letting it be taken away is enormously disappointing – especially if the white people I'm referring to are American and slightly racist and conservative. They still have a 1 cent coin for God's sakes. I swear the guy in McDonalds that had to deal with us buying cheese fries and paying entirely with 1 cent coins looked like he wanted to die. "1 cent, 2 cents, 3 cents, fuck this shit ..."

That's not a quote but is probably his internal monologue.

So fandom's not broken, and the outrage the internet seems to have is, at least in part justified. Well, it maybe is a little broken. You shouldn't threaten people for making bad decisions in the name of 'entertainment'. Disagree, fuck yes. Threaten, fuck no. And that also extends to Trump because of that British guy that showed up at a Trump rally and tried to steal a cop's gun to kill The Donald. He didn't get very far at *all*, and I think it's fair to say stealing a cop's gun is perhaps not the best plan of attack. Like, seriously no.

The only thing left now I guess is to get prepared, grudgingly, to call Tronald Dump the president of the United States. And while the rest of the world is working their way through that I'll be over here stockpiling for a nuclear winter. Starting January 1, 2017. Finishing slightly later on January 1, 2017. And when I say finishing, I do mean the whole world.

TPPA: An Analysis

I trust John Key with this deal. He's a good investment banker. If he thought it would go wrong, he would not have signed it. And I think the protesting has certainly become anti-JK protesting, rather than actually properly educated about the points it actually wants to make (more on that below ...). I feel that you can't be anti-international trade, and the readily accept the reality of McDonalds and smartphones. Fundamental irony.

The protests. Now. I agree with protesting in theory. But the protesting in Auckland inconvenienced people that had nothing to do with the TPPA for no reason other than to 'send a message'. You should maybe have thought to send a different message because protesting by blocking off roads is actually just rude and inconsiderate, and makes me think you're just whinging for the sake of it. Even if you believe what you're saying, the actual message is lost in the protest; and the protest and fact that inconvenience was caused are the only things that end up reported. So, while I agree with the principle, your approach and respect for others is appalling; so much so that I actually disagree with the point you're trying to make. That's an ad hominem argument. You could probably ignore it. Should probably. The accusations of police using force are mostly because idiots are being stupid and not listening to instructions. Which is surely a breach of some law anyway even on its own. Like the people refusing to leave SkyCity even though protesting there has no value anymore because the deal has been signed now and there's nothing more that can be done until the agreement is debated fully and in a more civilised manner. Anyways.

See it's not the idea of a trade agreement that I'm against; and I'm told that most international anythings are negotiated in secret in the way this was done, so that doesn't really bother me either. The TPPA will eliminate tariffs for exports to the countries (especially the USA) and will bring benefit to the country when it is implemented (which, admittedly, won't be for a while ...). Tariffs on goods will be eliminated over a little while, presumably as a kind of stepping scale. The TPPA of course spends much of it's 600 pages discussing the extent to which tariffs will be removed for each good to each country. The TPPA ensures that signatories are the primary benefactors of the deal. It agrees on transparent and non-discriminatory guidelines to remove barriers to trade and ensure cooperation.

The problem I have with the TPPA is a thing called ISDS. Investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) is an instrument of public international law, that grants an investor the right to use dispute settlement proceedings against a foreign government. The actual agreement isn't so transparent in its wording and actually almost seems reasonable. There certainly seems to be a restriction on the claims that can be made, but that isn't exactly reassuring because the possibility is still real. The fact that ISDS operates under a different system as national law (no precedent or appeal systems, the arbitrator's decisions are final and they're paid by the hour, so the \$\$\$ quickly piles up...). While, in theory, ISDS is a dispute-resolution system that is fair and unbiased, the fact is that these measures make ISDS cases unbalanced in the favour of the investor, and the explosion of ISDS cases since the 1990s is worrying. Many countries have vowed to not sign agreements with ISDS clauses in them. And this is fair because ISDS seems to be an antiquated way for corporate power to undermine government operation. That being said, protesters saying that the rights of New Zealanders are being eroded are ... wrong. The TPPA won't affect individual actions of any one person. Taxpayer coffers, perhaps, but the likelihood that normal government operating will break the TPP is, at least from where I sit, low.

To conclude on a positive note, I want to share an extract from an Annex in the Intellectual Property section; Annex 18-A Article 4. *The interpretation of the Treaty of Waitangi, including as to the nature of the rights and obligations arising under it, shall not be subject to the dispute settlement provisions of this Agreement. Chapter 28 (Dispute Settlement) shall otherwise apply to this Annex. A panel established under Article 28.7 (Establishment of a Panel) may be requested to determine only whether any measure referred to in paragraph 2 is inconsistent with a Party's rights under this Agreement.* So, yes. There are problems I have with the TPPA. But ultimately, I believe the benefits will outweigh the costs; apart from the ISDS stuff it seems like a really good trade deal. Mostly because I can't actually see half the things people say the costs will be; I can't see anywhere stating that medicine prices will rise, so I don't think medicine prices will rise that much, or certainly not much more than they might have irrespective of the TPPA. Because if the companies were going to put prices up, they would surely do that anyway ...

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- <https://www.tpp.mfat.govt.nz/>

A Year In Review (2015)

So. Nothing's happened this year. That's right, nothing at all. It's all been a dream and we'll wake up tomorrow on the 1st of January 2015. Because if that doesn't happen then by God the world's gone to Hell in a Handcart. The usual fast-walk-down (as opposed to run-down) of the year's stories begins here;

We start with Auckland house prices. That's about the most positive story. As in, the trend for prices rising is a positive one, and I'm positive we're all positively stuffed and won't be able to buy a house. Sigh. Oh and there was that time a seal was in the Auckland harbour. Which was at least some relief for the media from reporting about the doom and gloom stuff. Although every single media outlet missed out the 'seal the deal' headline to do with downtown CBD house prices. But, eh whatever. Any joke they miss is one I can spread over a whole paragraph.

Greece. That one slipped me by. Actually it didn't because I wrote an article on it in July, before the referendum result was announced. SPOILER: they voted no. I could talk about the economic blah blah but ... actually I already did that this year. There aren't any jokes though. (Shush. I know there aren't any jokes here either).

JellyTip Chocolate fever gripped the nation in September. Yup. It was nice. Okay, fine, so this is the nicest and most positive story of the year. (This is of course entirely ignoring the implications on the obesity epidemic and the fact that we may have no chocolate by 2030 (nooooooooooooo)).

Also they found a wing of MH370 but not the rest of it. In the ocean. The great game of Where's Wally continues ...

Actually, I lie. For the second time in 300 words. Because the most positive story this year is, without doubt, the fact that we won the Rugby World Cup. I have never given any flying fucks for Rugby. Still don't. But honestly, the whole 'it wasn't a punch, just a push of the fist to the face' debacle in the semi-final is a joke that just wrote itself. Then a whole lot of the people retired from the team. And there were two major deaths in Rugby (not *in* in, as in not during a game); Jonah Lomu and ~~the other guy~~ Jerry Collins. I can only imagine what might have happened if, instead of retiring, one of the more well-known players had kicked the metaphorical ~~rugby ball~~ bucket. The whole country would have lost ... their ... minds.

Okay, I've drunk the required amount of alcohol to talk politics, so let's continue.

Local politics; Colin Craig had some scandals earlier in the year that meant he stepped down as Conservative leader. By November, the party had not appointed a new leader, or recovered from the substantial damage of Craig's exit (along with most of the Board). Northland by-election that Peters won by heaps. Obviously. He's the only even-close-to-recognisable name. And this country there was a referendum on changing the fucking flag instead of any issues that actually matter (the TPPA, anyone?). That story looked promising when a fifth item was added to the list by public request, and looked set for an underdog story ... but alas, no. It wasn't to be. Our Prime Minister made a series of mistakes this year, first pulling a waitress' ponytail as a 'joke', then making inflammatory comments later in the year regarding rapists and refusing to firstly apologise, and secondly hear female MP's speak about their abuse.

Across the Moat (Tasman), Malcolm Turnbull became Prime Minister, after ~~the racist, sexist, ignorant and just-general pig~~ Tony Abbott was voted unfit to rule by his own party. There was also an election seeing the removal of Stephen Harper as Canadian PM, replacing him with Justin Trudeau by a fair margin. And the US presidential race has begun. DJ Trump (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7WqcNbcKmQ> – don't worry, it is very funny and not in any way political – something like his campaign ...) is running, saying controversial (and uninformed) things in a charismatic way. Also here's a quote; "It has not been easy for me. I started off in Brooklyn. My father gave me a small loan of a million dollars." Good god, man. What would you consider having it easy to be? Also there was a candidate called 'Deez Nuts', after a meme from a shit film I haven't seen (phew). I have another article on this stuff. I've tried to be balanced. There's also a Bush in the White House (they let it get overgrown ...), and a Clinton is hoping to sit behind the desk (and maybe not get sucked off while so doing ... but he never had sexual relations with that woman, right? In a similar story of American ignorance, there was an instance of a town turning down the opportunity of a solar farm because it would 'suck up all the sunlight'. No. I can't even. Just no.

The 'Most Positive Story of the Year' Award (sarcasm fully intended) goes to the ISIS crisis. I've written a more detailed article on this stuff. Apparently wars displace people. The problem is, there's paranoia so there isn't many places for people to go. The logic that IS doesn't represent Muslims is only valid in some situations, it would seem (SARCASM!). However, their radical ideology (*muffled 'EXTERMINATE' in the distance*) is very uncommon amongst

regular Muslims that aren't unhinged and insane. They claim responsibility for a series of attacks on other places (Paris, plane-crash in Egypt, surely others ...). So yes, positive story.

No. Definitely, the most positive story this time. I promise, and I'm not joking. There was a draft agreement reached to halt climate change (which isn't happening at all, right Donald?). But it isn't binding, so even though it's a big step (and it is), it's the kind of big step that happens in a dream; you wanted the step to happen, and imagined it actually occurring. And that may lead to actual change in the real world. But it also may not. Self-driving cars took a step forward (even though they're cars and can't walk ...), and hybrids are becoming cheaper so that when fossil fuels become a thing of the past (ha ha ha ha), there is a cohesive forward-looking plan for humanity.

Very bleak year. I thank you for reading this, as it's longer than normal. Even this article is condensed; I couldn't possibly articulate properly the levels of stupid in the amount of space I used in the last few years. I guess we'll see.

And, to conclude this rather bleak-looking Year-in-Review article, here's this year's funny headlines;

- Rare crockery to go under hammer.
- Homicide victims rarely talk to Police
- Alton attorney accidentally sues himself
- Murderer says detective ruined his reputation
- Woman missing since she got lost

The Price of Free and Fair Election

Yes, the title is a Scandal reference. No, I don't care you didn't get it.

In any democratic system, but especially a country like America where there are multiple rounds of voting to select candidates and then the 'final showdown' on Election Day, it's important that voters vote at any opportunity that they can, to ensure the best possible representation of the views of the people being represented in that final showdown. The theory being that a Presidential candidate will have, by that point, won two or three elections (especially if they're career politicians who've won Gubernatorial elections and been appointed as Senators. The main drawback with this, of course, is that (especially in the early stages) there are a lot of candidates, with a lot of policies; and a flip of a lot of research to do to make sure you vote for the best candidate for you.

Note: Obviously only the basic principle of this argument applies in this country where there are far fewer candidates and only one voting opportunity.

Here's a run-down of the front-runners;

Bush (<http://presidential-candidates.insidegov.com/l/46/Jeb-Bush>) is either close to the average Republican (in terms of individual rights and domestic issues) or more liberal than the average republican (economic and defense). Carson (<http://presidential-candidates.insidegov.com/l/64/Ben-Carson>); similar to Trump, Carson is a fucking smart man. Like best neurosurgeon in the world-level smart. But his politics. He's also more liberal than the average Republican in almost all regards (except economic). Overall, Carson seems to be the best high-profile Republican for the Presidential nomination.

Trump (<http://presidential-candidates.insidegov.com/l/70/Donald-Trump>) is actually scarily close to the average Republican candidate in terms of politics, except for individual rights, where he's more conservative, economic; where he's more liberal, and defence where he's more conservative. Overall, this balances somewhat. That's worrying for reasons I won't discuss here in full.

Because of the fact that Trump is running for President, none of the other Republican candidates have any real advertising in any way at all, but that also means nobody's listening if they mess something up. So I'm not entirely sure any of them have (there may well be scandals I'm not aware of). This, of course, also means the public don't know very much about the candidate's actual politics.

The Democrat side is somewhat more straightforward, because there's only five candidates total, and only two of those with any real campaign momentum.

Clinton (<http://presidential-candidates.insidegov.com/l/40/Hillary-Clinton>). Ah, Nana Clinton. She's close to the average Democrat (close to, or more liberal than, the average Democrat; except for Defense, which she is more conservative in). This seems a more sustainable mix of economic and social policy. Overall, therefore, she seems (on paper) to be the best-fitting Democrat for the role. However, Clinton's campaign has had to negotiate its way around a series of Republican candidates that are vastly more 'popular' in terms of brand value, as well as a minor snafu where some private emails were sent on a work computer and then removed. Will we ever know what they said? No, probably not. Does it really matter? Not the content of the emails. But the whole situation does or could make you stop and think.

Sanders (<http://presidential-candidates.insidegov.com/l/35/Bernie-Sanders>) is on average far more liberal than the average Democrat. Which is quite liberal to begin with, so that's maybe a little scary. He seems to support free university education, which sounds good in theory, but in practice where would the money come from? Probably tax increases across the board, which affect poor people more than rich, or decreases of unemployment benefits (same issue). That's the thing with every decision ever made; there is an opportunity cost, a trade-off, that must be accepted in order for the policy to go ahead. The problems the Left seem to have hinge around not being able to envisage long-term consequences of short-term actions. Because even if the mass-decrease in cost of American college was offset by the increases to productivity and economic value in the long-run, there will still be an increase in poor families due to these policies that will need dealing with at some point in the future and requiring yet more money.

Obviously this only covers the front-runners (or in any case, most popular candidates). The information I've used may not be entirely accurate, but I've learned that political research is a total minefield. I hope this does help (even though people who read this don't live in America so it doesn't really matter because none of us can vote).

This was supposed to be a short supplementary article to my Year in Review post, but it got longer ... and longer ... and longer. Sigh.

We Need A New Way To Manage a Crisis

Sigh.

There must be a solution to this problem. By this point in proceedings, I think you may have figured out that the state of the world makes me less than happy. Mostly because the people spearheading this particular war don't seem to have thought it through. (And the people saying that all Muslims are terrorists ... don't know what they're on about - http://www.huffingtonpost.com/omar-alnatour/muslims-are-not-terrorist_b_8718000.html?ncid=fbklkushpmg00000063).

Firstly, have they even thought about what a post-war world will be like? All the evidence; towns colonised that were reclaimed later, say that no. If you actually look at any of the villages, you'd see very little upright and even less of it as usable buildings. In what way would any world invaded by those people be usable in any real way.

And this isn't even taking into account the warzones as whole regions and the people that are displaced as a result (which frankly is an issue in and of itself). Nobody would be able to predict who would be affected by wars like this. The problem is that the extremist groups don't actually care, which is a far bigger problem than even what it may seem. Because the whole regions become far less usable and desirable as you may expect during a war. Logic following, the people living there pack up and leave. But where exactly do they go?

Immigration is a problem. Both legal and illegal migration to most countries. New Zealand has increased its refugee quota to accommodate some extra people. It may not be an especially significant quota, but it's a start. Refugees cost money in the short-term. I don't disagree with that logic, it would be futile. The thing is; it doesn't cost money in the long-term if refugees assimilate properly, and people should be able and allowed to live in a place free from war and persecution.

Which leads me neatly and tidily on to the whole American thing. Paranoia spreads. The Cold War and Japanese internments (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internment_of_Japanese_Americans; during WW2, presumably after Pearl Harbour) are examples of when this goes horrifically wrong. It doesn't help that isolated terror attacks around the world (Paris, and a plane crash in Egypt), make being Muslim in the world a stigma. See; clock kid. Even though, apparently, that did look like a bomb, so might be at least somewhat justified. Trump's campaign hasn't helped this, with a press release (<https://www.donaldjtrump.com/press-releases>) suggesting Muslim immigration stop to the US, and Muslims wear identifying badges. This suggests a very paranoid, and very offensive notion that every Muslim is a risk to American society. As should be clear by now, I feel the real risk to American society is Donald Trump.

Is it possible to accept that by ignoring and degrading people that seek refuge (especially Muslims from Syria), we give the radical extremists what they want. They seem to want the total persecution of the Muslim religion so that there is nowhere safe to turn except for them. The spread of paranoia and intolerance helps them. Because, of course, closing borders is pointless. Cutting off travel may reduce the number of attacks from foreigners, but that's only a hypothetical. Is it not also possible that the number of attacks committed by locals would increase after the travel cuts too? These extremists seem to only want the kind of people that are exactly the same as them to populate the world. Are we not just as bad as them by outlawing people different from us? Admittedly there's no videoed decapitations, but the West doesn't need to do that, do they? We leave it all to them ...

That's still far longer than it needs to be. But less long than it could have been. Overall I consider this a success.

A Trumpet of False Ideologies

The whole Trump thing was funny at the beginning. Now it's slightly scary and even the other Republicans are denouncing his extreme solutions (for political points, possibly, but the point remains ...).

The longer his campaign goes on, and the more controversial things he says, you begin to wonder if he'll be derailed at all. The thing is that Americans are disillusioned with the system the way that it is. And when that happens, the downsides of electing someone like Trump can't be seen, because what could possibly be worse than what we have now? But that's exactly the problem; a lot could actually be worse than current situations. This is why Trump is popular; he plays to the fears of people that think the system doesn't work (as well as many quotes to the effect that the system isn't working), and is charismatic in his delivery of his rhetoric. Would you expect anything else from a television personality.

I've heard many people say that Trump is stupid. This is wrong. He's a very smart man. You don't make \$10bn in the business world without being smart. He seems able to speak in an engaging way so that people will listen, whether or not what he is saying is reasonable, factually backed up or not [either one or both of those things]. Key policies include a proposal reform trade agreements with China and to ban Muslims from immigrating to the US and force Muslims already here to wear badges. Sounds like what Hitler did with the Jews in WW2 (which is un-American; land of the free bahahahaha, and a breach of Articles 1 and 3 of the Human Rights Declaration, as well as similar to the Japanese internments; <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>). This is because it would prohibit Muslim migration from warzones where they are not safe, and discriminate against these people for their beliefs. Also it's just generally a colossal dick move fuelled by misinformation or under-information blasted at high volume. Although, illegal immigration is definitely a problem in America that needs sorting out, I'm not sure a massive wall between the US and Mexico is the most cost-effective solution. Trump seems to be able to say very controversial things and gain in popularity (numerous comments against women, there might even have been one against soldiers ...).

Okay, so now I've illustrated my actual point without balance at all, we can move on to some actual debate.

Trump's rhetoric addresses all the issues facing America. And his 'solutions' would solve the problems they are meant to address. In a manner of speaking. For instance, illegal immigration is a *big* problem in the US. Especially from Mexico. And building a wall *would* solve that problem. But it would be costly, and seems oddly xenophobic for a country. Similarly, his suggestion that Muslims should not be allowed to migrate to the US until ISIS is sorted out is ... impractical and xenophobic, but again, a solution.

The main problem with Trump is that with all the things he says he speaks the opening words to the plan, and fails to follow up with a proper plan about how the plan would become anything other than a plan. In the following quote, it's worrying because he seems to think he's the one that's responsible enough to control the nuclear weapons. Example; in one of the recent GOP debates), he said "Well, first of all, I think we need somebody absolutely that we can trust, who is totally responsible, who really knows what he or she is doing. That is so powerful and so important," in relation to US' nuclear weapons.

Firstly, he doesn't even have the maturity of a pair of shoes. Here's some quotes he's actually said about women to prove my point. "Beauty and elegance, whether in a woman, a building, or a work of art, is not just superficial or something pretty to see."

"You know, it doesn't really matter what [the media] write as long as you've got a young and beautiful piece of ass." When confronted with a woman pumping breastmilk; "He got up, his face got red, he shook his finger at me and he screamed, 'You're disgusting, you're disgusting,' and he ran out of there."

Not only is his stance on women somewhat lacking, but he continues to blatantly lie about the issues he's talking about.

Examples; During a press conference before a rally, reporters pressed Trump to explain why he continues to say President Obama plans to resettle 250,000 Syrian refugees in the United States even though the administration has only publicly committed to accepting 10,000. Trump said his larger number comes from a "pretty good source" and is likely accurate because he has correctly predicted a number of other foreign events, including the rise of Osama bin Laden. "You watch," he said, "I'll be right."

Frankly, I don't even have the space to explain why (even if you totally ignore his politics), he lacks basic maturity and common sense to control even a small country, much less the most powerful country on earth). But perhaps spearheading a multi-billion dollar company, and running a country are not so different?

Ultimately at this point in the post, my serious argument with facts in has been done and backed up, so I can just yell at Trump and how he looks (like he does with women, immigrants and people that don't agree with him ...). So here's a selection of Trump jokes I wrote or found. So plentiful are the Trump jokes that I can't remember whether I wrote them or found them. But here they are;

Trump seems to have a buy-two-get-one-free deal on ex-wives. That joke is credit Savi Mohan. I do at least remember that.

Shithead of the year award goes to ... actually I'm not sure. That one might be Tony Abbott. But hey, whatever.

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Well, Trump seems to look like a hybrid of chicken and egg, so ...

He also seems to look like he's got some kind of ginger cat stapled to his head.

And here's a quote that I couldn't find a place for it to go. "NBC News just called it 'The Great Freeze' — coldest weather in years. Is our country still spending money on the GLOBAL WARMING HOAX?". See that's the thing with global warming is that the colds get colder as well, sweetie. Do a google. Use the hamsized plugs you have stuck in your ears and do a google, darling. Yes, I mean fingers, that's their conventional name.

TL;DR: Trump is a xenophobic trumpet of 'simple' solutions without an actual plan to more complicated problems for which the solutions are not an ideal fit ... basically a racist, ignorant bigot. And supporters seem to share these views with tacit support for the policy. I take the phrase "... source?" as a victory. But even so, I included some ...

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The Night Watch – Series Archive

Chapter 1: Paper Cascade

FALKLAND CITY PD SOLVES CRIME. The Falkland City Police Department has, for a change, solved three cases in the course of the week, leading to five more arrests. This department is a team of five; Gladys, an aged investigator (grey hair, short and with a fashion sense to match); Tom, the team leader (medium height, and with resting bitch face and resting bitch personality); Johnny, a new cop with little experience (young and naïve-looking); Michelle, an intern with dark hair and dark humour; and Fred, a tall and spindly cop that had a significant stoop. [...]

Tom put down the newspaper on his desk. Well, on top of another newspaper which was on top of a stack of cases, which was on his desk. Open cases, closed cases, press reports, headlines, and interview transcripts. It was chaotic and the weather was atrocious. Lightning illuminated the city outside the window, and rain was audible over the whirring of Tom's computer. Tom Stout was stuck. All the activity of the last six months and this was where luck ran out. He lashed out at the papers and they went everywhere. He'd pick them up later, probably in two months. Then his phone rang, and he answered.

"Yeah. What?"

He paused. Then spoke, "I know the interview didn't go as planned, Fred. You should call Gladys, she'll be able to finish the case. There are some things you can't solve with raw concentration power." He hung up before Fred could reply. Fred's case would be solved within the hour. Then he thought of something and redialled Fred. But he didn't answer, so the call was redirected to the department's operator; a teenage intern called Michelle who'd got in trouble multiple times for her cynical and dark sense of humour. And being bored, all the time.

"Speak. You have ten seconds or I'll hang up." Flat and without emotion, although Tom was about 70% sure she was joking.

"Get me through to Fred or Gladys. I need to find something from the suspect."

"I'll see what I can do. But I promise you nothing. Do you need them this evening? Or is it non-urgent?"

"As urgent as possible, please." Telling Michelle a job could wait was the same as not asking for it. Time would tell if she'd get through to Gladys.

The phone rang at the very end of the interview, after Gladys had thoroughly embarrassed and scared the suspect. "Hello?" Gladys was always polite on the phone; she'd been brought up that way.

Tom spoke from his desk, while looking at the open case file. "I need you to find out whether or not they buried the dog." Tom hung up after Gladys' assent.

Then Gladys turned back to the suspect with a glint in her eye, and the suspect moved backwards out of fear. But Gladys had moved too fast and her hip twinged.

"Damn being 73," she muttered under her breath.

The rest of Falkland City woke up to the headlines. But the police department were there when they happened. They didn't sleep at all.

"Yes. This is the case we'd been unable to solve for months," Tom said, while reclining in his chair. He was on the phone to some journalist, as often happened after a big case. Something in his demeanour changed when he heard the next line.

"What do you mean I have sole credit?"

He put the phone down without saying goodbye, and yelled into the abyss that was the rest of his office; "Gladys, get in here." The walls were thin. She'd heard.

"I know what you're going to say, all of it." Gladys eased herself into a chair Tom had put on standby.

"And that's okay, is it?"

"Look at me. I have my dream job, and I'm doing it for far longer than I legally have to. I'm not complaining. I don't want the fame. That's your job."

“My problem.” Tom chuckled and turned over a newspaper on his desk. “My problem, yes indeed.” This perplexed Gladys, but she’d learned not to ask too many questions.

Fred got into work, passing Michelle on the way to his desk. She always put a hand out to stop him if Tom was busy and likely to throw a fit. She didn’t today. On this occasion, Fred wasn’t technically late because he’d been gathering evidence in a different part of town. Fred hadn’t taken a sick day in ten years.

“111, what’s your – ” Michelle began to answer the phone sounding bored, then stopped. Whatever the caller had said, she was now paying full attention. “I’ll just get him.” She got up, leaving the phone face up on her desk.

Michelle didn’t knock. She never knocked before interrupting Tom. It wouldn’t be interrupting, otherwise. “Tom?”

“What. I’m busy.” He gestured at Gladys, who was still seated.

“Yeah, I think you’ll want to take this one.”

“All right fine just pass it here.” Tom was slightly annoyed at this; Michelle had never been the most caring of workers and tended to offload if at all possible. He grabbed the phone grumpily and listened for a while.

“So ... should I just go then?” Gladys queried, as she stood up and winced as her hip clicked.

Michelle had already left and Gladys only just made it through Tom’s office door before it shut behind her, rapping her on the elbow.

“Michelle, you really need to watch what you’re doing.” Nothing from the other woman who sat at her desk and put headphones in, presumably to continue not doing work.

Once the two women had left Tom could properly talk.

“I don’t know what you want, but you have to stop calling me. It’s getting annoying now, you just sitting and listening.”

The man on the other end of the phone call sat and listened. After a while, he got bored, so he put the phone on speaker, and walked across to a wall with many pictures, news articles and research clippings on. He pencilled in another line to a flow chart diagram that had been drawn in Visio. It made the document look unprofessional; he’d tidy it up later. The important thing was that his plans were succeeding. Everything was in place ... and he’d prepared it all to specification. That was what the voice on the end of his phone had said. He checked the conversation with Tom. He’d hung up. Shame. The man hung up the phone. Then there was a knock at the door of his small and dimly lit apartment. Well, closer to bang than knock and he didn’t really have a choice other than to answer. So he answered the door. That was a mistake.

“Robert Byrne, you are under ...” He zoned out. Knew this bit. He’d seen films.

Chapter 2: Close The File

Gladys had been assigned an interrogation early in the evening.

“Mr. Robert Byrne, where were you yesterday evening?” Gladys had the interrogation room set up for an interrogation, which is as you might expect under the circumstances; them being that she was in the interrogation room, and it has been established that she was in fact doing an interrogation. The room was perfectly simple in its decoration, mind you; winning art-deco awards wasn’t its purpose. There was an iron table in the centre of the room and decent space for walking around it (and physical violence, but it was only once and Stout made sure the recorder was off and just generally shhhhh).

Gladys had a light shining directly in his face, and Byrne was cuffed to the table. For effect, Gladys had a walking stick she was using to walk around, and her intent was to make Byrne feel an odd mixture of pity for the old woman, and threat of getting whacked on the head if he stepped out of line. So he was being oddly cooperative. He listened to Gladys talking and answered every second question with an icy glare, which Gladys countered by raising the stick.

“And when we found the body at the bottom of the ditch, it was clear you’d put it there.”

“How?”

“Your ID was there. I mean could it be any more obvious?”

Unnaturally calm given he was being interrogated by a woman with a stick. “Oh, so that’s where it got to. I spent about ten minutes looking for it the other day. Can I have it back?”

“Okay, sure.” Gladys put the card on the table, just out of Byrne’s reach. She grinned in only the way sweet old women can without seeming inherently psychopathic.

Michelle tried to steal Johnny’s popcorn (which isn’t a euphemism). Johnny always seemed to have some sort of snack food on standby at his desk. Writing the case report for the interrogation Gladys was currently doing; Fred looked up, cross. “Get a room, you two.”

“We have a room.” Johnny replied, gesturing at the office. To this, Fred picked up a newspaper and threw it. The paper collided with Johnny’s face and made a satisfactory whack noise.

“I have to finish this report before Gladys gets back from the interview and gives me the final details, and Tom gets back from his case; so if you wouldn’t mind being very quiet or perhaps even fucking off totally that would be super.”

“Ooh Fred; you’re always doing work.” Michelle countered with extreme levels of sarcasm.

“Given that Johnny is a new and, even though I wouldn’t have said this if Stout was in the room, incompetent member of the force, I feel it may be in his interests to actually learn what it is I’m doing rather than sitting there scoffing at me and trying to get in your pants.”

Under normal circumstances, Johnny might perhaps have been hurt by the dissection of his character. But it was accurate, and he knew it; and also he was trying to impress Michelle (shhhh don’t tell her).

Gladys put her stick on the table. “So tell me,” she said after a pause for thought, “what you were doing at the site of the murder and why your ID was there.”

“I was murdering your victim, and it fell out of my pocket. Oops, my bad, I should just go and not make these mistakes again ...” Robert stood up to leave and Gladys began to laugh. His handcuffs that he had forgotten about prevented much, if any, movement. He was, for want of a better phrase, stuck here.

“Don’t think I didn’t hear you confess to murder. You just put yourself in jail, and I’d very much like to know why.”
“Because they’ll get me if I’m on the outside.”

“They?”

“I’m not allowed to tell you who ‘they’ are, but I can say there’s a gang in operation in this city.”

“Honey, there’s many of those.”

“But I mean a sophisticated gang organising crime. Not the wishy-washy ‘what’d you say about my mum’ sort.”

“Oh? And have you any idea what they intend to do?”

“There’s a murder planned for tomorrow at the hospital. That’s all I know. I’ll just be off ...” Movement, to no avail.

His chains clanked. “Damn.”

“You will be off, yes. But to prison.”

Robert Byrne sighed. “Of course.”

Gladys didn’t like Byrne much. So she hit him over the head on the way out, just to make sure he actually got where he was supposed to be going. He seemed the sort of slippery bugger that would find a way out. (I mean yeah, it’s technically illegal to hit someone over the head but no-one was looking -- unless you want to tell someone ... but you don’t? *DO YOU?*)

Gladys arrived back at the office just a little after ten o’clock, and, surprise surprise, Michelle and Johnny had already bunked off. Even though they were technically allowed to leave, Gladys still thought of it as bunking, mostly because she had news to tell and only Tom was there to listen. So she told him about the murder that she’d been told about. Stout leapt into action; that is to say he leapt straight into his police car that was nicknamed ‘Action’, and departed the station to pick up Johnny to go and wait by the hospital for if anything developed. Then Gladys remembered she’d left some photos developing and asked if Tom could collect them on his way.

Eventually, the two men ended up at the hospital with the obligatory donuts to eat while waiting, and of course, Gladys’ photos. She had many grandkids. It wasn’t long before Johnny’s feet were up on the dashboard and donut crumbs were everywhere.

They weren’t sure how much time had passed before they heard the gunshot.

They looked at each other in mute horror because they both realised in that split second that Johnny wasn't a very good cop. Then a decision was reached, and the two men ran out of the car and into the hospital door, which resulted in an enormous bang and didn't so much stop the crime from being committed, as distract one of the criminals and freak the other one out. The distracted assailant recovered and raised his weapon and pointed it at the police through the sliding glass door.

Byrne saw it on the news. They were on the right track. A more immediate and important question was whether or not the shooters had done what they intended to do, and if the police would ever get to the bottom of the case. He sat back. There was nothing he could do in here, and nothing they could do to him while he was either. In fact, he was bored. Using a contraption devised from a steel spoon and fork, he began to lightly scratch markings into the floor. A drawing. Of boxes and lines, mapping out connections, planning. He'd been asked to design a plan, but hadn't been told where it would lead ...

Chapter 3: Possible Mistakes and Shortcuts

The door fell inwards slowly, like a drunk teenager trying not to pass out when the momentums of gravity and unconsciousness are already united against him. It turned out the hinges were still attached, a small oversight on Fred's part. The net result of all this was the most awkward-looking slow tumble it is possible to imagine; something that left absolutely stellar impressions of the Falkland City Police Department on all innocent bystanders; and also some stellar impressions and hinge-marks left on the team courtesy of the fallen door.

The commotion had, as was to be expected, entirely disrupted a murder. Or at least in many respects it had disrupted the murder, but in others it had sort of sped it up. Such was the confusion that by the time the FLKPD had got their bearings and stood up, the assailants had disappeared and left two people dead. The two victims seemed to be unrelated both to each other, and to the operation of the hospital. In other words they were two random strangers that weren't staff.

"So. That wasn't pretty." Johnny and Tom had sat down in the break room with one of the nurses to try and recover from the trauma; and this was as much for her as it was for them.

"Would you be okay telling us what had actually happened before we arrived?"

"Or after we arrived, for that matter?" Johnny intercut before Tom could clap him across the back of the head. "Well," the shaken nurse put down the shaking glass with her shaking fingers. She was middle-aged, and seemed to be a housewife; slightly portly and brown-haired, she mostly administered injections (without taking part in them herself, obviously). A job that meant she didn't form much attachment with any client. So she didn't know very much, especially why two masked intruders would so publicly shoot up a hospital and then depart. She just wanted to get home to her kids.

"At least we did get some information."

"Yes, two random attackers, and a very public shooting." Johnny interrupted Tom to complete the sentence. Tom wasn't particularly happy about this.

"Right. A small number of affected people, or at least that was the plan. Also I think it's possible that chaos that we – err – caused was intended to cover up the actual crime. When there is such a ruckus in a hospital, one dead body might be missed, especially if the death method doesn't match the shooting."

"So you're saying that if we find the victim, then we could find the perpetrator?" Johnny was smart, just lazy.

"Couldn't have put it better myself." Tom said as he stood up from the chair to leave.

Next port of call was the receptionist at the front desk. She'd most definitely have a better account of what was going on, and might be able to give the department a list of potential people of interest, or shed light on why the shooting had occurred.

She was also, as it turns out, rather pretty. This posed new problems for Tom as it threatened Johnny's professionalism.

"Could you tell us if you saw anything of interest?"

"They came from inside the building not the entrance. Now that I think about that it seems weird."

"Could we have a list of patients in the hospital at that time?"

“Sure. Just hold up, I’ll print it now.”

While she was away performing this task, Tom and Johnny had a look around the crime scene. There was little of note, except the places where people had been killed. But Johnny noticed a folded yellow piece of paper inside a stack of files. He unfolded it, even though this was probably unethical or something, and took a photo of it. What he had found was a sequence of symbols, perpendicular lines, crosses and dots. He was pretty sure it was Pig Latin. Then he replaced the paper and moved on with his search. The receptionist came back with a list of names, and left the cops to their work.

“I’ll run all the names through the FLKPD recognition software and see if there are any matches in military or police fields; see what we can find.” Tom continued talking after the woman continued on with her work

“Hey, also I found a thing.” Johnny alerted Tom to the coded message, just before Tom moved off to run the names. “And why police or military?”

“Let’s take everything we know so far and add it up. A criminal told us there would be a murder and also that there was a gang in operation. So what would that mean? It would probably mean they had a cop or soldier that they wanted revenge on because of shortsightedness and the belief that ‘the system’ is against them. So narrow it to military/cop and you’ll probably get what you want to find.”

Some time later, Tom had run the names, and there were five possible victims, and a list of two possible suspects.

“Hey boss, what should I do?” Johnny seemed unsure, and Tom had dealt with this behaviour enough times to be a little annoyed by it.

“Look, just find the codes that there are in this place, and then we’ll be able to solve them to narrow down which of the two suspects that we have is guilty.”

“No, but I mean; if we planted some evidence here we could narrow it down to one with far less work.”

“Well yes but that’s illegal.”

“And that’s bugged us before, has it?”

“I will not let you plant evidence that falsely incriminates a suspect.”

“I already did it. There was a van that left the ambulance depot about a minute ago, and I put one of the shooters’ IDs on it.”

“The shooters had IDs?”

“Yeah there was one that had fallen by the door, I saw it, wrote the name down and then passed it off.”

Tom was shocked. Firstly by the display of initiative, second by the lack of apparent morals and third by the insistence on doing the wrong thing. And the fact that Johnny had seen something he’d missed. He took a minute to gather his thoughts into a coherent sentence that didn’t involve swear words. This wait was too long for Johnny, who was impatient.

“Boss, I said what do we do?”

Chapter 4: Possible Solutions and Messages

Michelle and Gladys hadn’t directly heard about Johnny’s massive mistake. They heard about it more or less through osmosis and the fact that Tom asked they all come to the hospital said there’d been some kind of problem. Fred was stressed although this happened somewhat regularly so was not, in and of itself, especially notable.

“Boss, I said what do we do?”

“Well,” Tom answered after careful thought. “You need to intercept the van and get the evidence back. Because the political implications of evidence-planting may well end your career.”

“This isn’t about my career, it’s about yours, isn’t it?”

Tom was annoyed at this display of arrogance and ignorance; in the same sentence, no less. “Well no it’s not. But if you have such a low opinion of me and the work we do here and that would mean you didn’t want to change the frankly atrocious act of misconduct you just committed, then that is absolutely fine. But you would eventually be hung

out to dry. It might not be this week, or month, or year. But some way down the line, some lawyer is going to ask 'can this be used in court' and whoever it is that has it is going to have to look really quite stupid and say 'no, I'm so sorry it can't'. So I think it would be best for all people involved if you just tracked down the van and corrected your mistake."

"Fine." Johnny moved off. Tom sighed. Then he called Fred, and asked him to start working on the codes.

Johnny couldn't possibly find the van, that just wouldn't have happened. And he knew that.

After a small amount of thought (we're talking about twenty seconds – quite a fast decision by Johnny standards), he decided to set up an elaborate batch of roadblocks using Department resources and intercept it that way.

About ten minutes later, the van driver approached a road block. Odd. It was just after eleven in the morning, so being a breath-test outpost was unlikely. He hadn't heard anything about police chases on the news (and he would have heard about police chases on the news because of the way they impact other people). He pulled up and rolled down his window. An old woman approached and asked for ID and registration number. He passed it over. He had a load to run and was in a rush – he hadn't done anything wrong either. They had no reason to detain him, and he knew his rights.

But the message came back through and the old woman told him to stop his motor and that other people would be on the way to check out the vehicle.

He felt compelled to obey, almost entirely because he had no reason to (and no reason to be stopped in the first place...)

Then a young cop arrived. He looked new on the job; blond, spiky hair and a crisp, ironed uniform.

"Could we have a look in your boot, please?"

"But I don't have any –"

"Then you won't mind us having a look." The older woman intercut, and strolled around the back; calling her colleague around after a while. They opened the boot, and retrieved something that the driver couldn't see.

"And, sir, could you explain what this is?"

The woman held up something that looked nothing like what the driver was pretty sure they'd taken. The driver also had never seen it before.

Her colleague said; "It's like the codes we found at the hospital, and I'm pretty sure that's a V, and that's an X ..." he continued decoding the message wrongly.

"Look, I don't even know what any of this is and you'll be hearing from my lawyer."

"I'm sure you're perfectly innocent. The bigger question is, why you?"

"Look, I need to go ..."

The cops let him leave, and travelled back to the hospital.

"So we need to find the actual victim and figure out what the codes mean."

"But we can't figure them out; I mean Johnny's tried, and failed, but there's nothing concrete."

"So what do you suggest?"

"You and I should try to find the victim. That will shed light on who is trying to do this and why. Gladys should go to the prison and give the codes to Byrne. He should know what they mean."

Gladys left the hospital, and the two men tracked through the death records of the last day. They found two deaths that had occurred under suspicious circumstances and noted them down, then left the hospital. Both men had been military personnel. Then Tom stopped as a thought hit him (so did Johnny, who hadn't noticed the change in pace); what if it was linked to the criminal ring? He'd mark it down as 'investigation ongoing'. Then the two cops received a call from Michelle; a burglary had happened in the central city that they should go and have a look at. He'd return to this investigation later.

Gladys arrived at the prison just after 11 in the morning. Which wasn't something she'd done before; she normally preferred to simply put people in prison and then forget about them; and the mid-morning task disrupted her sleep

time. Remarkably easy. She requested to meet with Byrne about the messages. He was cuffed to the table (which wasn't the first time Gladys had made that happen – although thinking about it that was different, and you didn't need to hear about it).

Byrne was understandably pleased to see her. Mostly because he had nothing else to do all day.

"We found some messages at the scene of the murder that we have no idea what they say. Even though one of our cops knows how they're encoded, he can't actually decode them because he can't be stuffed looking it up."

"Well, this one is telling someone that a murder is about to occur," Byrne pulls another of the messages, "and this one is threatening your team; specifically a woman called Michelle."

"And the last one ...?"

"Could you get me some paper?" Gladys went to grab Byrne some paper, which Byrne used (somehow) to draw a box and line plot with a ruler. He seemed validated by the diagram, and was able to answer the question. "It says the Department would cut corners to achieve their goals and fram people for the greater good. It says you should be careful. In my personal experience," he gestured at a bruise on his temple, "this is correct. Don't continue on the false-imprisonment-and-police-brutality route. It may get short-term results, but it will always cause problems in the long term." Gladys sat in silence for a minute, considering this.

Then; "So which of the two suspects committed the crime?"

"There's no way of knowing, from these codes at least. It's probably too hard to find out now. Why don't you just leave it?" So Gladys left. Then Byrne requested a phone call.

He heard a dial tone then a female voice that said "where are you calling from?"

"Cell phone. Look, they're starting to figure it out ..."

Chapter 5: Order Hidden By Chaos

Chaos. Bookshelves toppled over, cushions ripped, cables everywhere. A TV torn from the wall and taken. Missing computers, graffiti on the windows. Tom and Johnny surveyed the property from the outside.

"Someone did a very good job of hiding what it was they came here for." Johnny was the first to speak.

"Or they just had too much fun. It's possible."

"Yes, but given what we know about the gangs in operation in this city, what would you think?"

"You're right, but I was giving them the benefit of the doubt."

They found the owner of the property in her bedroom; Alice (middle-height, brunette, young), swept up in the shock of the whole situation. She'd heard them talking and looked up as they entered, fear in her eyes.

"Did you say there were gangs in this city?" She was hiding something.

Tom took one approach to finding out what. "There are gangs in every city, why would this one be any different?"

"No it's just ... I used to They might ..."

"Ah. So you think this is a personal attack against you?"

"Boss? I found something." Johnny pulled a piece of paper from the wreckage of Alice's wardrobe.

He had found a message. It read; this is a personal attack.

Michelle put the phone off its stand. It wouldn't ring that way. She could work on the things that were actually important.

She was working on a system that would automate her job. Short term pain for long term gain, as she said. Work now and then never again.

She tried some settings and then put the phone back on its stand. She answered it; this had not been planned for. "No." Then she hung up.

Then she tried more settings. And recorded a different answerphone message. Then the phone rang again and she let it. The machine answered itself.

[Hello, Falkland City Police. Have you tried turning it off and on again?]

“Uhhhhhhhhhhhh, some guy stole my father’s life support ma –”

“Sorry about that,” Michelle picked up the phone mid-statement. Trying out the system had been a mistake. Too early.

The rest of the department split up to survey the whole house, see what’s missing, what’s damaged, and where there might be fingerprints.

Johnny ended up talking to Alice, while Tom dusted for prints.

“I – I got home at about three o’clock and it was just like this ... I hate to think what might have happened if I’d been home ...”

“And you think you might be in danger?” Gladys arrived at the house, and interjected.

“Yes, I’m assuming you know how they work. You are cops after all ...”

Tom was dusting for prints in another room but he could hear the discussion. Then he saw a piece of paper slotted into a bookshelf. He opened it out, and it was a message. Not coded, unlike the others.

Apparently there would be a heist at the art gallery tomorrow.

But why was it here? Why was this one uncoded? And what had the burglars actually come for?

These were questions for another ...

Tom had a thought and raced back to Johnny and Gladys’ discussion with Alice.

“I heard you say you worked with them. How long ago did you stop?”

“About a week, why?”

“Okay, so they’re probably after something you held on to after you left them. Something they wanted. But also; could you explain this?” He showed her the message, and she decided to tell them everything.

By this point, Michelle had managed to automate her job.

Which had its positives; for instance she was playing Angry Birds with one hand and drinking coffee with the other. While Facebook was open on her computer and she was totally ignoring the phones.

The phone rang while Michelle was ignoring it, and the machine answered. It was Tom.

“Michelle, have there been any other calls?”

[Please state your ailment or injury]

“Have. There. Been. Any. Other. Calls.”

[A team has been dispatched to your location]

“MICHELLE, FOR GOD’S SAKE.”

[Which service do you req-]

Tom hung up from the call, which was just as well. Had he stayed on the line, he would have heard Michelle fall out of her chair laughing.

Alice had been a member of the gang for two years. She had encoded the messages at the hospital before her sudden departure from the gang, and it had been intended she would encode that one as well. But she packed up and ran from them. In theory, they shouldn’t have found her. She wasn’t sure how they had. She was scared. And she didn’t even know what they’d come to her house to steal. She didn’t actually know they were behind the robbery. But obviously they were. Unless they were, her mind always told her; then she ignored it. They were. They must be.

She’d just finished scouring through her property to notice anything of importance that was missing. Then she realised. The burglars had stolen her gang patch. And it was clearly a threat. But a threat of what, exactly.

She talked to Tom, Fred and Johnny. They agreed they'd keep her safe from the gang's operations. There was a safehouse on the outskirts of the city she could move into. Gladys would take her there as soon as she was ready.

Alice packed a bag and took inventory of all her damaged property so she could fill out an insurance form while she hid in the safehouse. She'd need something to do.

Fred had a phone call to make, so he detached from the department who were now clustered in Alice's lounge. Meanwhile, Tom re-read the message and tried to form a plan.

"Right. We'll go to the gallery, and Gladys; you take Alice to the safehouse, then meet us."

Chapter 6: Theft of an Image

Tom had finished reading the message. "Okay. So. the message definitely talked about a heist that was going to occur at the art museum and that we should get there quickly. Obviously the note didn't say that we should get there, but we really should."

The department mobilised, and clear roads meant that only a short time later they were outside the art gallery. The roads being clear was probably a good thing because Johnny wasn't particularly mindful of the other drivers on the road (or road markings). But he did drive fast, so they arrived quicker than they should have.

The curator of the museum met them at the door, and was visibly stressed and dishevelled. His name was Alex, and he'd been alerted to the fact the theft was potentially going to happen at the same time the cops had. He showed them to the room the painting was in; a small room with a large frame dominating the far wall. Then he shut and locked the door

A grate over an air vent fell to the floor with a clang. Cautiously, a balaclava'd head peeked down, then after realising nobody had heard, did some acrobatic manoeuvre and finished the right way up on the floor of the room. There was only a painting on the wall, and the room was small; barely five metres square. So the man could see exactly what it was they'd come for. With a second sweeping hand movement, he swiped the painting from its frame in one smooth movement, then he spent another ten seconds rolling it up. He passed the rolled-up painting back up the vent, to some other person that was presumably waiting.

The department were stationed outside the room. It wasn't quite like how you see in films though; there weren't random Kalashnikovs lying around and pointed at the door. The team weren't even in uniform. It was the middle of the day and they should have been in bed. Gladys was taking involuntary cat naps and jolting awake whenever Michelle tapped her on the shoulder. Unusual foresight for someone who didn't normally care much.

"I spy, with my little –" Tom started sarcastically.

"No." Even Michelle couldn't get on board, such was the time of day.

"So we're just waiting here until the ... when, exactly?"

"Just the night. To make sure nothing happens to the painting."

"Well I'm pretty sure nothing's going to happen to it. I mean, we're here; an old woman – " Gladys hit him over the head at this point. "And, uh, an inexperienced new cop," evils from Johnny; "an intern that seems to have tagged along for some reason," Michelle paid no attention whatsoever to this insult; "and a workaholic investigator." Fred ignored this description too, mostly because it was dead accurate.

Johnny waited a bit, then sarcastically remarked; "If the painting's gone then please someone hit me on the head with a shoe."

It was at this point in the heist that things took a turn for the worse, because there was an almighty knock on the door from the outside. The man froze; totally still; for about a minute and the danger had passed. The next question was how he himself would escape. It had to be answered quickly as there was a key in the door. He could hear the rattling; then it again stopped. The man was able to wedge himself in the air vent to escape by sitting such that his back was against one wall and his feet against the other. One of his shoes fell off just before he managed to jam the grate back over the opening of the vent, then work his way up the vent and out to escape. Then the door started to open ...

"Do you think all these crimes are connected to the organisation?"

"Probably. It's certainly the most likely course of action. But then the question is how they're relevant."

“And do you have any answers?”

“We already kind of figured that the actual murder victim wasn’t any of the people we knew to be involved in the shooting; and we think it was this guy on a life support machine in one of the upper floors. But how would he be connected to the gang and why would they kill him?”

“And what would they want with a painting? These are probably questions for another day, I think. Certainly good insight, Johnny. You may become a good cop yet.”

“Why, thank you, Allister.” Sarcasm could be cut with a knife.

“Allister?” Tom was confused by this

“You were getting too happy. Used the wrong name on purpose to show I don’t like you that much. It worked.”

“Wait.” Michelle had heard something from within the room. “We should check, just to see what that was.”

Johnny opened the door slowly and carefully, just in time to notice three things. First, that the frame hanging on the wall no longer had a painting in it, secondly that there was nobody currently in the room, and thirdly, and perhaps most noticeably, Johnny got hit on the head when a shoe fell from the ceiling.

Confused, he called back to the team, “uh, guys. I think there’s a problem.” Which was of course an understatement.

Gladys saw what had happened and replied dryly, “yep. Big problem. So how are we going to get the painting back?”

Clambering out of the air vents, the man looked at his accomplice as they pulled off their balaclavas.

“Nice job, Alex. Are you sure it has the map on?”

“Yeah, definitely. We did enough illicit art trade in the 80s to know the maps are definitely on the back of the paintings.”

“Why’d you put them there?”

“It was just spare paper at the time. Didn’t really think. We should still be able to follow them ...”

The men walked off, together, passing the map between them.

Chapter 7: Image of the Thief

The team looked at each other in confusion.

“The shoe’s probably gonna be useful?”

“Most likely, yes. So that would allow us to find out who the people that committed the heist are. But that doesn’t help us with where they have ended up, does it?”

“That depends. I think, because I got hit on the head with a shoe, that they left through the air vents. They might be in a database.”

“What, and have a GPS on them that tells the government their location at all times?”

“It’s possible. I read somewhere ...”

“Oh God. Not you and your stupid conspiracy theories again ...”

“I’m just saying it’s possible is all. Anyway, what do you suggest?”

“I suggest we track cell phone records once we figure out who the guy is, and track phone and credit card records to find where he ended up. Then some of us can go there and collect it.”

“... yeah. Good plan. I suppose at least we solved the Locked Room mystery.”

“Or had it solved for us ...”

“Right, so first thing’s first. We need to get a sample off the shoe to analyse it and see if there are any matches in our software.” Johnny stated, in such a way as to clearly point out the task that needed doing, but in no way suggest he would be the person that he thought should do it.

“So do it then.” Tom was the leader and Johnny would have needed to comply.

“Yes, um, I’ll just take ... this,” Johnny stuttered awkwardly while Michelle tried not to laugh, “and go do ... that”.

He shuffled off as if trying to forget that he had a smelly shoe in his hand. After a while, Michelle said; “I’ll just go with him ... make sure he does the thing properly.” She moved off after Johnny.

No sooner had she left, than Alex, the curator of the museum, approached the team. He seemed curiously out of breath and had (for want of a better term) hat-hair.

“All good?”

“Ye—yes. We’re fine.” Gladys answered. As she did so, she observed the man to whom she was talking. Looked him up and down and noticed something was wrong. Up and down ... and he was missing a shoe.

“I’ll just swab the shoe then we can run it through the system.” Johnny was startled to hear Michelle’s voice behind him.

“You?” Johnny couldn’t recover presence of mind fast enough.

“Yes. It is me. Let’s do this thing. Quickly.” She grabbed his hand and ran off. He had no choice but to follow at an equal pace.

They arrived at the station five minutes later totally exhausted and out of breath. But Michelle wasted no time grabbing a swab from one of the top drawers while Johnny fired up the computer with the database in it. Michelle swabbed the shoe. Johnny processed the swab. Michelle waited for the results. Johnny put the kettle on. The results would be another ten minutes.

“Fred, I saw something that I thought you might want to know,” Gladys said while Tom and Alex were talking.

“What was it?” Fred respected Gladys’ observations and skills. He’d known her for too long (and she was too often right) for him to discount things she said.

“The curator was missing a shoe.”

“So?”

“So what if he was involved with the theft?”

“Why would he do that, though?”

“Because the painting was something important, and served another purpose, perhaps?”

Tom and Alex continued talking, and, as she looked over Fred’s shoulder, Gladys noticed Alex attempting to shuffle around Tom and into the room. Trying to see ... straining Really trying And then nothing. He just stopped.

He had seen that the shoe was gone.

If that’s what he was looking for. But if not that, then what?

He excused himself and went off, leaving Tom looking confused.

Went to the next room.

Pulled out a phone.

Dialled, listened, started to talk.

Oh God, this was bad.

Johnny and Michelle returned to the lookout just as the rest of the team was finishing up.

“What’s going on? We found the guy whose shoe that was ...” Johnny was confused.

“So did we. It was Alex, the curator. We talked with him and he told us. Then we arrested him, and he gave the painting back.”

“Did he say why he wanted it?”

“For-profit sale. I think that’s a lie, but I guess we’ll never know. I couldn’t see anything wrong with the painting when we got it back.”

“So he’s in prison now?” Michelle asked.

“And we didn’t cut any more corners, right?”

“As far as I know. Why?”

“It’s becoming a problem. We should stop doing it.”

“So then stop doing it. And be prepared to stop solving cases.”

“But hasn’t it occurred to you? What if we’re wrong?”

Alex walked into the cell and slumped down against the wall. Damn, he’d failed. So close. At least he’d taken low-quality pictures of the maps. But that wouldn’t be any help. Unless

“Hello?” A voice from behind. He looked around. Robert Byrne sat against the opposite wall, just hanging out.

Alex had an idea.

“Hey. I just met you, and this is crazy. But would you want to break out of this hellhole?”

“How?”

“I have maps. I know how to.”

“Where are they?”

Alex tapped his head in a knowing fashion.

“I heard you guys keep making mistakes. Johnson’s not pleased. She’s probably coming for you now. Same as me.”

“Good thing we’re here then. What’s she after you for?”

“Oooh, that would be telling. I think we should focus on the escape plan ...”

Chapter 8: Mob Rules

As the sun set, the Night Division of the Falkland City Police Department left their station to go out on duty.

Team go on duty on the streets. Johnny, Tom, Fred and Gladys started their patrol together, walking side-by-side along the footpaths with torches stretched out in front. After a while they spread further out. This would cover more ground that way. It was an ordinary Friday evening, and the sun had gone down about an hour ago.

Gladys and Johnny found themselves walking along the same street about a minute later; Fred and Tom were together in a street headed in the opposite direction to Gladys and Johnny. Michelle had stayed at the headquarters to manage the phone lines, which were reasonably active for a change. This was, of course, not helped by a conversation Michelle was trying to have over the intercoms with Johnny. Over the course of the next hour of patrolling, this had thoroughly annoyed Gladys, who walked slightly behind and mimed hitting Johnny on the head with her stick.

Passing a nightclub on a Friday night is a bad move. Tom and Fred learned this the hard way when they witnessed a tussle between a long-suffering bouncer and a drunk man with a superiority complex.

It wasn’t going well. The drunk was trying to swing the bouncer around by his ankles (which, had he succeeded, would have given another meaning to the name). Instead, the bouncer just looked thoroughly exasperated and bored by the whole thing. The drunk guy was so out of it, Johnny and Gladys managed to sneak up behind him and get handcuffs two-thirds of the way on his wrists before he noticed what had happened.

They left the cuffs on him for the next ten minutes until the guy had calmed down (and Johnny had sent a photo back to Michelle), letting him off with a warning and telling the guy to go home. Gladys offered to drive him, but the drunk guy refused.

“What’s your name?” Johnny asked just before the guy left.

“Joe,” the guy slurred as he stumbled away.

The team apologised to the bouncer and then moved on their rounds.

Some six-inch heels clacked on hard concrete floor. Click. Click. Click.

“Where was Robert Byrne last time he called us?”

“In prison ma’am. He called us on a cell phone.” A tall, sophisticated-looking woman was talking to one of her admin workers. She was poised as if she was a CEO of an organisation and had worked her way up from the mailroom. So she looked as if she thought she fully deserved everything she was currently in control of. And in many ways, she’d earned it.

“And did you check in with the segment operating in the Badlands?”

“Yes, I did that yesterday.” The admin worker was used to these discussions; he’d worked here for a while.

“The shipments of arms and munitions ready to enter the city?”

“Yes, ma’am. We just need to get the cops out of the way ...”

Around midnight, Gladys and Johnny stumbled upon (over) a hunched figure in a doorway.

“Wha-what?” the guy stuttered sleepily as he repositioned himself so he could see the two policepeople.

He couldn’t clearly see them because of their torchlight obscuring his view; but they could see him. It was Joe, from before. As it turns out, he had not made it home.

“Sir, I can’t help but notice, you have not made it home.” Johnny tried being polite.

“No shit, Sherlock.” He was significantly less drunk, but no more dignified than the last time they’d met.

“This time I must insist we take you home.” Gladys offered transport, but this time it was far less of a question.

“Okay, fine. I’ll tell you where my address is.” So he climbed in an uncoordinated manner into a police car when it arrived, and they set off.

“Is it left or right at this intersection?” Johnny was navigating.

Joe gave them the directions and they ended up outside a three storey building, looking formidable, dark and empty in the moonlight.

“This it?” Gladys asked.

“Yes, yes. Thanks very much.” Joe exited the vehicle and composed himself on the pavement before entering the property. He looked up into one of the windows and saw a female figure looking down at him. Oh, shit. He’d messed up.

“YOU SHOWED THE POLICE HERE? TO OUR BASE? ARE YOU MAD?” The woman was livid.

“I did what you asked, ma’am.” Joe was now completely sober. It had been an act.

“And then you totally messed it all up. What if they come back?”

“But this is part of the plan. See? Now they know where we operate.”

“Do they know of your involvement in the heist?”

“They know there was two of us. And they know about Alex.”

“And where are they on the murder at the hospital?”

“Still investigating, I think.”

Johnson paused, and looked at the diagram with boxes and lines.

“So this will achieve what we want it to?”

“Should do, yes. We just need to try harder. They seem to be able to deal with what we’re throwing at them.”

“You said Robert Byrne was in prison. He probably thinks he’s safer in there. Away from us. But what if he’s useful to us?”

“Like what? Use him to distract the department and then commit a series of attacks they can’t deal with?”

“Kind of, yes. Not exactly. But he’ll be getting bored in there. If we could guarantee his safety, he’d work with us. After all, that’s the reason he went so easily to prison. To be safe from us.”

Tom's phone rang after the department arrived back at the station. He picked it up, cautiously.

"Yes? What do you want?"

He heard a female voice respond. One he had never heard before.

"I'm Johnson, and I'm sure you weren't expecting to talk with me. You normally get Robert Byrne, but he's indisposed at the moment. I'd like to arrange a meeting between you and I, just to clear up what's going on. Come to the centre of the city on Friday to talk. Come alone. I don't want you to record, either."

"Okay. Hopefully we'll be able to sort this out. In simple terms, what do your lot even want?" Tom asked.

The phone hung up and he never got a proper answer. He put the phone down and an alert came through. There was talk of an escape from the prison. The whole team would be needed on duty, as well as the entirety of the Day force.

Chapter 9: Mexican Standoff With An Empty Cell

Tom Stout reviewed CCTV footage for the cell block containing Robert Byrne. After a while of meaningless scrolling, he found a snatch of useful footage.

Robert Byrne looked at his watch. "It's time."

Alex sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Right. So. This is what we need to do ..."

Then a guard came by with the prisoners' breakfast. And the prisoners made some movements that couldn't easily be seen on the camera. And the guard ended up on the ground; the prisoners escaping through the open cell door.

"Okay, so that was how it began ... but the real question is, of course, how did they escape?"

Over a month, Alex and Robert studied the maps.

"One thing you never said; why did the shootout at the hospital occur?" Alex asked on one occasion.

"Mostly theatrics. There was a team member that was opposed to us stealing the maps, so obviously he had to go ... but that was quiet. Subtle. The shootout was just for show."

"And you think they'll figure it out?"

"Not now. There was a time it was a viable option. But it's been too long now. So no."

They studied the plans every night after the guards were off-duty. Finally, Alex was convinced Robert had committed them to memory.

So the question remains, how would you escape this prison?

As it turns out, it's easy.

You would find yourself in a corridor after leaving your cell. You'd have half an hour before anyone noticed anything was wrong. Bureaucratic authority is often arrogant and self-important. When they say there's no way out, they believe it. Thing is, they're sometimes wrong.

Then you'd run down corridors. Hoping to find something useful. You'd escaped your cell, but what good was that if you were discovered in the hallways. You had twenty-five minutes.

Then you'd remember it was dinnertime and that most people had gone home. Twenty minutes. And you'd realise it was worth a solid go at just walking out the front door. You'd go back to the guard and steal his uniform. Fifteen. You'd approach the reception desk, and use the monitor of their computer to knock them out. You'd steal their clothes. If they were male, good; because you are. If female, then you'd have to learn to be sassy, fast. Ten. Then you'd walk out the front door and into the visitor carpark. Seven. The good thing with having a criminal record is that adding to it isn't even a problem. You'd try to hotwire a car. Five. The car would start and you'd pile in and drive off. Two.

Then you'd have escaped, and you'd have two minutes on the outside to find somewhere to hide. In two minutes they'd –

The alarms begin. Even though they were about a kilometre away from the prison, they could clearly hear.

Alex looked at Robert. "It begins."

The man left the prison and walked across the carpark to a van that was no longer there.

“My fucking luck. First, I get made late to a prison security meeting by a random van search, and now this. For fuck’s sake ...”

Annoyed, he walked back into the prison. He saw a news channel on one of the screens in the main entrance.

There was a story about police brutality on the news and some interview room footage of an old woman hitting a suspect with a cane.

Gladys saw the footage. She sighed, and opened a file on her computer. A resignation letter.

“It was fun while it lasted,” she said sadly. Resigned to her fate, in every sense. She was guilty, there was literal proof.

Across the other side of the office, Michelle had already taken some initiative and set up a series of roadblocks to find the prisoners. Gladys had walked in to see Tom.

Johnny radioed the Day watch to pool resources so the prisoners could be caught faster. The first wave of cop cars left the Headquarters, with Fred in charge.

The prisoners had driven the van for about half an hour when they approached a roadblock.

The police force were fast at setting those up.

They approached the cop who was standing out in front. He looked like he was a member of the Day Police.

“Officer?”

“Yes?”

“What’s this for?”

“Some prisoners escaped and we need to get them –”

The cop stopped talking abruptly when the two men revealed their faces.

A pause, dramatic.

The cop reached a decision.

“So you used the information I gave you?”

“Yes, sir. Bring them down from within. Are we done here?”

“I think so.”

“Good on you, Fred. You’ve done well for us.”

The two men moved off in the vehicle, leaving Fred to think about what had just happened. He made a decision, and followed after the two men.

Chapter 10: Mexican Standoff With An Empty Room

One week later.

Michelle rushed into the station during the day. This was not normal, for her. She had been compiling a list of ways to help get Gladys back. Johnny was privy to the list too, and hadn’t directly commented on it, but found the fact that she’d assembled it out of her character. And then he decided to help.

There had to be a way to get Gladys back on the team/ Work had slowed right down, they couldn’t solve any cases. It was certainly true that Gladys’ methods were illegal, but there was no question that they worked. It hadn’t helped that Fred had suddenly, and without detailed explanation, upped and left. The question was, of course, why. Johnny suspected that’s why Fred hadn’t told them, and pointed it out to Michelle. Michelle in turn pointed out that Johnny was getting some police instincts and might be on the way to being a good cop.

The two of them eventually settled on an open letter to the police department that they tried to get signed by everyone in the department.

Gladys read the letter from her home after it was published in the newspaper. She was touched, more than she'd thought she ever would be in that job. With those people. Maybe they were becoming a family unit. Somewhat cohesive. She anticipated a call from the department before the end of the week. Either accepting her resignation or offering her the job back. Of course she'd take it, it was too much fun.

Meanwhile, Tom worked on the actual problem; how had the two men escaped. Piecing the beginning of the escape. Reviewing the CCTV footage to see what had happened and been recorded. He realised they'd got maps somehow. Maps ... of the prison. That would mean planning. So they acquired them somehow.

He stopped a particular piece of footage two-thirds of the way through. It couldn't be ...

The paper the map was on. On the other side, there was a drawing. Or, more accurately, a painting. It looked vaguely similar to the one that had been stolen.

He scanned back through all the other footage. Finding a clearer shot of the reverse side of the map.

Yes, that was it. That was definitely it ...

But if this was closely linked with the heist, then what other crime could be directly relevant to the gang's activity?

Tom needed to do proper research. He would do that soon. Because there was possibly not much time.

Alice was used to it by now. Boarded-up windows and no movement outside, except for the garden out the back for fresh air. A member of the Night Watch would stop by every day with food and anything else Alice needed; and to check she was still alive. They'd been searching for Joe and Alex for a week.=

Bang.

Alice looked up. Dropped her mug of coffee. Audible clatter as the cup smashed.

Bang. Bang.

Alice backed to against the wall, terrified. Slowly, carefully. Without making noise.

Bang. Bang. Bangbang. Bangbangbang.

The door fell in with a clatter, and Alice squinted into sudden brightness. A figure appeared from the light holding something in each hand. In the left, a sawn-off shotgun. But that wasn't even the most interesting part. Because in the right, the figure held a bundle of loosely folded material. He tossed the material on the floor of the safehouse, while gesturing to the far wall from the door with the gun. Alice moved across, picking up and unfolding the cloth the man had thrown. It was her gang patch. The man didn't need to say anything else.

The police department had been looking for the two escapees for a week. The road blocks hadn't actually turned anything up, and the suspects had escaped on the wind. It hadn't helped that Fred had handed in a resignation letter the very afternoon of the blocks. Gladys and Fred at the same time. The Department wasn't able to cope with its standard amount of work.

Then there was an alert. A hostage situation. At the safe house. With Alice.

The department (such as it was) mobilised immediately and arrived at the scene not long after. They weren't armed, though and this presented several difficulties; they couldn't actually enter the scene in any way, or interact with the kidnapper before he engaged them. But it wasn't long before they received a message. It was an anonymously uploaded video to YouTube. Like most videos of the sort, it was shot on a mobile and you could see a gun in the top of the frame. Alice was terrified, and it showed. She requested that the department assemble \$1 million and meet with it and a briefcase in an hour.

"We should at least try to negotiate; I did Debating at high sch-" Michelle said.

"I'm sure that'd help." Tom shut her down.

They were prepared to storm the building, and had waited about half an hour when they were alerted to the second video. It showed Alice being threatened by one of the two men. The video showed the men admonish the police for not meeting their demands. Then one of the two kidnappers (Tom was never sure which one although he recognised the voice. But this wasn't noteworthy, he'd met both of them before) shot Alice live on camera. They heard the gunshot in real life too, and they had little choice but to storm the building.

The department moving into the building took longer than the kidnappers exiting. Such that there was a confrontation at the front door. Then a third member that none of the team had known about appeared from behind. Still shrouded in darkness. But they knew he was there because they heard two gunshots and the two men in front both keeled over. Then this third man charged forward, little regard for his fallen ex-comrades, and out the door. Fred.

Shock. The whole team stopped, very unsure about what had just happened. Fred managed to overpower Tom and get into the car they'd driven to the scene in. Using his key that he still had, he started the vehicle and drove away.

"What?" Johnny was totally flabbergasted.

"I assume," replied Tom, frustrated, disappointed, beaten, "I assume he's been giving them info this whole time."

Chapter 11: Cat and Mouse

The car vanished into the distance, leaving the team standing on the roadside looking into the distance where the police car used to be.

"I don't want to state the obvious, but –"

"Then don't".

"So then what, because you seem to have all the answers, are we going to use to chase him?"

"Chase them? Good God, no. No way we'd catch him by now."

"What else do you propose? It's not like we have many resources at this time."

"Okay. So what the hell are we going to use to chase him?"

"I'm sure there's something somewhere ..." Johnny said as he walked into the distance swinging his keys.

Tom noticed Michelle staring after Johnny. "I hear wedding bells already ..."

Johnny conjured a vehicle as if from thin air, and drove up to the assorted remaining team members a minute later.

"So," Johnny settled into the leather and turned the key in the ignition, "let's begin."

"Where'd you get the car?"

"I live around the corner."

"Johnny, you just need to be careful while you're dri – holyshitshitshitwatchoutthat'sabus." Tom had probably shat himself in the back seat. The car was driving on a 50km/h road at ... not that speed. In pursuit of the other vehicle, but due to the time distance between the two vehicles, they were traveling in very different route paths. "This is Cat, on the trail of Mouse." Johnny spoke into his walkie-talkie, and Tom's heard the reply. Which made the whole thing pointless because they were both in the same car.

Michelle worked out a route that would get them to the path of the stolen cop car so that they could catch Fred. Meanwhile Johnny drove the car like a madman with his foot glued to the floor and head in a box of pills.

"Um, Johnny," Michelle said about a minute later, "could I have the AUX cable please?"

"Last time you were given the cable, we ended up listening to whale noises."

"They're soothing. Don't knock it till you try."

"The last time I saw you try to be relaxed ended with your foot on fire."

"Yeah, everything I do is kind of ... ironic."

"I noticed."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

"Well yes, that is why I just said it."

"I know but I was being – JOHNNYWATCHOUTTHAT'SACAR"

“Jesus Christ man,” Tom had recovered from the shock of this latest near-miss, “pay attention to the road, and not your girlfriend.”

Michelle blushed, and hoped Tom hadn’t seen. She hadn’t.

“Update; Cat still on the trail of – oh. Oops.” Johnny remembered that Tom was in the same car and stopped talking into his walkie-talkie.

By precise and exact calculations, the route the team was headed on would intersect with Fred’s car at an intersection just outside the Parliament building, in about five minutes. Traffic permitting, which of course means that the traffic stopped to let them pass.

They arrived at the intersection, and Fred was about two cars ahead. They carried on, in the pursuit, hoping he would mess up somehow.

“Come on, I don’t have all day ...” Johnny was getting impatient.

“Actually you do. The sun’s just come up and it’s not like you have anywhere else to be.”

“Shush.”

About ten minutes after catching up with the car Fred had stolen, Fred mistook a left-turn and crashed into a lamppost. Going well over 100km/h, this was bad news for pole, driver and car.

The department stopped at the scene and tried to help Fred. Because they were a police department and that’s what they did.

“Should’ve said you wanted to be a pole dancer.”

“Stop that, Johnny. Now tell us, Fred. What the hell do the gang want?”

“There’s a very complicated plan that they’ve been working on for a while ...”

“Which is? WHAT IS IT?”

“It’s to make the Police Department ...” He didn’t finish the sentence before his somewhat untimely death.

Michelle found Fred’s phone nearby and saw that he’d uploaded something to Facebook, but the phone died before they figured out what.

“If we could get a warrant, we should search his house to see if we could find more information about the gang’s plans.”

“That might take a while, but should be possible.”

A week later, Tom received a piece of paper in the post.

So, late at night on a Wednesday (because everyone knows no crime ever happens on a Wednesday), when they wouldn’t be needed anywhere else, the team showed up at Fred’s house with a search warrant that there was nobody to show it to. The door was locked. Tom kicked it down. It’s not like there’d be anyone coming home to the place for a while. Until the estate would have to pay for a new door.

The team turned on their torches. If it helps to describe this scene, think like a detective procedural where the police search through a darkly lit scene at night to find evidence. This image really does help because it’s ... exactly what they were doing.

Tom took the living and dining rooms, Johnny took the hallways, bedroom and bathroom, and Michelle took notes on what people found in each room. Midway through his sweep of the dining room, Tom found a safe, and search of the bedroom shed some light when Johnny found paperwork. The paperwork outlined the gang’s masterplan. Johnny took photos of it without actually reading it. Then Tom opened the safe and found more material that photos were taken of, to be analysed later.

The team packed up the house and picked up the door, then left to continue with their analysis.

Upon returning to the headquarters, and Tom sitting down in his office, he read a notice from someone called ‘Johnson’. Some plans had been leaked that should not have been leaked. Their privacy had been breached, and reputations damaged. And they were prepared to sue ...

Chapter 12: His Case Comes Together

Stout v. Johnson [2015] FLKHC 134**ALIAS CJ.**

[1] The defendant, Ms Katherine Johnson appeals against a \$500,000 fine imposed by Judge Smith in the High Court relating to one count of Invasion of Privacy. The alleged breach arose from an illegally conducted search by the plaintiff; the Falkland City Police Department, which then gave rise to a Privacy breach when the findings of this search were leaked by an unnamed and unknown third party.

Facts

[2] The data that was part of the search that led to the alleged breach concerned the plans of an organised crime ring and the way in which they continue their operations. This data was collected by the police and incriminates many upstanding members of society. The nature of this breach and the alleged crimes committed will be summarised below.

[3] The plan documents found in a search of the property of Ms Johnson related to incidents that had occurred between June and December 2015. The documents related to a murder of an ex-operative who ‘knew too much’, who was currently in the hospital in June; this event led to a shooting in the same hospital. There was also reference to the heist of a famous painting in July; the painting that had maps of Falkland City Prison that would presumably be used to help a gang operative escape. This presumption is made because there was in fact just such an escape in October of this year. Furthermore, the crime ring is linked to a seemingly random burglary and vandalism of a house in Southern Falkland City, where the ring acquired an ex-member’s gang patch and used it to threaten her. She was then killed in a hostage situation after the prisonbreak. This led to a chase with the police department ending in a crash and the death of the suspect.

[4] After this death, the police department searched the suspect’s house for more information, and it is this search that resulted in the breach of privacy when the data was released to the public by a cop.

Invasion of Privacy

[5] The issue here is whether or not the alleged sharing of information as I have laid out is a breach of privacy. This would mean that the Falkland City Police Department would be liable to reasonable fines for breaching the privacy of the defendants.

[6] The defendant is alleging an Invasion of Privacy, defined as “a public disclosure of private information, such that the disclosure would or may cause harm to the plaintiff”. This would relate to the release of the criminal plans to the public, and subsequent damage to the reputations of people mentioned in plans, that may or may not be accurate, would be damaged as a result of the publication. However, when establishing the facts of the case, it was discovered that the breach of privacy was created by a member of the police department who was also a member of the gang.

[7] At this point, I must question whether it would still be classified a breach of privacy if a gang member had released their own plans to the public. I find then, in that case, that while the criteria for a breach of privacy could still be made, this case would have the wrong emphasis.

[8] Even so, the counsel for the plaintiff has alleged there is significant public interest in these plans, and that any relevant breach of privacy (if one occurred) could be justified as the public would be informed of the gang’s plans and be able to stop them without harm being caused to the community.

[9] The only question, in this case, is whether or not the data leak was a breach of privacy. This case is not concerned with whether or not the search of the property was legal or not, partly because that is beyond the scope of the case, and partly also because the search and seizure of the data was legal.

Conclusion

[10] In conclusion, I am forced to decide whether a breach of privacy occurred, who was guilty of the breach if one did occur, and whether there is sufficient public interest in the breach of privacy for the information itself to be of note to the public.

[11] I find that a breach of privacy did, in fact, occur. But the gang member who committed the breach was acting in his role as a gang member at the time, rather than his role as a policeman. Therefore I find that the Falkland City Night Watch did not commit the breach, and should not be accountable for it.

[12] Similarly, the information that was leaked should be of sufficient interest to the public to mean that charges would be dropped in this case. This would mean that there is no criminal case to be brought against the late gang member who leaked the information. However, in theory, a civil case could be pursued. But I find this unlikely, given that he's dead.

[13] With all of this in mind, it seems obvious to me that the sharing of the information relating to Ms Johnson and her operations was not a breach of privacy by the Falkland City Police Department. For the reasons I have outlined in that regard, I find the appeal unsuccessful by the defendant. However, I would issue warning to the Night Watch that the gang seems unlikely to stop their smear campaign in the near future.

Order

A The appeal is dismissed. The defendant is ordered to pay court costs.

B The plaintiff appeals the ruling. Appeal to be heard in the Court of Appeal.

Chapter 13: Her Gang Falls Apart

Tom wouldn't quite have believed what he saw on his desk, if he hadn't seen it on his desk. He saw a large pile of magazines and newspapers on his desk. Michelle must have put them there. Before, he would have said she was trying to stress him out and intimidate him just to watch him squirm. But now ... Tom thought she'd changed. For the better. He opened them at random and skimmed through. Police brutality, random searches, corruption, profiling, unsolved crimes ...

The department was finished. Tom could see no way the department might recover.

Gladys looked at some of the reports from her house. She was expecting someone from the department to stop by fairly soon. Hopefully Johnny, she had something to tell him ...

Tom and Johnson had scheduled a meeting for the Friday morning. They were seated across from each other in a conference room with the door shut. Nobody would interrupt.

"Just tell me why I'm here. Surely we could just settle this at trial?"

"We agreed a meeting, Johnson. So no, I won't settle this at trial. Although we both know you'll lose."

"Lose? Why would I lose? One of your cops leaked our plans."

"That's as may be, but he wasn't working in his capacity as a cop at the time."

"Ah, the good old plausible deniability. You didn't know so can't be accountable. The thing is, though, that he was a cop, and he did leak the data."

"But what I don't get is, why leak the plan? What do you gain from it?"

"Making you look bad. Everything we've done has been to make the cops look bad. From orchestrating many crimes at the same time to releasing media reports to framing you for a privacy breach. All of it."

"But why? Is it because when the police are out of the way, your gang can operate freely?"

"We can operate freely as it is. We still managed to get away with most of the crime. Did you even solve the murder, in the end?"

"Yes. You poisoned a patient that was averse to you stealing the prison maps."

Johnson looked at Tom with a certain level of admiration now. Rather than how she'd been before; bored and frustrated. She was interested and paying attention.

"There's one more thing, though."

"What?"

“There’s a bomb under the houses of parliament that will go off when I say it should. Fred was going there before he unfortunately died. I’m sure another volunteer will be on their way to find it. Tell you what, let’s play a game; you find the bomb, you win and ...”

“And? And you’ll be arrested? Because you were going to be arrested anyway. So what’s your ‘and’?”

“And you’ll never be bugged by us again.”

“That word choice was odd ...”

“Do you want a minute to communicate with your team?”

Johnny knocked on the door. It was the door of a house you’d expect an old woman to live at. Then Gladys answered the door.

“Oh, hello Johnny, what can I help you with?”

“Not too much, really. I just came by with some of your things.”

“Oh?” Gladys was surprised, because Johnny had nothing in his hands. Johnny followed her gaze.

“Oh, yeah, it’s all in my car.”

As they walked back to Johnny’s car, she asked “how’s Michelle?”

“Why’d you want to know? Does everyone think we’re together?”

“Do you want to be?”

“I wouldn’t say no if she asked ... but ...”

“But?”

“But she wouldn’t ask. So it doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter? That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard, of course it matters. If you want her, you should say something. Or else it might be too late, and then what?”

“You’re right but what if I mess up?”

“You’re right, but what if you don’t?”

Johnny paused, then appeared to reach some kind of decision. He changed the subject.

“And you’re sure you’re not going to come back?”

“No, I’m too old. I think I knew that before, but this time off ... it cleared it up. It was fun ... but alas. Not anymore.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’ll miss you around the office.”

“You weren’t bad either, kid.”

“This bad press might mean we get shut down anyway, so maybe this is for the best.”

“Maybe it is, or maybe the universe has other plans.”

Johnny received a text alert from Tom. *Bomb at Parliament.*

“Oh, God. I have to go. Apparently there’s a bomb underneath Parliament.”

“So glad I left. I’m too old for that sort of thing. Tell Tom I said I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“Just tell him. Tell him it was fun.”

Johnny dashed back to his car and set off, leaving Gladys standing on her porch, looking sad.

Tom had also called Michelle into the meeting room, as apparently she had some Debating experience and could assist with the negotiations.

She hadn’t exactly succeeded.

Johnson seemed to have taken a dislike to her, possibly because she was on her phone, looking up and flippantly replying ‘whatever’ any time Johnson said anything.

Tom received word that Johnny had reached Parliament and called for more backup. Then Michelle began to pay a little more attention.

“Wait, did you say Johnny?”

“Yes, he’s investigating a bomb that we put in Parliament.”

“Look, it’s already over. You didn’t even think twice about meeting in this room but look over there,” she said, gesturing to an area on the roof. There was a flash, they were being recorded.

“You’ve just gone on tape saying that you committed all these crimes. We’d arrest you and our case is solid, then we’d arrest the other members of your outfit because we have information on them too.”

“But there’s no sound in CCTV recorders.”

“Not always, but I’ve been told these ones are repurposed webcams that do have sound.”

“Okay. So. How about I agree to call off the bomb threat? Then we could walk out of here, and promise not to cause any more trouble.”

“Deal.” But Michelle didn’t shake on it. Johnson got up to leave, and she only got as far as the door, where she smacked into Johnny, who was waiting outside.

“But you just said you were at parliament?” Michelle was confused.

“Yes, I had to make her think that’s where I was. What I actually did was, after I got in my car, I realised Gladys could get the Parliament security people to scope out the bomb threat, and then I could come here in case you guys needed any help. Worked out rather well, didn’t it?”

“And the bomb?”

“I’m not sure, but I would say there never was one. Or it’s been disabled by security men that are better at that job than I ever could be.”

“Are we done here?” Michelle stood up.

“I think so, yes. Meet you back at the station.”

The team left, with Johnson in cuffs and in tow. Crossing the main road outside the Parliament building was slightly tricky on most days, but the team managed to get halfway across before Johnson lashed out and hit Michelle. She stumbled backwards and into the path of an oncoming car ...

“She still doesn’t remember me.”

“She knows who you are right now, though?”

“Yes, but she doesn’t know that we were friends ... before. It’s like I’m meeting her again.”

Johnny and Tom were sat in Tom’s new office. The Night Watch department had been assimilated into the Day Watch, who were nice enough guys. A bit dickish, sometimes, but basically okay.

“You go and see her?”

“Once a week, if I get time. I got promoted though, so it’s tough.”

“You’ll be a good cop, don’t worry.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh. You’ll move on, with time.”

“Yeah ... Gladys said I should tell her how I felt, wish I had; that’s all.”

“So, what now?”

“I’m just about to go on duty, do you want to join?”

“No, I have to do this paperwork,” Tom gestured at the pile of papers on his desk.

Johnny left, then there was a lightning strike in the distance.

“Poor kid, it’s raining too.”

Tom turned back to the case he was working on. “Oh, that’s how it happened ... someone get Gladys on the ph—”

He sat in the rain pondering his next case.

Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts

This is most likely going to be a lengthy article. I'll try to keep it interesting with pictures, videos and metaphors that hopefully are funny or clarify the issue. But I make no promises, because the issues are not simple.

But, even so; here's a TL;DR.

TLDR: The Greek economy is fucked because of persistent Government overspending since the GFC in 2008.

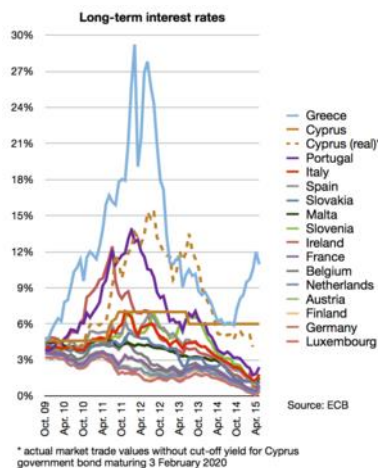
See, here's the thing. Greece has just voted 'no' to the terms of an international bailout (okay, not completely. At the time of writing there were still some ballots to be counted. But it was at 38% yes / 62% no. So I doubt there would be any gameshifting votes left. There's probably only like ten still uncounted). But the issue is; they kind of need it. The 'Syriza' party were campaigning for a 'no' vote because the bailout terms were humiliating. But with Greece in the position it's in (we'll get there, don't worry – I'm not going to assume that is knowledge you already have. Fuck, I didn't even know half of the stuff before researching this. I've also included my sources). So let's start at the beginning.

The History

Global Recession: This issue is not a new one. It's been floating around since the global recession of 2008. Actually, I'll start there. The global recession of 2008 started in the USA because banks and other financial institutions (probably not so much banks, but y'know) were giving mortgages to people that could not meet the repayment terms for those mortgages. And banks or other financial institutions immediately invest money that has been invested in them elsewhere; even if they don't have the physical cash to show for any of these transactions. If you're still with me, you may begin to understand the issue. When the people began to default on their mortgage payments that they didn't have the means to meet, the banks began to have to default on their repayments too. Because they'd never actually had the cash they'd invested anyway. Then the cash problems flowed through to those investments, then the investments on those investments, and so on. Right, we can now move on to Greece. After this break.

Economic forecasters assume everything, except responsibility. Economists are people who are too smart for their own good and not smart enough for anyone else's.

Greece 2010 - 2014: In April 2010, there was news of adverse deficit and debt data in Greece for 2008 and 2009. The same data also revealed that Greece had been hit with three distinct recessions (Q3-Q4 2007, Q2-2008 until Q1-2009, and Q3-2009 until then the current time). This



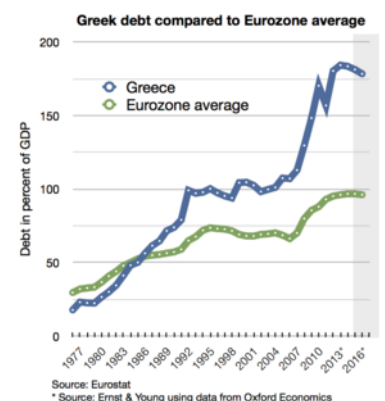
corresponded with credit rating agencies lowering Greece's debt status to 'junk bond' status; below investment grade, as they found there was growing risk that Greece would not be able to repay its debts (clap clap clap). In May of that year, a bailout loan was advanced to Greece in order to rescue it from the default.

Then a second bailout loan and adjustments to the terms accepted by all creditors to Greece. This at least helped to bring the Greek interest and debt rates down (a bit) as well as allowed Greece to access the private lending market again, and lowering unemployment, but a snap election in December 2014 caused a fourth recession which made the private lending market inaccessible again. As can be seen, interest and debt rates then spiked again, and

undid everything that had been done in the last few years.

A 2011 piece of topical comedy by John Finnemore (found <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KUcu5HdhYI>) analogises this with respect to the whole Euro as up to 2011 (so including the then-current plight of Ireland, Spain and Portugal – who have largely recovered since). We'll move on to the current situation after some more jokes; On the first day, God created the sun. In response, the Devil created sunburn. On the second day, God created sex. In response, the Devil created marriage. On the third day God created an economist. This was a tough one for the Devil, but, in the end and after a lot of thought, he created a second economist.

They say that Christopher Columbus was the first economist. When he left to discover America, he didn't know where he was going; when he got there he didn't know where he was; and it was all done on a government grant.



The current problem

Greece 2015): This fourth recession continued into 2015 and is exacerbated by a left-wing government that doesn't want to follow the austerity measures laid out by the Euro. Due to the panic caused by the expiry of the current bailout plan's terms, Greeks frantically began withdrawing money as well as major cuts to the standard of living because of electricity and hot water cuts in parts of Greece. Basically, it's not a pretty picture on any level; economic or non-economic. So the Greek government held a referendum on whether or not to renegotiate the bailout terms; the net result of which was, seemingly, a 'no' vote.

The causes and solutions

The present crisis is at least in part attributed to the fact that Greece joined the Euro in 1999 despite having a significantly higher debt rate than the Euro average at even that time (and it's only got worse), see the diagram above. The Government debt level has risen consistently, as well as the GDP level being unsatisfactory. In fact it is argued that the only way Greece can be certain to pay its debts is that Growth may increase (so increase GDP). Basically the Greek recession is caused by persistent overspending causing budget deficits; as well as Trade deficits. As well as all of this, the Greek people and Government still seem to have a misplaced notion of dignity in the matter, when in fact they really do not. This can be evidenced by the current Government calling the terms 'humiliating'. This is not the time for dignity and honour (or even democracy in electing such a Government) to take precedence over the fiscal validity of the country (and Union) as a whole. So they held a vote, the result of which was negative, as said many times before. The possible outcomes of this vote will now be discussed.

If Yes: Although it seems unlikely this will happen now, it is still possible and certainly worth considering. So that's what I'll do here. This would most likely lead to a bankruptcy within the Euro, and is not as good an option as it perhaps seems. The Greek government would not be able to handle a bankruptcy and the ECB would be unlikely to support them given the circumstances that led to this bankruptcy. Sooner or later, this would lead also to a Grexit. Of course, they would try to stall this for as long as possible by extending maturities of the loan or lowering interest rates ... but it would likely still happen anyway.

If No: The vote looks to be swinging this way, so I'll discuss this too. A no vote would almost certainly mean Greece is forced to leave the Euro (a Grexit). This would cause banks to collapse in much the way they have begun to already as creditors would withdraw Euros, not knowing if they would be able to withdraw them later and at what rate. This would cause the new Drachma to be very, very weak, and imports would be very, very expensive giving the Greeks less purchasing power. It's also possible that more drachmas would be printed causing inflation and making the drachma worth even less.

There really is no hope for Greece as they seem screwed no matter what they do. Unless they use either solution to generate Growth. Perhaps they could commission most of the country's workforce to build a giant wooden horse ...

Source List:

- <http://www.cnn.com/id/102795653>
- <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33403665>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KUcu5HdhYI>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_government-debt_crisis

And that's all from me.

Free Choice, or Government Choice?

Okay, I don't know how long this thing is going to be. Basically, like with the previous post where I tackled the Freedom of Speech stuff, today I'll talk about the abortion debate.

And the more I think about what the article will say, I realise this isn't a debate at all. Its either idiots being stupid, or other idiots misinterpreting the arguments other people make, and mix that in with hardcore religion. Religion + Idiots = Disaster. Sorry, republicans.

So the argument splits itself rather neatly into reasonable people and idiots. With reasonable people occupying pro-Choice movement, where they basically think (and in case you haven't figured it out, I agree), where it is agreed that women have the right to choose what happens with their bodies because OF COURSE THEY DO. Certainly, if abortions would become illegal if the other side were to win the debate, I would side here every time. I think it's fine to not abort or believe in conception. It is, however, another thing to inflict your religion-based and rather ignorant views on ALL OTHER PEOPLE IN THE COUNTRY.

And then there's the other side which basically believe life is sacred. And, as far as the point goes, I don't completely disagree. But I think they're going the wrong way about it. Because the fact is abortions will happen whether they're legal or not. But if they're illegal, there will be a significantly higher number of harmful abortions and/or people that dies because they screw it up. The other thing they do, and this is totally reprehensible in my opinion, harass women outside abortion clinics. NOW. My article yesterday talked about freedom of speech and the fact that you have NO RIGHT to intimidate, threaten or kill people for having views that oppose yours.

The other thing the zealots do, is they call their movement pro-Life. While this is technically true, it's also complete bullshit. Because there are situations where it would be best to abort a pregnancy (mostly limited to if your personal current situation would not be conducive to the raising of a child; or concerns over the health of said child that would make their life unassailably difficult. This would, only on some occasions, include aborting because of disability). So basically the argument should instead be summarised as (as the title to this thing suggests) Pro-Choice or No-Choice. Because if the idiots have their way, the Government would legislate. And that would be bad.

Okay. So, that's my view. The final point I wish to make is one I don't see especially often. I am a man. This would mean, would it not, that I have no place in deciding what a woman does with her body? I also have no medical expertise **whatsoever**. So do I have the knowledge to recommend a thing without knowing it's the right choice? No. If I have no right to expect people to take my opinions seriously, then why do the (mostly male) politicians that are pushing through these laws think they can?

Heh. 510 words.

As you were.

You Can't Kill an Idea

Neil Gaiman said a thing about ideas and freedom of speech the other day. I will link it here eventually within this article, but that is not where my argument begins.

My argument is about ... arguments. Oooh, meta. Because an argument stems from the disagreement between two people and their opinions or values. But what exactly is its purpose, in the majority of cases? To change someone's mind? To alert them to your views while they alert you to theirs and see where they overlap? See, it's human nature to want people to agree with us, and for this reason I think arguments primarily exist to change people's minds.

And that's not really okay, if you think about it.

Because, yes, you have views; and hey, yes, they also have views. But a correlation of these views isn't necessary to be friends with or talk to a person. You can still get on with people and disagree fundamentally with their stances on big issues; religion, politics, the abortion debate (which stems mostly from religion or lack of), freedom of speech and many other 'heavy-weight' topics that can be discussed.

In these topics, it is unlikely that debating them will help you to 'change the other person's mind' because their beliefs have been entrenched by upbringing or a genuine belief that it is the best (or only) way to look at a particular subject. You could say that I'm entrenched in my view; which is a one-liner is ever I heard one.

So, people argue to change other people's minds, as opposed to eloquently expressing their opinions. And they generally think that yelling will achieve this. As a rather quiet individual prone to making eloquent arguments that see both sides of the debate, I detest this notion.

However, of late, methods have been used by certain groups to 'regulate' the flow of ideas and stop the spread of ideas that are not liked. I am talking, yes, about the Charlie Hebdo attacks, ISIL in Syria, harassment of women outside abortion clinics and the more recent and less publicised attack on a Danish cafe that killed three people.

Enter; Neil Gaiman. Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8kOdPWld-c#t=113>.

Highlights from that include but are not limited to;

"I believe that it is difficult to kill an idea." This links to my earlier point about people's beliefs being hard to change.

"I believe you can set your own ideas against ideas you dislike." Which means you can argue things out, and will see textual, graphic or visual representations of opinions you do not like. The echo-chamber theory; which is a media studies theory stating we only seek out opinions we like - states that we see less opinions we dislike than those we like, but still see them sometimes.

"I do not believe that burning, murdering, exploding people, smashing their heads with rocks to let the bad ideas out, drowning them or even defeating them; will work." This links directly to my point immediately below, and the belief that it will be impossible to have a world with just one faith system (ISIL's endgoal), and that killing people with ideas you disagree with is immoral and just plain wrong. Also it won't work, anyway.

"I believe that repressing ideas spreads ideas." THIS IS THE BEST QUOTE. Because it's so true. Human nature dictates that if you're told not to do something and not really given a reason why, you'll do it anyway just to see what happens. This was also proven after the Charlie Hebdo attack, where a magazine with a usual print run of a few thousand printed about a million copies just to two-fingered salute the terrorists. I'm not sure of the exact numbers, but the run was significantly higher, and the paper still had the kind of cartoon in it that the earlier paper had been attacked over. This is ultimately why the idea will win against the gun. Have you ever wonder why paper wins against rock? I suspect this might be the reason ...

"I believe that people and books and newspapers are containers for ideas." Therefore persecuting people for the beliefs they hold won't solve the problem, right? To solve the problem, you'd have to burn all the newspapers, but ...

"It is already too late." It's already too late because once the paper has been written and read, the ideas are in people's heads. So there'd be no point burning the newspaper archive. So how do you repress the ideas of people? Answer; you can't. Not properly and for long-term periods, anyway

"I believe you have every right to be perfectly certain that images of God or Prophet or Man are sacred." This has more to do with religion that perhaps it should so I'll simplify. You can have your beliefs or opinions and that's fine, and nothing to do with me.

"I believe I have the right to think and say the wrong thing." Same point.

"I believe that you have the right to think things that I find offensive, stupid, preposterous or dangerous, and that you have the right to speak, write or distribute these things." Same point again, but then he adds that it should be okay to distribute those things as well.

"I believe that in the battle between guns and ideas; that ideas will - eventually - win." Because ideas are intangible and hard to kill, and everyone has them.

However, I have a concluding paragraph that was not included in Neil's speech. It follows thus; just because you have an opinion doesn't mean you have to broadcast it, and you will have to defend it against backlash. I also disagree with (and from here on, I refer specifically to Charle Hebdo) insulting a group by clearly understood terms that you know what you're doing and can't understand the backlash. Now, what I mean by that is, in Islam, depicting the Prophet is blasphemy. So the cartoons by Hebdo are blasphemy, satirical or no. In fact the satirical nature of the cartoon is simply the last nail in the coffin, because they're doing blasphemy and then mocking the religion at the same time.

Sideline point; I also believe satire is 'average' people poking fun at systems of power with more power (or privilege, if you like) than they have. So I don't see the content of Hebdo and its attack on Islam as satire, I see it as an attack. So I don't follow the Je Suis Charlie campaign. I see its point, but ...

But I definitely don't condone killing people for disagreeing with ideas or thoughts. And anyone who does ought to, in my opinion, take a long, hard look in the mirror.

There be my thoughts on a thing about his thought on a thing.

You may now resume what you were doing.

To Raise or Not To Raise: The Minimum Wage

I did a scholarship eco thing on this a while back. The basic gist of my argument shall follow. Basically, having a minimum wage stops 'nasty' employers from paying their staff unreasonably low wages for doing stuff (their jobs). When you're an adult, this is important. Like, really important. Because of all the boring shit like bills and mortgage and food (okay that last one isn't really boring but it still costs heaps). But as a teenage worker, the amount of money you get paid doesn't matter as much because you don't rely on that money to provide the necessities of living. That's what parents are for. So, accordingly, in this country, there are three minimum wages (source: <http://www.dol.govt.nz/er/pay/minimumwage/>). The 'adult' minimum wage, the 'starting-out' minimum wage and the 'training minimum wage. All of these have different rates and apply to different groups of people.

The 'starting out wage' applies to starting-out workers. Starting-out workers are either; A) 16- and 17-year-old employees who have not yet completed six months of continuous employment with their current employer. B) 18- and 19-year-old employees who have been paid a specified social security benefit for six months or more, and who have not yet completed six months continuous employment with any employer since they started being paid a benefit. Once they have completed six months continuous employment with a single employer, they will no longer be a starting-out worker, and must be paid at least the adult minimum wage rate. Or C) 16- to 19-year-old employees who are required by their employment agreement to undertake industry training for at least 40 credits a year in order to become qualified.

This means that a starting out worker is any person between 16 and 19 who hasn't worked at a place for 6 months and/or is doing training. That's the simplified version.

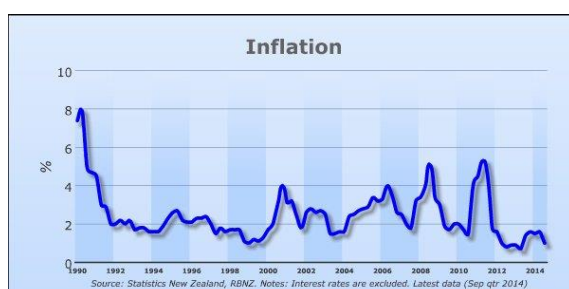
The training minimum wage applies to "employees aged 20 years or over who are doing recognised industry training involving at least 60 credits a year as part of their employment agreement, in order to become qualified." This would mostly apply to people in Trades required to meet industry standards that do not have other recognised qualifications. This is why it isn't as widely known as the other two forms of minimum.

These two above rates are \$11.40/hr before tax.

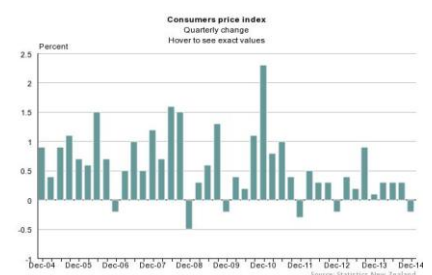
The 'adult' minimum wage applies to "all employees aged 16 and over who are not starting-out workers or trainees, and all employees who are involved in supervising or training other employees." This applies to pretty much every other worker that isn't a high-school student or recently-ex-beneficiary that is paid minimum wage in the workforce. This rate is currently \$14.25/hr BEFORE tax.

Okay, that was a long introduction, but now we all know what a minimum wage is, what it does, what workers get it, why workers need it, and what the rates are.

So, there is an argument oft posed about raising said minimum wage to a more acceptable amount (as \$14.25/hr is not enough to live on due to inflation rates and Growth increasing prices (most noticeable in the CPI (source: http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/economic_indicators/CPI_inflation/ConsumersPriceIndex_HOTPD14qtr.aspx)). These graphs show that both Inflation and the CPI are at relatively low levels. Because an inflation of 0 would be bad for the economy because it wouldn't be growing (Growth and inflation are inextricably linked, shown by the AD/AS model). The current monetary policy is to keep inflation between 1-3%.



But counter-arguments to this act as though individual firms will be hurt if the Government raises the minimum wage through legislation. While this isn't strictly true, it does have some base. Because McDonalds wouldn't make a loss (as in entirely negative profit for the year) if the wage were raised. But they would hire less workers. This is because they would be spending the same amount of money on wages. But



therefore having less staff. Which, if anything is bad for the workers. Because they would be worked harder, stress would increase, and the standard of living would decrease. Because McDonalds has less workers to provide the same service because it is forced to pay them more.

A solution to this problem is a thing called a Living (or efficiency) Wage. This means the Government suggests a wage that companies feel they should provide because it creates goodwill, as opposed to a higher minimum wage that has been legislated and costs some people their jobs, or tightens up the labour market because firms demand less labour. So, basically firms need to come to the decision of raising the minimum wage themselves, as opposed to being forced to do so, and then this would happen with a minimum increase in unemployment. An example of this is The Warehouse (apparently – there isn't much you can find on exactly what rates companies pay online). But the theory of this stacks up; if workers are paid more by firms, and jobs aren't lost as a result of that pay increase, workers have more money to buy more things and unemployment doesn't increase. Henry Ford (source: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/01/06/henry-ford-understood-that-raising-wages-would-bring-him-more-profit.html>, and <http://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2012/03/04/the-story-of-henry-fords-5-a-day-wages-its-not-what-you-think/>) also did a similar thing around the time of World War One. Ford's theory was: Companies had an interest in ensuring that their employees could afford the products they produced. Put another way, employers had a role to play in boosting consumption. While paying higher wages than you absolutely needed to might lower profits temporarily, it would lead to a more sustainable business and economy over time. If the motorcar was going to be a mass-produced product for typical Americans, not a plaything for the rich, Ford would strive to pay his workers enough so they could afford the products they worked on all day.

So, raising the minimum wage by legislation may appear to make consumers better off – and for those who still have jobs after the increase this is true. But if firms raise wages of their own accord, then customers will better be able to afford their products and increase their profits, and there would be no increase in unemployment. Employment may, in fact, go up.

That will be all.

Badly Used English

Here are some things that I found on a site that I thought are funny.

In a hotel in Athens:

Visitors are expected to complain at the office between the hours of 9 and 11 A.M. daily.

In a Japanese hotel:

You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid.

In a Bangkok dry cleaner's:

Drop your trousers here for best results.

In a Rhodes tailor shop:

Order your summer's suit. Because is big rush we will execute customers in strict rotation.

In a Rome laundry:

Ladies, leave your clothes here and spend the afternoon having a good time.

In a Czechoslovakian tourist agency:

Take one of our horse-driven city tours - we guarantee no miscarriages.

Advertisement for donkey rides in Thailand:

Would you like to ride on your own ass?

In a Bangkok temple:

It is forbidden to enter a woman even a foreigner if dressed as a man.

In a Tokyo bar:

Special cocktails for the ladies with nuts.

In a Copenhagen airline ticket office:

We take your bags and send them in all directions.

On the door of a Moscow hotel room:

If this is your first visit to the USSR, you are welcome to it.

In a Norwegian cocktail lounge:

Ladies are requested not to have children in the bar.

In a Budapest zoo:

Please do not feed the animals. If you have any suitable food, give it to the guard on duty.

In the office of a Roman doctor:

Specialist in women and other diseases.

In an Acapulco hotel:

The manager has personally passed all the water served here.

The News – Series Archive

Preface

As a preface to this whatever-you-want-to-call-it, this is a rundown of the writing process of the thing.

July 2011. On an overseas holiday to Fiji, I started thinking about a sitcom idea that we could film at some point later on. As happens with ideas, this one was complete crap. Well, the idea was about 55% solid. The main thing letting it down was the acting talent (or lack thereof) that would perform it (or not). So I drafted a script using some jokes I had assembled from various sources, including but not limited to my own head.

September 2011 (I think). I attempted to film the script I had laid out. No original footage of the project remains, that's how bad it was. It was at this point I realised we *really* couldn't act. Up to this point, I'd known it, but this was the first proper opportunity of seeing it in practice. So I edited a bit of it, realised it was quite bad, then scrapped the whole thing, deleting all footage. But keeping the script, I was certain I could make it work in a way that involved less ... acting.

Throughout 2012. I redrafted and redrafted my original idea, which had been all along that teenagers have to make a film (or some form of that or other). It had transitioned between sitcom and sketch show more times than an indecisive turntable, and I had continued to dredge up more material from internal and external sources. But I hadn't found an idea I liked, yet.

February 2013. An idea was suggested that involved a news channel run by teenagers, meant as a satire on news shows and the media industry as a whole. I liked this idea and had enough material to flesh out a script. Well, write. The characters were really 2-dimensional, and the whole thing relied on one-liner delivery. Nevertheless, in my head it worked, so we gave filming it another go.

April 2013. In my head, it worked. In practice ... it didn't entirely fail. But it didn't entirely succeed either. Because the characters were not strong enough to be empathetic and the acting was not good enough to even close to make the acting empathetic. But it looked quite good, except for minor focus issues. So the \$15/person round trip to Mission Bay we did in filming wasn't completely wasted. It remains, in its 12-minute entirety, on YouTube (as far as I know). Or you can find it here (<http://bluelazer.co.nz/server/films/Cinema/thenews.html>). And I thought there wasn't enough material for a second episode.

February 2014. Not only was I wrong, but there was a story to work with the material. Enough for two more 15-minute films. But alas, they would never come. Because of acting and delivery problems that made the things we did for this idea always better in my head, I realised that the best way to create the stories without screwing them up as badly as we had been doing was in text-form. Also, they were faster to write.

May – August 2014. Instead of completing a particularly annoying Maths internal, I decided to start writing, and did so; completing Part One: Professional Incompetence faster than I had thought I would. So I decided that I could, in this format with its decreased reliance on a fast flow of jokes, do a series.

May The thirteen-part series of 1000 (ish) word stories was completed, using not all of the material I had collated over the three-year writing period. So, I decided I'd do more, also because I felt that the ending to this (which went up to Part 13: And Now It's Six o'Clock) slightly unsatisfying.

December 2014 – February 2015. I followed on with a further 12 stories over that summer (mostly because I was bored). The plotting and continuity in the later parts of these 12 stories is probably the best of the kind that I have done, and as such I am quite proud of it, especially the ending. I also found that almost all of the material had been used. So I stop here, until I get another idea for a series of stories.

April - May 2015. Five more parts. Almost definitely the finish this time. Because I'm out of both ideas and jokes.

June 2015. Edited the whole thing. Some big changes, some small changes.

And that's 700-words of your time you'll never see again. Enjoy this. Or don't. See if I care.

Dylan Thompson

17th February 2015.

Prologue: Just An Ordinary Day

Stories have to start somewhere. But this particular story starts somewhere near the end, then goes backwards from there.

Try to make sense of it, I dare you.

So here goes.

Imagine, for a moment, a wine glass. And then draw your imagination from the wine glass backwards until you see the whole room. Quite a large hall, shiny floor, presumably expensive to book. Probably built in the 1950s or something. But anyway, that's not the point, much as architects may disagree. The point is, indeed, that a man is about to begin speaking. He's a young man, no older than twenty. And yet, here he is, about to start a speech. He opens his mouth to speak and then there's a shrill scream that cuts him off. One of the guests (who, no doubt you'll come to know very well) has ended up on top of a table because he thinks there's a mouse underneath. With a clatter, he climbs back down, and the speaker begins.

"So, as you may well have guessed, this is a wedding. And the story behind this absolute monstrosity of an event starts like this ..."

Imagine for a moment the speaker fade out, and the camera in the mind's eye pan up and look out to a blue sky out of a window.

See the blue sky, and pan down to a bench. This bench is not especially extraordinary, and it's currently occupied by four people, of whom the speaker is one. For the sake of putting names to descriptions, he's called Nigel.

"Being a pessimist is great because I'm either right or pleasantly surprised".

"That's true," said his friend, who we will come to know as Alex.

"So," Nigel said, worried about the flow of conversation from one end of the lunchtime to the other, "I bet you can't name two structures that hold water."

"Well, damn," the third person on the bench said (he is, for the sake of continuity, called Ravi), "I don't know ..."

The fourth member of the quartet was quiet on this particular occasion.

"What are you thinking, Cameron?" Nigel asked carefully. This question could get any sort of answer; and it turns out Nigel was correct in being cautious.

"Well," Cameron said absentmindedly, "I'm worried about never being properly happy and dying alone tragically young. And also fluffy kittens."

There was an awkward pause.

"Well, that's just ... thank you Cameron." Ravi was pretending to be a chat show host; presumably practicing for a Drama internal. "Oh, and", he said, dropping the façade, "how's your dad, Alex?"

"Same old." Something about the tone. Almost-but-not-quite-covered sadness.

Cameron wasn't paying attention, Alex had also zoned out and Nigel had given up trying to keep the talk going. So the conversation subsided and Ravi put headphones on. In a very loud and exaggerated manner, just so the others really got the message.

"Hey, guys," Ravi said, after a substantial wait, "listen to this news anchor. She's got a really nice voice." So they did, by turns. She was reporting on something absolutely horrible like the death rates in the city and lack of medical funding, or maybe it was gangs. Either way, it was produced or whatever – they weren't sure – by a guy called Sir. Whoever it was that had the headphones when the article finished heard a producer faintly calling out "Gemma, can you get the next story, please?" She replied with a comment about her appearance or something, and this particular producer (whose name was Steve) snapped back "it's like putting twenty-six inch rims on a wheely bin; just get the damn report".

Alex would never be properly able to recollect the story because she did indeed have a voice like ... well ... it's sort of indescribable, but could be equated to a harp being played behind a silk sheet backdrop. Then she said "and I'm Helena for 7 News; next on TV 7, we talk to the politician representing the constituency of ..." and then she said a long name that was unpronounceable to any decent speaker. And did an okay job of it.

Then Ravi had an idea. "Hey, why don't we have a goal, right? That we sort of, you know? Get a TV station? I don't know how that would ..." He was uncharacteristically meek in his suggestion.

Nigel looked at his watch with such vigour there was a major snapping noise and springs were visible. Whatever it was that happened, it was totally screwed, so Nigel flagged down the nearest person to ask them the time. So the girl stopped and theatrically shoved her watch in his face. Then, after a satisfactorily long time, replaced the outstretched watch with her opposite hand. "I'm Julie. And you are?"

Then Ravi fell off the chair because Nigel had been introduced to a girl. And not totally messed it up.

Chapter 1: Hostile Takeover

Things got interesting for the media executive when he was hit over the head with a frying pan. Well, they got interesting around him. He just lay there. Unconscious. The boys didn't really pay too much attention to him, they were too busy worrying about the task at hand. The particular gentleman that had hit the flattened official had a nose that looked like a doorknob and a face that was too big for him. He was Cameron, and he compensated for these facts by growing straight brown hair shoulder length and leaving it loose. He also had reasonably broad shoulders and was of slightly above average height, wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with 'Video games ruined my life. Luckily I have two extra lives'.

"Yeah, he's been taken care of," Cameron whispered into an earpiece, "how are things at your end?"

"Well, they're just fine, but you needn't whisper". The reply came through. Cameron jumped as he looked up to see the person supposedly on the other end of his communications device standing in front of him. One of the other team members, Nigel has slightly shorter and thinner than Cameron, had a short mop of black hair and stubble you could use to light a match. His black t-shirt had 'Nigel No-friends' stamped across it in football jersey style.

"So how many others are left?" Cameron asked.

"Well I took out my quota, and you did yours, so that just leaves Ravi and Alex -".

"So we killed them all". It was Ravi's voice. Cameron couldn't yet see him but the mere sound of it set his teeth on edge.

"No, I killed them all, you polished the cutlery. You could've cooked the chicken". Alex. The team leader, and clearly frustrated with everyone's inherent crapness. They rounded the bend so that Cameron could see them properly. Ravi was shorter than Nigel, and slightly chubbier. He played basketball for no apparent reason; although you wouldn't notice to look at him (on or off-court) and was holding a frying pan the size of his head with a massive dent in the centre, that he had forgotten to lay down. Alex was similar size to Ravi and red with frustration. It didn't help that his shirt was green and trousers were brown, so he looked like an angry Christmas tree.

"So ... we did it?" Nigel asked.

"Yep," said Cameron, who was promptly hit over the head by Ravi with his frying pan.

Ravi giggled at the resulting sound, "hehehehehehe that sound's always funny", as Cameron clutched his head in pain.

About a week later, the enormity of the task at hand hit them. Alex especially, because he was the one doing all the paperwork. It was like all the clichés you heard of people in class group exercises doing none of the work and leaving it all for one member, except magnified because the team weren't doing nothing, they were actively making Alex's job harder. As the days grew longer, or at least in his mind they did, and the pile of paper on the long desk grew larger and more pile-like, Alex continued working on the pitch to station executives. If the pitch was wrong they'd be chucked off the air, and although from what Alex could see this was not a bad thing, he still wanted to maintain control over the thing they had worked so hard for. Or he did anyway. He wrote another word on the document on his screen, then he heard a maniacal laugh from somewhere in the distance.

"What've you done now, Nigel?" he asked, not looking forward to hearing the answer.

"You'll see, you'll see", was the only reply. Alex settled back to his work, not anxious for the big reveal of exactly what Nigel had been doing. But he'd asked for this in a way, setting Nigel up as the editor.

Sometime later, Cameron entered with some coffee. Didn't even offer it. Just sat in the office and drank his own. Rude. Then he got up and with minimal speaking, left. The pitch was nearly done. It would take some kind of a miracle to get a commission.

Ravi laughed hysterically in the distance. "Nigel, that is brilliant".

"What even has he done?" Alex called from his office.

"Wait for the broadcast. All I'll say now is, Scam."

"Scam?"

"S.C.A.M. Special Corporation for Authentic Media."

"What." Not a question as such, more a general exclamation.

"You know – it's funny."

"Well, all right."

Alex carried on working. Then the pitch was finished and he submitted it. He strongly suspected they wouldn't get a commission, but you never know ...

Alex had worked non-stop since ten o'clock and was thoroughly frustrated, pissed off and absent-minded. He'd drafted the message many, many times. One draft of the message began with the line; "I tried to write this message

sitting down but then they wouldn't be able to call it stand-up AYOOOOOO". But then he'd quickly deleted it and replaced it with something else.

But, unconvinced, he changed it again, and again, and again.

Then, at about two o'clock, he started reconsidering the whole situation.

They'd get it wrong, obviously. Because they would; their luck hadn't been great up to now and every member of the team had been interviewed for some legitimate media job and been rejected in some form or other – Alex for not being in the right place at the right time, Cameron because he'd applied for a job in the dying print medium, Ravi because ... well, he's Ravi, and Nigel, who was actually successful but lost interest and stopped showing up. There was a time he hadn't even been getting out of bed, Cameron called it 'The Dark Time'.

In the end, Alex settled on backtracking out of the whole deal, but accidentally hit send too early; sending "To Whom It May Concern; I am afraid –"

Then he panicked properly and had to fix his mess, so he actually ended up requesting a show. He's still not quite sure how an adamant desire to quit the business manifested itself in an email that resorted to begging for a job.

The response email came through at a quarter to five. Some minor screaming ensued for the next hour, (well, okay, it never really stopped), and the team assembled in Alex's new office to discuss the filming strategy and how exactly they'd not be shitty at their jobs. Naturally, Nigel was late; doing God knows what. Eventually however the whole team was present and seated, and the meeting could begin.

"So," Alex began, and was promptly cut off by Ravi running out of the meeting. Stopping only quickly to look surprised at this sudden turn of events, he then continued.

"So. What exactly do you think the best bet would be in terms of filming? Should we film things as fast as we can and press on, stiff upper lip and hardened souls, preparing for the negative press? Or are we better to premeditate everything we do so it looks scripted and poorly acted, like it'll look anyways so it may as well be professional?" Ravi returned during the silence that followed.

"Film it". Nigel's sarcastic reply cut through the contemplative silence like a knife and with minimum response from the team other than a frying pan to the head and giggle from Ravi, the forum continued.

"I think we do one of each and follow up with whichever we muck up less". Cameron's reply seemed to make sense. Hedging bets, it was called.

So they did that for a week, alternating the style of their shooting; live at the time of broadcast (6pm on TV8) or filmed throughout the day and broadcast from tape.

And they settled back for the reviews which trickled in at a pace roughly equivalent to the speed of a bullet (Okay, maybe trickled wasn't the right adjective). And it seemed that, at least for the time being, you could kill your way into the film industry and run a TV station reasonably successfully.

Chapter 2: Professional Incompetence

Let's take a moment to actually consider the office the team occupied. Well, it was four rooms, joined with a hallway. The studio formed the center of the whole outfit, with Alex's office (which the team usually met up in), a meeting room and a kitchen and staff break room off of it. These were so arranged such that Alex's office had a window into the break room and meeting room – which also had windows into each other; connected in a sort of quadrangle. The décor was vaguely 21st century – modern but not excessively so. An interior designer would presumably have a field day telling anyone who would listen exactly why leather upholstery and steel and plastic fittings didn't look good. But the meeting room was perhaps at once the most stylish and consistent element of the whole office – this was because Nigel had decent taste; and this was where the team met with its clients (such as there are). The studio was basically a large empty room with heavy curtains. Easy to decorate, even though Ravi had messed it up and the curtains were a dark blue instead of black. There was a water cooler in the break room that Ravi used a lot. Too much, even. Having to go to the toilet in the middle of the 'you need to wash your hands' advert they'd done a while back was just ironic.

The team had assembled in Alex's office. It seemed every time they did that, bad things were just around the corner. This time felt exactly the same as all the other ones before it. So, Alex was a bit panicked. The team sat in the office in silence for about a minute until Cameron began to speak.

"Uh, guys, I got the camera yesterday."

"Yeah, what did you get?" Alex asked.

Cameron holds up a reasonably light and cheap looking handcam.

Alex looked disappointed. "Oh. Right. So. You want me to ensure this station runs properly using ... that."

“Yeah, that was what I thought, yes.”

“Did you think? That doesn’t seem evident”. Ravi and Nigel did the typical ‘ooh, you gonna take that’ thing.

Then they lapsed back into silence for the next five minutes, where Alex turned back to the pressing business of Facebook, and Cameron moved to look out the window over suburban Auckland (as the view of the centre city is remarkably expansive from a second floor window). Then a phone rang in the office and everyone tuned in to hear what the conversation was. But no-one answered the phone. After panicking and redialling the number, given that they had missed the call, Alex sat back and listened and the others sat back and waited for Alex to tell them what he’d sat back and heard.

He told them after hanging up the phone, “so that call there was a wealthy advertising executive asking us to film a commercial for him, or at least a promotional something to do with their product.”

“So what exactly is the corporate slogan for the station gonna be? What precisely do we actually do here?” Cameron was confused now.

“That’s a fairly good idea for a slogan, actually. And, stuff. We do TV-station things until someone else charts us to do something else. Because how else are we gonna get money. Oh that’s the other thing. The ad guy promised us something like late 5 figures for the ad. This could make or break us.”

“So we wait to meet him and do our thing and hope like buggery we don’t screw anything up?”

“That seems too much to ask, but I take your point.”

The businessman requested to meet them in their office. There was no given reason for this. But nevertheless, the team dressed up for the occasion with Alex and Cameron in semi-formal attire, Nigel not in attendance and Ravi, who came as a witch. The businessman entered and Ravi, in the most faux-formal way he knew how, said; “hi. Welcome to 8 News. Would sir like a tea? Or a coffee? Or a seat? Or a stand? Or a pen? Or a pen-holder? Or a complimentary cupcake? Or a cupcake with the proper cost? Or a –”

“What Sir would like,” said Sir in a posh and nasal voice, “is for you to go a really long way away, really quickly”.

“Um, okay.” Ravi left.

“Right,” said Sir. “Let’s start filming the report. I prepared the script in advance”. Cameron walked around to where Sir was sitting and collected the script; giving him a coffee that it very much seemed had appeared from nowhere as if by magic, and thanking his client at every possible opportunity, even if half of the manners were unwarranted.

The next day, they were ready to begin filming. Well, it was the first day of filming, and everyone was awake. Wide awake, the only kind of awake you get when you realise there’s a whole pile of things needing preparation that have not been prepared. Mostly because the team were not yet ready to film, and therefore running around like headless chickens; a startlingly accurate analogy given the way Ravi runs. Eventually everything was gathered into the company vehicle in a mildly acceptable fashion, and the team could relocate to the location. Or that was the theory, until the car broke down. And then the AA had to be called. But eventually they arrived to the location for filming. The camera setup took all of an hour, while Ravi stood around and made funny faces for no good reason. When finally the team were ready for filming, Ravi was handed a script and expected to memorise it in five minutes (big mistake). So what ended up happening was Alex read out the report line by line to Ravi, with the camera changing shot after each one. Apparently they make these things look good in editing.

It was, however, at this point that Alex’s job changed, as Sir had a request.

“Um, could you twats please just say the damn lines normally and without any of the ‘reading’ stuff?”

“I don’t actually know. Ravi’s not that good, but normally we can ingenuitate our way out of situations.”

“Ingenuitate?”

“Yes. I made it up. So anyway, we’ll fix it up in editing.”

“But I want just one take”.

“Errrrrrr ...”

“Eventually we managed it”. The team were back in the office and previewing the finished report on the monitor.

“After five botched takes, minor memory errors, a cross businessman and a mildly sprained wrist, yes.” Nigel’s sarcastic remark whilst processing the clip showed he was paying attention. He placed another cut in the timeline.

“Also we seem to have escaped with no real issues. I mean the clip actually looks quite good.”

“Play it back then,” Alex said, as Nigel pressed the play button. The clip played through tinny laptop speakers.

The price of water has risen substantially since 1996, but this pond has been left untouched by water companies; mostly due to pollution, and the invention of whiskey in the later year. The world’s water shortages happened largely to other places, so basically this pond is going nowhere soon.

“Yes, that’s good.” Sir was at the door. He wore a hat over his normal formal attire. Taking the hat off, he sat down.

“So. I think I should explain.” He pulled out a badge with the company insignia on it, and continued, “I’m from the company, and they wanted me to appraise you. So basically that’s useless, that report there.”

He handed over a sealed envelope and left. Alex opened up the envelope after the door was closed.

“He says that ... they show promise and with careful supervision and less workload between each member, the station could be reasonably successful –”

“Ha. Does he even know us?”

“Well, he also says that we should hire a new member of staff”.

Chapter 3: The Game, the Interview, and Administrative Systems

The interviewing process was well underway, and with Ravi at its helm that meant they were getting absolutely nowhere. Until a particular prospective employee walked in ...

The door clicked open. Ravi was adjusting some “paperwork” (crude inappropriate drawings done during the most recent interview). The woman walked purposefully into the room and settled a briefcase on the floor. At the slight click, Ravi looked up and saw a young woman of no more than 20 in a trouser suit standing near a briefcase. He didn’t know what to say.

“Uh, yes. Hi there. I hear the biscuits are extremely good this time of year”, he said gesturing to a packet open on the desk.

“Yes, I reckon they are. And at other times too,” she replied, taking one.

She sat down and Ravi shuffled into what he thought looked a mixture of a more confident and business-like position, and one such as to impress this girl, who for some inexplicable reason, he seemed to fancy. The look he received from the woman told him he looked constipated. She stuck out a hand, and Ravi manoeuvred himself so as to be able to shake it.

“Gemma. Gemma Chan”, she said.

“Okay,” pausing for breath, he began “so what do you think you can bring to the company if we employ you?”

“Well I think I’ll liven the place up a bit”.

Ravi said nothing, but was thinking *you sure will*. He noticed Alex in the doorway, and waved him in. The door opened, and Alex asked; “any good?”

“Very”, Ravi said. Alex was puzzled by this and left the room, allowing Ravi to carry on the interview.

“Okay, Question two. What would you say if someone in the workplace asked you out?”

“No. That one’s easy. Unless they’re really attractive.”

“So ... let’s say I ask you out?”

“No. Just no.”

“Ah.” Ravi sat in awkward silence, until a loud “THERE. THAT’S HOW YOU PLAY THE GAME OF CARDS”, was heard from the next room, at which point Ravi noticed Gemma nearly laughed. Her professional dignity kicked in and she didn’t but it was close. Ravi looked down and placed a tick on the paper, at which point Cameron burst through the door. He was out of breath.

“Alex said to ask if you’d finished the interview?”

“Yeah, we’re done.” Gemma stood up to leave, and Ravi stayed sitting, for reasons unknown (ahem). Alex entered the office again, just as Gemma was leaving, and the door swung shut behind her.

“So you finished the interview, nice.”

“We found our employee,” Ravi said, showing Alex the tick.

Alex sat in his office working out the administrative structure. It wasn’t the most entertaining job in the world to do, but someone had to do it and Ravi had already messed around with the files by drawing skulls on the employment contracts and other sundry defacements on the scripts. He stared at the files for a minute, then heard Ravi in the next room seemingly handling, with exactly the same intent as he had the file structure, a job interview. This very much needed stopping before it somehow escalated into costing the company time and money. So Alex left his office, and moved to enter the next room. Ravi saw him almost straight away.

“Any good?” Alex asked.

“Very,” Ravi’s reply unsettled Alex. So he promptly went as far away from the interview as was humanly possible; he went back to his office to sort out the filing system. Cameron and Nigel were playing a board game in the next room, presumably waiting for a project to export or something.

“THERE. THAT’S HOW YOU PLAY THE GAME OF CARDS”. Cameron’s cry distracted Alex from his work. Well, it gave him an excuse to stop doing work while he went to tell them to shut up. So he did that, and not short of five minutes later found himself back at his desk. He needed to set up the office – as their frenzied takeover of the station had left

little time for the petty annoyance that was file organisation. The filing cabinet was literally the whole office with small stacks of papers and random notes all over the room. And Post-it notes stuck to the underside of the TV. But Alex was confident that could wait for another day, and then after that it could wait then wait even more after that. So he went back into the interview room as the interview must have been nearly finished. He went to check, and Cameron had beaten him to it, by about a second.

“Alex asked if you had finished the interview”, Cameron said, out of breath. *I had not*, Alex thought, *but oh well*.

“Yeah we’re done”, Gemma said as she exited the room and the door swung shut behind her. Ravi stayed sitting and Alex said, “So you finished the interview, nice.”

“We found our employee,” Ravi said, showing Alex the tick on his piece of paper. “What position was she applying for again?”

“Manager.”

“Oh ...” you could feel the embarrassment emanating from Ravi as he covered his face. Alex didn’t want to know what had happened during the interview. But he sort of did.

Exporting is a filmmakers’ nightmare. Nigel had known that at the start, but still found himself sat in the edit suite, exporting. But Cameron was in the room too. So they played cards to pass the time. Last card, probably. Nigel had never had time for rules. He found that if there was a task that needed doing, you did that with almost all of your energy without regarding any attached rules. So he was more or less married to his work, and it didn’t help he’d once proposed to his computer using an SD card in a case to prove this point. Eventually menial card-game occupying conversation began.

“So what are you gonna do after this?” Cameron asked.

“Well after the project finishes exporting I’ll -”

“No. After *this*.” Cameron made an expansive gesture and acted as though Nigel should just understand.

“Well true, I mean this isn’t going to last forever is it? I personally collect crash mats ... always good to have something to fall back on.” Nigel pondered.

“Whatever gave you that idea? The fake shitty news report we did the other day? The fact we took over this station using frying pans to kill people?” Cameron’s sarcasm had melted walls in the past.

“I don’t know why you say kill, they aren’t actually dead. If they were, we wouldn’t be here, would we?”

“True. Fact is after we took it over, I didn’t really care what happened to them. Just sort of stopped caring.”

“Well they all ended up in the intensive care unit of a hospital. So someday they’ll all be back. And then we’ll be sent packing I suppose...” Nigel was lost in thought and Cameron had to snap his fingers to bring Nigel’s focus back to the game. Actually he was watching Ravi through the window looking into Alex’s office which had a window looking into the interview room. Alex had just gotten up to check on said interview. From what Nigel could see, Ravi was interviewing an Asian girl. Well, making an idiot of himself. This’d be fun to watch. Alex returned to his seat and Nigel returned to the game. Unfortunately, Cameron had just won it.

“THERE. THAT’S HOW YOU PLAY THE GAME OF CARDS.” Cameron’s yell was deafening. Alex looked up, and came in to tell them to shut up. Then he said “what do you guys think Ravi is trying to do?”

“Who, you mean. Who do you think Ravi is trying to do? And I think it’s obvious. That girl, whatever her name is...”

Nigel’s quick wit had never failed him before and it wasn’t about to.

“You know, she does look nice ...” Cameron began.

“Please don’t. Or if you do at least be orderly and civilised about it.”

“Orderly and Civilised. Have you forgotten who you’re talking to?”

Alex left and returned to his office and at the exact second he did this, Cameron sprung up and ran into the interview room.

“Alex asked if you had finished the interview”, Cameron said, out of breath. Alex and Nigel followed shortly after, Alex looking puzzled at Cameron’s question.

“Yeah we’re done”, Gemma said as she exited the room and the door swung shut behind her. Ravi stayed sitting and Alex said, “So you finished the interview, nice.”

“We found our employee,” Ravi said, showing Alex the tick on his piece of paper. “What position was she applying for again?”

“Manager.”

“Oh ...”

You could feel the embarrassment emanating from Ravi as he covered his face. Alex didn’t want to know what had

happened during the interview. But he sort of did. By this point, she had well and truly left the room, so Ravi and Cameron both made eye contact and with complete and perfect unison yelled “dibs”.

Chapter 4: All On His Own

Cameron looked left and right in the crowded shopping square. He could see people literally everywhere around him and knew what he had to do. He saw what he was looking for, and bundling the expensive production equipment against his body, ran across the street to where he needed to go. He didn’t even bother a setup he just straight out asked the question, expecting an instant response;

“Can I have a two-scoop ice-cream, please?”

Alex sat in the office, across a table from Gemma. She had been at the office for the first time the day before, so was acquainted and able to begin her work. Also she’d been properly introduced to Cameron. Alex pulled out a phone and dialled Cameron’s number.

Cameron’s phone rang as he sat on a park bench eating his ice-cream, watching people walk past. He answered it.

“What, I’m working,” he moaned.

“How the gods have smiled upon me, an employee who works,” Alex’s sarcasm had split walls in the past. “Anyway, stop whatever it is you think you’re doing, and listen to me. You need to film a report in the afternoon, and it needs to be edited by this evening, so not only will you be really pressured today, but Nigel and Gemma will be regularly checking in with you to monitor your progress.”

“I don’t need monitoring, I can do fine on my own”.

“What, so when you accidentally put the red wire in the blue plug and shorted a camera costing us six days of time and two thousand dollars, that was coping, was it?”

“I’m older now, I can do this, I promise.”

“Okay, fine. But you’ll need a hell of a legal team if you mess this up. For one thing they’ll have to be able to prove I didn’t have reason to string you from the power lines by your testicles.”

“Can I go now?”

“Sure. Don’t mess up.”

Alex hung up the phone. Gemma sat back, smiling.

“He’ll mess up”.

“Quick, touch some wood or something before you jinx it”. They laughed for a minute and got back to work.

“So how does this outfit work?”

“You’ve heard most of it already – guy gets task, guy fucks up task, I solve problem, guy gets pan-fried. Rinse and repeat.”

“Oh ... and I think the guy who interviewed me tried to ask me out three times in the interview.”

“Really?” the horror was evident in Alex’s expression, “oh god.”

Alex’s phone rang and he answered it.

“You know what I said about not messing up?” Cameron’s voice said, “well, turns out I made that promise too early.”

“What have you done?”

“Put the red wire in the blue socket and shorted the camera, costing us two thousand dollars and six days of time.”

“Cameron, for the absolute love of f –”

Cameron hung up before Alex could finish.

“So, he broke the camera”.

Gemma’s exasperated facepalm told Alex everything he needed to know. “I mean, how can you expect this to be successful if you get staff as crap as that?”

“I don’t. It’ll fall flat on its face at some point in the next year or so. But I figure we may as well enjoy it while we can, because are we ever going to be able to do this again?”

“True, true. But you should get them trained or something. Improve competence in some way”.

Cameron had paced around the square ten times, trailing bits of broken camera as he did this. He couldn’t easily fix the problem, not properly anyway. But he needed the footage. He walked past a man who looked like he’d come out worse off from a front-end collision with a hammer, and asked to borrow his phone. The man was a tourist, and this of course was misunderstood, costing Cameron ten minutes as he took the tourist’s photo in front of one of the shops.

Nigel was assigned to check up on Cameron every hour. He had taken this responsibility seriously, and Facebooked for the last two. When he finally remembered there was something he had meant to do, he sprung up from his chair and knocked it over causing a large crash and Alex to knock on the door asking if everything was okay.

He dialled the number and Cameron picked up.

"What."

"Have you finished shooting yet?"

"No."

"Okay. Why not?"

"Well, I would be able to if you weren't pestering me about not being done shooting so how about you do us all a favour and go away to let me do my job, while you do yours and then maybe we'll be able to sit around an edited product at some –"

"Okay, geez fine. I'll leave you to it." Nigel hung up, slightly baffled.

Cameron put down the phone from Nigel. No sooner had he done this than it rang again. It was Ravi this time.

"Hey, man. Just telling you to remember to get the establishing shot for the report. Without it, Alex's not gonna like it"

"I literally would be doing that right now, if you were not on the phone."

"Okay, sweet. Also there's a thing regarding Gem-"

Cameron hung up before Ravi could finish speaking. Then he took the Establishing shot for the report, realised something and called the studio. Gemma answered.

"Hi. Uh, I broke the camera. Any advice on what I should do?"

"Well, what have you done?"

"Okay, in chronological order; broken our camera, stolen a tourist's phone and recorded the thing I need on that, then got stuck when realising I can't retrieve it."

"Okay. Here's what you do. You pay attention to every word I say." Gemma then enumerated how to solve the problem and hung up.

"Gaffer tape and string?!" Alex was furious.

"But he needed to fix the camera to shoot the material!" Gemma fired back.

"So he can do that one report, but what about the future?"

"Obviously we get a new camera for that, I am not stupid."

"Okay, fine. This one's on you. Let's see how good you are."

Alex then left the room.

Gemma looked at the wall for about a minute, then had an idea. She called Cameron back.

"I'm on my way down. I've had an idea. Be there in five."

Gemma arrived at the shopping square about ten minutes later. Cameron was standing off to one side, tapping his watch.

"Five minutes?"

"You aren't in a position to complain. So shut up and listen. We need the report for today and the one for next week. Except that the one for next week is done, and the one for today is not. So switch them, and who would notice?"

"Not Ravi, that's for sure."

"He wouldn't notice if his head was screwed on backwards. Anyway, then we can do the filming for this report later, once we replace the camera."

"Are you off now?" Gemma was at equal measure curious and concerned. Alex's expression passed through confusion and then cleared itself up. "Oh, yeah, sure. Sort of have to ... uh ..." Then he dashed out of the office.

The machines and wires made odd beeping noises, and a heart-rate monitor sped up slightly as Alex stepped in.

"Dad?"

"Hello?" The man wasn't looking around. He also wasn't, in the grand scheme of things, that old. He was, though, in the grand scheme of things, sick.

"Hi, Dad. We did it. I have a TV station now."

"That was always your dream."

"Be careful what you wish for." Alex's tone made his father look around in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's like a smartass genie that deliberately misinterprets what you actually want. Anyway ..."

"Is it any good?"

The silence encompassed the room, and Alex could swear even the machines had stopped (they hadn't).

"You know, when I met your mother she had her little cousin in a supermarket. So she said hi, and I asked if the kid was hers. She panicked and said no, and that he'd come free with two bottles of wine. Which, it turns out, was sort of true."

The conversation went on like this for about ten minutes, then Alex said goodbye and left. He had a station to run.

Back in the office, Gemma looked at the broken camera and couldn't really see anything wrong with it. She tapped it gently twice then turned it on. It turned on. Not broken. Stupid Cameron.

Chapter 5: The Secret Life of an Editor

Nigel sat in the edit suite, all on his own. He liked it that way. There was less fuss. Just you and the computer. The downside was, of course, that if he messed up, he was at fault, and could not blame it on anyone else. The report Cameron had finished filming on three different devices required a reasonable amount of editing, and Nigel was dismayed to find out that it also required frequent rendering. Because frequent rendering means wasted time. And wasted time means muck around.

Five hours later, and no work was done. Well, work had been done, and rendering had been done, but no actual editing had taken place. Alex walked in to see Nigel with his head completely submerged in a laptop case.

"Just one moment, I'll be right --- AAAAAAAAH". There was an electric zap sound and Nigel threw the laptop case off of his head where it crashed in to the floor.

"What even --"

"D-don't ask."

Alex figured Nigel was doing something shocking (if you'll pardon the pun). As often was the case with Nigel, he'd find this out later, as part of some grand scheme of things. So Alex left him to it.

What Nigel had designed was a teleprompter.

And he wasn't gonna stop there, after all, there was nothing else to do.

We shift back to the wedding.

Nigel totally lost the crowd after he tried to start speaking, and it took him five minutes and throwing a fork at Ravi to calm them down. The latter mostly because Ravi kept restarting the group's laughter. Nigel could see how Ravi would make a good actor. He certainly had style. Nigel's speech was on a teleprompter of his own devising that he'd got to work, displaying at the back of the room.

Back to the present ...

At around half past ten, a girl walked in and Nigel thought he was imagining things.

"Uh. Hi." Nigel clammed up, which is saying something given his normal mannerisms.

"Yeah, I'm Julie. We met at school, remember?"

"Of course, yes, um, so ... do you want a seat or something? Food?"

"No, I'm fine, just working here for the day."

Nigel went contemplative, and Julie leaned inwards, fully attentive.

"Why would you even do relationships when you can just ... not?"

"What if you want the high?"

"Chocolate."

"Companion?"

"Cat."

"Cuddles?"

"Cat"

"Anxious and wants to know where you've been?"

"Cat."

"Sexual partner?"

"Ca --" he paused after seeing the shocked look on Julie's face, but rallied excellently and continued; "-- n you please repeat the question?" Nigel had switched to autopilot, and went back there after his temporary hiccup.

"Sexual partner?"

Back on auto-pilot, Nigel raised his right hand, and immediately wished he hadn't. Silence engulfed the room.

"Anyway, I'm Nigel," said Nigel. He held out his hand.

"Yeah, I know, we met before. And I won't shake your hand, because I know where it's been."

“Oh.”

Nigel withdrew the hand, then his eyes lit up.

"Hey, d'ya want to help me do a thing?"

Teleprompter Version 1 – Nigel twiddled a wire then pressed the spacebar on his teleprompter unit’s case. A typing bar came up, and he entered the relevant data. Pressing the spacebar again, he heard a faint, robotic “Make Coffee” sound. Then he changed the text it spat out, and pressed the bar again. This, however, was where his plan came unstuck. As instead of repeating this new text like it had been programmed to, the machine warbled “makecoffeemakecoffeemakecoffeemakecoffeemakecoffeemakecoffeemakecoffeemakecoffee” and Nigel had to electrocute himself by unplugging the main wire in the device to turn it off. Result – failure. Alex heard a faint noise from the edit suite, and walked down the hall to investigate it, but Nigel heard footsteps getting louder down the hall, so collected his laptop and dived out the window, meaning Ravi arrived into the room to see a flapping curtain. Then he heard a smash and Nigel yell “Fuck”, and looked down.

"No fair, man," was his only reply. Boredom = 1, Nigel = 0.

"Well, close," Julie was oddly supportive. Later on, that might have bothered Nigel.

Not long after this and the pair had returned to the edit suite. There was a second component to the report Nigel was editing that required cutting together so he did that, stopping to add in an explosion sound effect midway through. Then he changed the script to the lead-in piece of the report from “And I’m Ravi Sharma, for 8 News” to “And I’m a huge twat, for 8 news”. Ravi was reading it and he wouldn’t question the script change. Then he played it all back, just to see how the recently re-edited bit sounded. And the explosion played back way louder than expected, causing Cameron to run to the studio, thinking someone had ... Nigel was unsure. Boredom = 1, Nigel = 1. Nigel carried on mucking around, and set several further pranks in motion.

Then the render had finished, so Nigel compiled all the various bits and pieces he had done together into a somewhat cohesive product and hoped it would be good enough.

The time was 3:30, they were airing at 6:00. All was well.

But what if the prompter was done?

Nigel rushed around trying to get the various pieces of his (currently smashed) machine back together and working. He could do it. He could. He could.

He couldn't. 5:30 and he was nowhere.

The report was due to be aired in 30 minutes.

Julie and Nigel had almost finished, except that the thing wouldn't work, and they hadn't finished the broadcast.

"Nigel ..." Julie started.

“Start every sentence you address to me with ‘Dear Future Husband’; like that Meghan Trainor song, thank you very much.”

Julie laughed, and Nigel wasn't sure how this made him feel.

"So, we should get help with this, right?"

First port of call was Gemma and (as Nigel expected) no amount of begging could get her to change the schedule. Then he physically manipulated the files himself as a last-ditch effort. But it was no use. He was running out of time. So he came up with a plan. And set it in motion.

The record went as planned, and there were no immediate issues with any of the material that was broadcast. No immediate issues. There were, however, issues long after the recording.

Sitting in Alex's office, the team watched a playback of the report on the monitor above his desk.

"I want you guys to guess what problems I have with this," Alex said.

The report opens with a pan around a busy shopping square, to Cameron seated on a bench. "It turns out, the radiation that phones give off is harmful and dangerous-" His phone rings, and Cameron stops speaking, picks it up and as if to prove a point to the recording camera nearby, says; "Cameron is not here right now. Please leave a message after the beep." He pauses for several seconds and then yells "I SAID 'BEEP'", throwing his phone at the end of this exchange. He then carries on presenting a report, which is mostly unheard as repeated explosion sounds fill the audio track.

Nigel looks up suddenly, shocked, and somewhat proud. Alex glares at him with an intensity that could etch glass. *Then the report cuts back to the studio, which Ravi is sitting. "So if you want more on that story, subscribe to our website – no-one.cares.tv8.co.nz – and we'll give you more details. But for now, I'm a huge twat for 8 news.*

The report finishes.

"So," Alex says calmly (sort of), "Who did that?"

Nigel raises his hand sheepishly.

“Well, we need to have a ... little talk. Go and get Gemma, I need her to do something for me”.

Nigel goes to get Gemma, and Alex says to her; “check your emails and see if anyone’s complained.

Gemma leaves to do this with a smirk.

“So, shall we go to the meeting room?”

Julie smiled as she looked through the door.

Chapter 6: The Job, the Date, and Damage Control

When you start an occupation, you always look over your shoulder. Because you’re nervous, because you’re being observed, because you actually like it. But then you settle in to the rhythm, and literally killing people to get to where you got to isn’t such a big thing anymore. Or it is a big thing, but it’s a big thing you’re prepared to not think about just now, because you have bigger fish to fry, because you’re busy doing the job you literally killed people to get. You become consumed by the job, and then the job becomes your life; and your family become people you know, and the people you know become your family. Then you look back and realise what’s happened but you just don’t care anymore. Because you like it the way it is. Because you’re prepared to accept that. And then you find yourself sat in a room doing the job and the people you “killed” start to return ... That’s when the job that had become so tedious in its execution reminds you why you “killed” people to get it. That’s when shit gets interesting ...

Nigel and Alex sat in the meeting room. The table was long and they sat at either ends. Alex steepled his hands and leant over the table slightly. Business-like. Professional. The two were wearing formal attire. After all, this was a serious occasion. Alex had every confidence that Ravi would have come dressed as a witch again.

“Mr Singh. Please state your full name for the record.” Nigel couldn’t hear so Alex had to shout down the table.

“Nigel Singh. Why do I even have to do this?”

“You let a piece of footage highlighting our incompetence go to air and that isn’t good, although we aren’t – I concede – the most competent bunch, having that fact broadcast is not wise. So your job is ... I dunno. I’m just not sure you have one.”

Gemma burst in, panting slightly.

“Uh, I’m sorry, but I had to interrupt. Look at the email,” she passed it over. Alex read it then looked up. Cameron and Ravi were at the door.

Cameron and Ravi were in Alex’s office in his absence, spinning around on the chairs.

“So, who has dibs over Gemma?”

“Well, no-one as yet.”

“So what’s next?”

Gemma walks into the room to get a file from one of the filing cabinets. Scowling at Ravi as she leaves.

“Counting to ten, obviously.”

“Uh boys, come through here for a minute. I just received a real odd email.”

They go to have a look at the email

we’re coming to reclaim our station.

Gemma ran out of the room and into the meeting room. The boys followed afterwards.

“Uh, I’m sorry, but I had to interrupt. Look at the email,” Gemma passed it over to Alex. Alex read it then looked up. Cameron and Ravi were at the door.

Gemma sat in her office, on the computer, restructuring some files. She had found a small file structure on the company hard drive where Ravi had just made files inside files with no actual content. Then her email beeped and she opened it. Then she made a snap decision and collected the rest of the team in the meeting room.

Five people with varying issues, all in one room. What could go wrong?

There had been another email, that’s what. And that could go pretty badly wrong.

The meeting room had a long table in it, and the team sat around this table in such a way that Cameron and Ravi were seated together, opposite Gemma who had her laptop out and headphones on so was not really paying attention to them, despite the fact that Ravi had used the word “Gemma” very loudly at least twice and was doing his damndest to be noticeable to her by pointing at her every time her name came up in discussion. Either she hadn’t noticed or was ignoring the stupidity. Ravi was unsure either way.

He turned to Cameron.

“We still need to count to ten.”

“Count to ten? What is this?”

Nigel interrupted the meeting he was having with Alex to stare at Ravi for a prolonged and hugely uncomfortable length of time. Then he turned back around.

“So Nigel, you understand that I cannot let that footage air without some form of punishment.”

“Well you could always get Gemma to give me a smack. That’d work,” he said sarcastically.

“No. I already have two of the three idiots that work here vying unsuccessfully for her affections. I don’t need a third.” Alex’s flat and emotionless expression told Nigel he wouldn’t get the expected reaction.

“But seriously how do you intend to ‘punish’ me?”

“I have no idea. But I do think you need some time away from the station. That much I am certain of.”

“If it helps, I did buy a farm.”

“Yes, maybe go there, sort out your life, figure out you’re better than this, leave us and never come back.”

“I get the feeling you want me to leave.”

“SAVE YOURSELF. LEAVE WHILE YOU STILL CAN OR YOU NEEEEEEEEVER WILLLLLLL.” Alex dramatically grabbed Nigel’s arm as he said this in a highly exaggerated way. This remark was immediately followed by a loud “ONE-TWO-THREE-FOUR-FIVE-SIX-SEVEN-EIGHT-NINE-TEN-DAMMIT” from Cameron and Ravi at the same time, who had stood up for some reason. They then promptly sat back down looking disappointed. This elicited a reaction from Gemma, who removed her headphones and tutted at the boys.

“Guys, I don’t know if you realise but for some odd and unnamed reason I am actually trying to save this station from whoever sent the threatening email.”

“To be fair,” intercut Alex, “it could have been anyone, and it could be a legit warning. We are absolutely horrible at our jobs.”

“Sure, but I wanna be certain. It could be the executives trying to warn us.”

“Well, true,” said Cameron. Ravi and him had stood up again, and were comparing heights. Gemma decided she didn’t want to know.

“What if those execs did decide to come back? That’d be fun.”

“Would it though? Does having to fight for our jobs in a company we took over by force sound fun to you?”

“Yes, it does.” Ravi’s excited tone worried Gemma. So did the fact that the two boys, who were height-identical, sat down in a huff, both yelling “Damn”.

But there was no further time for wondering what exact drug the boys were on, because a postman came through the door and placed an envelope on the desk and left.

The white envelope sat in the middle of the interview room table. Gemma was the one brave enough to open it. She read the contents, then leaned across to Ravi and said, “We need to talk”.

Cameron looked slightly surprised at this turn of events, and so did Ravi. But not as surprised as Alex, when he picked up the newspaper on the table and read something then gave a cry of shock.

“What?” Gemma asked, also slightly shell-shocked.

“Nigel’s ... in the obituaries ... how?” He looked across at Nigel, who was about to reply in some way, but was never really given the chance.

Then the surprise-meter burst as the meeting room door was flung open and in the harsh contrast between the bright light in the doorway and the dimmer light in the room, a shadow stood in the doorway, holding a frying pan. Nigel stood up to greet him, but the silhouette wasn’t impressed, instead raising the pan and smacking Nigel with it five times.

“This station is ours, and we’ll take it back.” The executive’s voice was loud in the silence of the room.

Chapter 7: The Executive

TWO WEEKS LATER

The team crashed through the door. Not the stylish crash that you get in spy films. But an awkward tumble that ultimately meant a three-person pile up and the risk of a sexual harassment suit. They had been listening at the door, when it swung abruptly inwards, pulling them all with it, to a meeting between Alex and the executives (complete with bandages still around their heads) negotiating exactly what would be done about the running of the station – or lack of. Alex was annoyed, more annoyed than the team had ever seen him, and the executives were alternately patronising and condescending. So it wasn’t going well. And Alex didn’t appreciate the sudden arrivals. Gemma brushed herself off, getting up off the floor first. Cameron was slower, as he appeared to have gotten an elbow in the eye, and Ravi had a Cameron stuck on top of him, so was off the floor last. The meeting, by this point, had completely grinded (not a pun, thank you very much, the three-person-pile-up had broken apart long ago) to a

halt; the exec and Alex were waiting for the team to explain itself.

No explanations came, but Gemma looked up at the executive, turned a weird shade of green and red (at the same time, like an under-ripe capsicum), then ran from the room, and could be heard doing deep breathing in the hallway outside. Ravi just left, without even bothering to try and explain, and ended up tripping over the doormat. Cameron just looked at the two people seated, and said “Well ... this is awkward.”

“So, in order,” Alex said to the executive, with a trace of disapproval, “the token female character, the boy who appears to ‘like’ her, and my assistant, who really isn’t any good at his job. There is one other member of the team, which is in hospital due to an unfortunate encounter with a frying pan. So, we’re pretty much a clichéd sitcom.”

“See, the thing is,” the executive said, stopping to rub his head that was presumably itchy because of the bandages, “you need us. But you don’t want us”.

“I DOOOOOO” yelled Gemma – she was still outside. This resulted in a mild look of confusion from the executive.

“Why is that?” he replied to Gemma. But Cameron had already understood. His hypothesis was further proven to be true, when Ravi walked back into the office and asked Cameron for a word in the corridor.

“What is it?” Cameron asked. He had a fair idea, he just wanted to be sure.

“Damn,” was Ravi’s only reply.

Nigel’s hospital bed had been used for many things over the past few weeks. For one thing, it had a Nigel in it. Right now, Gemma was also perched on a table nearby. Or she was until the executive walked in, then she hyperventilated and fell off.

“Yeah, yeah ... so ... um,” she said, from on the floor, “the life support doesn’t seem like it’s working so I turned it off then back on again just to check.”

“So, ‘Gemma Chan – competent and professional’ was what the personnel file I was given said,” the exec mused dryly, before continuing “And yet I appear to have walked into an episode of Miranda.”

Gemma picked herself up and squared off with the exec, who was by now standing at the door. He had it half-open, and was not going to stay long for a chat.

“It isn’t my fault that I for some odd and unexplainable reason –”

“Just don’t”. The executive left, the door swinging shut behind him.

The executive had left a DVD on the table, and while Gemma recovered from the embarrassment of that last exchange, she walked over to pick it up.

It was marked “Reports Archive.”

Gemma sat down near Nigel’s bed and opened the DVD player, placing the disc inside. It began to play;

There is an opening shot of a glass door as Cameron walks towards the camera. Cameron doesn’t know the glass door is closed, and carries on walking, crashing straight into it. He staggers back, pulls the handles and the door slides open.

“Glass doors are an item of enormous personal risk to human society”, he says, holding up a piece of card with the words “An 8 News Public Service Announcement scrawled in nearly illegible writing on it.

“Honestly, the number of messages we’ll receive saying things like ‘See you next Fall’, or ‘Have a nice trip?’ is simply astronomical.” He pauses for a second. “Anyway, back to the point of this thing ...”

Gemma stops the recording, because she hasn’t even been watching it, hiding her head in shame. She looks across at Nigel, who had been asleep when she entered. He was still sound asleep, and that’s all that mattered. If he’d seen that report, she’d never hear the end of it. She continued the recording, just out of curiosity.

Ravi was mucking around with the camera. It was steadily on a tripod in the 8 News studio; or this could be inferred from the fact that it was steady footage, and was indeed in the 8 News studio.

“Hello, Shameless Claims,” Ravi started with a voice you only hear from humans when they’re high on Helium but pretending not to be, “I tried to clean the wax out of my ears using a match stick wrapped in sandpaper ... and now my head’s on fire. Can you help me?”

The recording jumps to a shot of the main lounge. Nigel presses a button on a remote and then a machine, presumably an early prototype of his teleprompter warbles ‘makecoffee makecoffee makecoffee makecoffee makecoffee makecoffee makecoffee makecoffee makecoffee makecoffee’. Then Nigel stops the device and the recording. It jumps to a presumably illicit recording of Alex and the exec. The exec starts, “Here are the Special Corporation for Authentic Media –”

Alex cuts him off “even our organisation is called SCAM”.

Then Nigel spoke, and Gemma stopped the recording out of shock.

“I’ve always liked that it was called SCAM”.

A week later, and with Nigel out of hospital recovering from his frying-pan based head wounds, the team met up in the meeting room to discuss progress.

"It looks as though it's only a matter of time before they take the station from us," Alex opened up the proceedings.

"So then we need to be actually professional this time," Cameron continued.

"Yes, we do. But could we keep that executive guy – what even is his name – around?" Gemma agreed, and looked over her shoulder in a way that can only be equated to the way a moth looks towards a flame.

"We reached an arrangement. He'll check up on us every week or so for the next month. Then he'll decide whether or not we can run this station or not." Alex failed to notice Gemma's odd behaviour.

"We are perfectly capable of running this station ourselves". Cameron.

"What so when you got bored that time and made your computer propose to you using an SD card highlights your professionalism, does it?" Gemma.

"At least I didn't go through a whole report acting like I'd been bitten by a feral dog". Cameron.

"Okay okay, guys calm down. We're all useless. So we probably need all the help we can get". Alex tried to stop the argument and mediate. He didn't need to.

"So then Steve should stay?" Gemma perked up.

"Who even is Steve?" Alex was confused.

"The exec," Gemma replied.

"Oh. And how'd you know his name."

"Urhhmm ..."

"Anyway, guys, we can do this. We just need to stop mucking around and take this job seriously," Cameron finished the discussion.

Ravi walked into the meeting room wearing a full-blown clown outfit.

"We appear to have a reasonable way to go."

Chapter 8: Chemically Enhanced

Steve had left them alone for just over a week. Just enough time for things to start going horribly wrong ...

Cameron always arrived at work nice and early. He tended to deal with the important paperwork that had accumulated overnight before Alex arrived an hour later. Because when Alex arrived, there was no further time for clearing the backlog of paperwork, because of the general incompetence of everyone else. Basically Cameron's job finished at half past eight in the morning and the rest of the day was devoted to ensuring the station didn't go completely to hell in a handcart. That was Alex's job description, and thus far between the two of them they had just about managed it. But today was different, Cameron could tell.

Mostly because he felt like he was being watched. As he cycled into the office and locked his bike to a metal drainpipe on the driveway, he could feel the eyes on the back of his neck. Then he checked the post-box, because that was what he did when he arrived every morning. He had become so adept at this particular task he could do it without looking. He felt around in the box and was about 80% sure there was nothing, and due to the nature of the business they ran, that meant there was nothing. The letterbox was either deathly empty or exceedingly full. He felt around and felt nothing. But then he felt some more, and there was indeed a package present.

Grabbing the package, he was startled to find a clear plastic pocket filled with a white powder. He would keep this a secret. It would not affect the business. It could not affect the business.

Nigel arrived to work an hour later. Cameron couldn't keep his secret any longer, so he told him.

"What do you think I should do?"

"My dad always said you should fight fire with fire."

"He was a fireman, right?"

"Yeah, but then he got fired."

"Come on dude, be serious."

"Well," said Nigel after consideration, "I have many Chemistry jokes, but they won't get a good reaction".

And they laughed it off. In the distance, they heard a toilet flush and Ravi go "dammit, that's another phone."

Then Gemma told them about the threatening emails. And they changed their mind-set a bit. Maybe it would be worthwhile to tell the others.

The team assembled in the meeting room on the urgent insistence of Gemma.

She looked worried. Nigel was unsettled by this. Gemma had been reasonably dependable before now.

"So, guys ..." Gemma began, her voice somewhat weak.

"The death threats?" Nigel finished. Had Gemma been less stressed, she might have questioned how he knew that. But she didn't and instead she just nodded.

"Do you know what they might be about? Have you been ordering ... ahem ... stuff online again?"

"No," Nigel looked down, ashamed.

"So what are we gonna do?" Ravi asked.

"Typical. Every village has one idiot, but I've lucked out and got three. This is what's going to happen. Alex will go around the city with the package and the info we have about the death threats to try and track it back to its source. If we can't do that by evening then we'll set up an evening broadcast and try to clear this mess up before anyone actually dies." Gemma had laid out the plan. All that remained was to fulfil it.

So Ravi and Cameron set up the studio, well, Cameron set up the studio while Ravi made silly faces at himself in the mirror in one of the dressing rooms. And Alex toured a car around the main square of the city and embarrassed himself and the station in front of well-meaning and non-murderous individuals.

Alex returned with this news thinking all was lost, but Gemma looked at the paper for a prolonged period of time and became convinced the whole thing was a weird kind of code. So Alex trawled the streets again, figuring it out. Just before six o'clock, Alex returned to the station with no further information. This time, however, there was a white envelope addressed specifically to Cameron.

Specificity was always more threatening and dangerous than generalness.

This remained the case with death threats. Cameron was white as a sheet, which is an oddly appropriate simile as he was hiding in the linen cupboard.

Cameron hadn't seen Nigel recently. But Ravi was being 'helpful' again, so that could explain the absence.

Ravi had been being 'helpful' all day, racing around as if he was high on something. Cameron opened the linen cupboard door and saw the white package on the floor, but this time, unlike the first time he had seen it, it was empty. It was six o'clock. Time for humiliation on national TV. And it was Ravi's go at new reading too ... that could not have come at a worse time.

Ravi sat down at the news desk, then promptly stood back up again. He was still acting weird.

Then the cameras were rolling and Ravi was speaking, fast.

"Hello and welcome to an unscheduled broadcast of 8 News. Just to let the relevant people know that we received an unmarked white package –"

"Stop, Ravi." Alex's voice was firm. And Ravi acted like a kid and took offense to that – nearly crying.

"You never let me do anything on my own ..."

Then he seemed to flick a switch, as Cameron said "look what happened the last time you were left on your own," holding up the white plastic pocket. For some reason, Ravi found this HILARIOUS.

He doubled over and legitimately could not control himself enough to continue. Then, from that position he leant forward and fell asleep.

Cameron opened the white plastic pocket and sniffed.

"Yes, that's definitely sugar."

Nigel had arrived by this time, and was standing off to one side smirking.

"Care to explain," Cameron was mock-cross.

"Well, okay, fine. I decided to have a bit of fun with you guys."

"You've done this before, haven't you?"

"Yeah, remember when I was editing that report that required heaps of rendering?"

"You put your name in the obituaries for something fun to do, didn't you?"

"Pretty much. That's what always happens when I get bored".

By this point the three telephone lines the station had were busy with callers, and Alex was sure further investigations would ensue over the next few weeks.

Nigel looked at his phone, saw who was calling. He decided he wouldn't tell the others the second part of the story. They'd find out soon enough.

Alex's dad was waiting for his son to come in from work. Well, into the hospital, and the number of times he hadn't showed up in the last month ... but he was busy, and would show up eventually.

When Alex did arrive, the older man was tripping on pain meds, so Alex knew straight away that this conversation would be equally interesting and frustrating.

"It's windy outside, Dad".

"Is it Wednesday?"

“No, it’s definitely Thursday.”

“I’m thirsty too, let’s get a drink.” Then the man tried to get up from his bed and Alex gently pushed him back onto the mattress. “What have you been doing?”

Alex carefully considered the answer, “well we had a station, which we couldn’t really manage – then we lost it, then we got it back and now we’ve been receiving anonymous death threats because someone thought we had drugs but we don’t. You?”

“You could’ve said busy. I’ve been stuck here against my will.”

“Dad, that’s kind of irrelevant, they think it’s best for you to be here.”

“Yeah ...” he was dejected but accepting. “Look, you better get back ...”

A team of five all with issues and secrets. The best way forward? Put it all in a psychiatrist’s office and stand back.

Chapter 9: The Psychiatrist, the Body and All Other Issues

The whole team was sat in the reception of a psychiatrist. Gemma was trying to get as close to Steve (the Executive, as Alex still called him) as possible, while Cameron and Ravi were both trying to get as close to Gemma as they could. Essentially, Alex was standing off to one side watching the rest of the outfit huddle together uncomfortably on a two-seater couch. Steve looked thoroughly perplexed and worried by this, as he had not signed up to be ambushed by two guys and a girl. Well, he had, but only unofficially.

Alex nodded to the receptionist, who failed to acknowledge his presence in the slightest.

Alex then said “Hello?” Instead of a reply from the receptionist as he had thought, a computer in the far right corner of the room made a beeping noise and started whirring, as if this noise had woken it up.

“Please state the nature of your ailment.” The voice was robotic. Then again, it had come from a computer. So this was justified.

“We need to see the psychiatrist”, Alex said loudly and clearly, like he was talking to a five year old. Third time lucky.

“Sending request”. The machine made a guttural sound then a disc flew out of a slot and smacked Ravi on the head.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry,” one of the receptionists at the office had come out from behind her desk, seeing that the automated system was clearly failing to efficiently do its job. This must have happened a lot.

After Ravi had been given a bag of ice and the receptionist had called for the psychiatrist, saying they had arrived, the team found themselves seated in a large and spacious office.

“Wow,” Ravi was awestruck at the size of the room.

“Wow,” Nigel began, and Alex thought it was for the same reason, but then he continued, “That machine was cool”.

The psychiatrist was sat at a large desk in the centre of the room. He had made no movement at all to greet the team as they had entered, and continued to show little or no interest in them as they sat down.

“So,” he said at last, “in 200 words or less, can one of you please explain the circumstances for your visit”.

The executive volunteered himself, and began to tell the story.

The team were on the verge of turning 8 News into a fiasco. The executive had realised this long before he had been assigned to its supervision, but it never failed to amaze him how close to the line of total collapse the outfit was.

This was particularly obvious on this day, a Thursday, just before six o’clock, when the police knocked on the door.

They asked after a “Cameron” who had been reported by a neighbour as having some drugs. Cameron was dragged out in front of the cops by the ear, and forced to explain himself.

It had been some kind of misunderstanding.

Steve paused in his story, waiting for the psychiatrist to write the whole thing down, and looking across at the team, who (reading from right to left); looked angrily at their shoes cursing the stupidity of the whole thing (Alex and Cameron in equal measure), stared longingly at him while he was talking (Gemma), tried and failed to stifle laughter letting out a sound that can only be described as like a dying whale sneezing (Nigel) and spinning on the office chair and scooting across the floor in the room and paying no attention whatsoever to the narrative (Ravi). Then Steve continued with the story, choosing to ignore the sundry reactions of the team.

“So, long story short, after they’d made sure there were no fugitives in the building and we’d convinced them we were not in possession of a corpse, it became clear to us that there had been a case of mistaken identity, or simply garbled communications.”

“Ha, we know all about garbled communications,” Nigel muttered.

“That’s basically our day job,” Gemma murmured in reply. Then she overbalanced by leaning her head too far forward on her wrist and fell off her chair.

The psychiatrist had stopped looking at the team, as he had been while Steve was recounting the story, and was now

writing on his pad. The whole room paused for a second, as if waiting for him to say something. He didn't and Gemma began to panic, over-compensating for the lack of dialogue by over-talking.

"I mean, it's not that we're bad at our jobs –"

"We're bad at our jobs. That doesn't mean we don't want the project to work," Cameron replied.

The psychiatrist looked up. "That sounds to me like someone with mild clinical depression," he said, pointing the tip of his pen at Nigel.

"And a taste for mischief."

"What does mischief taste like?" Ravi wondered aloud.

"Oily."

"But seriously," the psychiatrist said, pointing his pen meaningfully at Nigel, "you should come back later and have a proper session."

"Are you asking me out?"

The psychiatrist didn't even respond.

"Because even talking things through does help to sort them out or mitigate the negative effects ..."

Nigel began to see the merit in this, but had a reputation to protect, so kept his expression impassive; so much so that the psychiatrist thought he'd got nowhere.

"Because that might help to improve your productivity?" he lost confidence in his train of thought and ended what ought to have been a statement as a question.

There was a slight pause, then Alex thought of something.

"It would also help if we could actually focus on the work rather than fawning over different members of the team," Alex snapped and Gemma looked visibly hurt at this. Then slightly puzzled, "I get you meant me and him," she said, pointing at Steve, "but who else are you referring to?"

"Ravi and Cameron both."

"People don't just decide to fall in love ..." Ravi felt the need to defend himself; "and how'd you know, anyway?"

The whole room unanimously chorused "we *all* know".

"Well, Ravi and Cameron are all over you," he said. He looked across at the two aforementioned members of the team, who were hurriedly and, they thought, subtly playing a game of rock-paper-scissors. It ended in a draw and Ravi leaped up, yelling "why must you always do this?"

"So," said Gemma, in a wry and bemused way, "any other secrets that we need to pull out from the woodwork?"

"The drugs thing from last week? Who ended up with those?"

"I think Ravi got rid of that – it was just sugar anyway, I set that up"

"Anything else?"

"I don't think so. Oh, look at the time, it's the end of our session."

The psychiatrist looked up again.

"Would you like to rebook?"

"No, thanks – we'll just be off," Alex said as the team stood up. On their way out, the psychiatrist called after them.

"So let me get this straight," he said, adjusting his glasses, "you're a news outfit run by teenagers who took over the station by force and have been accused of harbouring a fugitive and a dead body, as well as being in possession of drugs...?"

"Yeah that's about it." Alex ushered the rest of the team out the door, and closed it firmly behind him.

He re-opened it about thirty seconds later.

"How much will this cost?"

"Two hundred and fifty dollars," the psychiatrist replied, and the door swung shut of its own accord, leaving Alex in the hallway, his mouth hanging open with shock.

Chapter 10: The Office Party

It was office party season again, but Gemma and Alex weren't feeling it as they sifted through the hand-delivered pile of complaints and the reviews for the year. In fact, they were positively depressed. This was not helped when Steve entered the room and started trying to flirt with Gemma. Gemma was confused and disappointed by this on the one hand, but at the same time almost tripping over her kneecaps at the prospect.

"So," Steve said, "If it's office party season, who will get the office award?"

“Two questions – one, do we have an office award -- and two, what employee reliably contributes positively to the firm? Answers are no, and none – in case you’re wondering”.

“That may well be, but you should consider it, because, and I don’t mean to be rude, but your little outfit here looks from the outside as if a six-year old has tried to press the record button on a camera and it’s fallen on the floor and smashed instead.”

“Well, that makes sense. That’s about Ravi’s mental age and that has actually happened ... once.”

Alex paused and coughed, “four times”.

Ravi and Cameron stood by the door as this exchange took place. Ravi’s mouth hung open. Cameron grabbed a tennis ball from nearby and put it in the open crevasse.

“Mhmhmmmmhhhhmmmmhmmhmmhmmmm” Ravi said, then he took the ball out of his mouth, threw it at Cameron’s head (who then lent over trying to remove the Ravi-spit from his locks), and repeated “so is that what they really think?”

“Well, we’ll have to change their minds about us, won’t we?” said Cameron enigmatically, before he swished away. But because he wasn’t wearing a long coat he looked like he was wafting a fart away as he left.

The meeting was called at lunchtime, where the announcement of a party was made official. Then the game was on.

The team gathered around the meeting room desk, but everyone was standing because everyone was on edge. Alex began the meeting by pulling out a baseball cap and putting some pre-prepared names into it.

“Decoration duty,” he declared, dipping his hand into the hat, and pulling out Cameron’s name.

“Catering,” he said, pulling out Ravi’s name and then immediately regretting it. He had seen Ravi’s packed lunches, and didn’t fancy leaving Ravi with total control of a kitchen.

“Also on decorations,” he pulled out Gemma’s name – prompting a relieved sigh from Cameron and Ravi glaring at Alex with such intensity his eyes could have sent laser beams.

“And ... last and least, assisting with the catering,” he reached into the hat and scrabbled around, knowing there was only one name in the hat but creating an atmosphere of suspense nevertheless. He pulled out Nigel’s name.

“So this is the deal,” he said, “you guys do the things you’re supposed to do and I score you for them. Winning team plays paper-scissors-rock for the office award. This is ‘My Station Rules’. You have two hours. Go!”

And so it began. Ravi and Nigel went to the supermarket, entirely failed to get the things they had planned and left after a yelling match with a self-service checkout.

Gemma and Cameron started off significantly better – getting all the streamers and balloons within half an hour (Cameron wryly noted Gemma’s abilities in the ‘blowing them up’ department and recorded that for later), but it was at the ‘hanging these up’ stage that they fell down (both the team and the balloons, literally and metaphorically), so that when Nigel and Ravi arrived back from the supermarket, they were still going. So Nigel and Ravi went to the kitchen.

Midway through the face-off (which had not started out that way), the first deal was struck. Nigel and Ravi were in the kitchen trying to separate eggs (which Ravi had slightly misinterpreted and had individually laid them all out), that Nigel left to go to the bathroom. Or that’s what he told Ravi. He actually went into the office, where Gemma and Nigel were hanging streamers, and made two deals – one with each. With Gemma he agreed that if they won, he would attempt to get Ravi and Cameron to stop doing whatever it was they were doing (with regards to the Gemma situation) and with Cameron he agreed that if they were to win he would give him \$100. Cameron’s deal worked both ways, Gemma’s did not – in return for winning Nigel asked nothing of her. Then he went back to the kitchen, where Ravi was still working. They had half an hour left.

“So I went to see Alex.”

“About what?”

“Never mind.”

Cameron and Gemma worked in silence. It wasn’t a companionable silence. It was an awkward silence. They had finished hanging the streamers and moved on to balloons, with half an hour left.

Then Gemma left to ‘go to the bathroom’, and no sooner had she done this than Alex came around to check what was going on. Naturally, at that time, Cameron made a deal -- \$100 if he were to win. Alex laughed this off, and Cameron realised Gemma was making deals with the other side (well, Ravi because Nigel had already seen them). And so it carried on like this for the remainder of the time until everyone had deals with everyone, but no-one was completely sure with whom their competition had made deals, and what those deals were.

The actual party started slowly. Steve, for some reason, couldn’t make it, which disappointed Gemma. While this made Cameron and Ravi both rather happy, the team just ended up sat around a dinner table in silence looking at

the whatever-it-was Ravi had made and hoping it was edible. But Julie had managed to find the time to gatecrash the event, so Nigel at least was entertained every so often when she leaned over and quietly whispered something to him. There was something going on there. Then she went back to reading her book. Oh yeah, she had brought a book. But she'd also brought a banana, so the two cancelled out. This carried on for a decent twenty minutes, until Alex stood up and said, "So I've decided on the winner. But first I'll give you a rundown of how each team scored points; it started even, as these things probably should, and with Cameron and Gemma arriving with supplies first, this gave them an early one-point lead. However, while Ravi and Nigel were later in arriving, they managed to work more consistently, evening up the scores. Finally, and this is the deciding point, the finished product; the decorating is simple but it works nevertheless, and it is certainly better than whatever this is," he stopped to prod an unidentified lump of meat as if to prove a point.

"So," he continued, "Gemma and Cameron win."

Then he dived back because the whole team became a flurry of action as it became apparent that Cameron was owed \$200, by Alex and Nigel (at \$100 each), Cameron had dibs at Gemma, Nigel was now hell-bent on ensuring Cameron didn't have dibs at Gemma, and Gemma didn't have to go on a date with Ravi, which greatly relieved her. Alex surveyed the mayhem with a perplexed and slightly disappointed expression, then he looked across at Julie who was similarly perplexed; the two slowly, and in a resigned manner, shrugged at each other. He had expected better. She'd had no idea. Then she returned to her book.

Cameron and Gemma appeared to have hit it off at the party. The firm was failing. Alex was unsure about everyone's jobs. Nigel was missing in action, again; perhaps with Julie. But Ravi had solutions to all four problems, or at least he thought he did. Only time would tell ...

Chapter 11: Resignation Stations

"So, basically it's been two months and there's been no noticeable improvement in the running or performance of the station. I mean, come on guys – do you want this to work or not? Normally if you did, there'd have been some kind of improvement, but here we all still are, like a cat waiting for a door to open."

"But we are waiting for a door to open," Nigel calmly interjected. This got confused looks from everyone else, and Nigel was required to explain.

"I mean, think about it. No-one thinks we can, so people need to let us do our job and then those expectations will change over time. Open the door ..."

"Except that we've been allowed to operate for the last four months and nothing's really changed. So while I do see your point, I don't actually agree with it", Alex interjected.

Steve continued, "Which brings me to my next point. Look at the team; Ravi who has the mental capacity of a brick wall, Nigel who casually screws up reports because he gets bored, Cameron who wants the station to be a success but can't organise the team, Gemma who could actually organise the team if she wasn't so busy flirting with me – nice shoes by the way," he paused while Gemma went red and hyperventilated, then continued, "and Alex, who is trying to get everything to work but no-one will listen. That's this team the way I see it."

"I'm out," said Cameron, to everyone's immediate shock. "Think about it, the team is failing and I have time that I could be using way better elsewhere. So yeah ... I think I'm done here."

He gets up and leaves, Ravi following not long after.

Alex stopped Ravi at the door; "what are you doing?"

"Same as him – I don't like doing work".

Alex sighed as the team fell apart and Gemma inched closer to Steve, who inched away from her.

"So," he said as Ravi slammed the door too hard and it fell off its hinges and Gemma and Steve played a shuffly game of follow the leader, "breaking news, just in."

"And that's all for tonight folks. Goodbye."

The pause following this resulted in complete silence in the studio aside from the steady click of the camera and beep of the red light on the door saying 'On Air'. Gemma looked down at the script she was reading from and flipped through pages, turning to the front of the document. She continued; "Oh shit, sorry. Hello and welcome to 8 News. Lots of important stuff happened that we've decided we won't show you, so here's something we prepared earlier." She then pulled a laptop out from under the newsroom desk and plugged in some wires.

"I have no idea what I'm doing. I've never been here before ..."

Then a clip took over the monitor and Gemma relaxed because she was no longer live.

"That was ... horrible."

"Yes, it was. Try next time to ... err ... get it right?" Alex was attempting constructive feedback and failing at it. The station had been like this for the past week, since Cameron and Ravi's departure. Steve had been around to offer encouragement to the team before broadcasts, read scripts and just generally flirt with Gemma. Nigel had, for reasons as yet unknown, disappeared. The station was failing worse than it had been previously – if that were even possible.

"I don't even think this is working. Maybe its best we just pack this up?" Gemma was confused and tired.

"Do you mean you're done too?" Alex was defeated also – even he had considered stopping the station then after a carefully worded meeting with Steve ("Get your head out of your fucking arse") he had decided to stick with it.

"Yeah, I'm done," Gemma said, as she switched off the newsroom lights, leaving Alex in the dark as the door shut behind her. Then Alex cycled through the clips they had to use and found one of Ravi holding up a paper clip and saying to the camera with a straight face "Have a look at this clip".

Alex sighed. Tomorrow he would try to re-assemble the team.

Ravi woke up early on Monday morning. This was not normal. He was woken up by his doorbell, and Alex was at the door.

"Typical", Ravi said, as he opened the door.

"So, would you please come back to the station?"

"Why would I? Life's good here ..." Ravi said this gesturing to the room immediately behind him. Pizza boxes and Xbox controllers littered the floor.

"I mean, yeah. But think about it like this – Gemma won't want to date you if you smell like an elephant's rear end". Somehow, miraculously Ravi had already fully dressed in business attire by the finish of the sentence.

"So, let's go".

At the same time, Steve was visiting Gemma, and adopting a slightly different tactic.

"Hi, Gemma. We need you to come back."

"Look, I do want to work there, but that's just it. I wanna work there, not have to sort out the problems of my workmates."

"So there won't be any issues."

"Well, okay you have one week to prove it."

Cameron opened the door to see Alex and Ravi standing on his porch.

"The fuck do you want?" he asked, half asleep.

"We need you to come back."

"Will Nigel be there? Nigel's cool, I'll only go back if he is ..."

"Actually that's our next stop, so I'm assuming you're in?"

The three boys made their way to Nigel's house and managed to convince him to come back to the station with little negotiating effort. That was after they'd got him out of bed, which required an insubordinate amount of physical effort. Then the team was back together.

The reassembled team was on a quiet road filming a public service announcement. They had been assured they would not be disturbed. While Gemma set up the camera and lighting, Alex and Ravi were talking;

"So Cameron and Gemma have hit it off of late, especially after leaving us," Alex observed wryly, and Ravi grimaced.

"The station's still failing, and are we still worried about everyone's jobs?" Ravi said as if he had the answer.

"Do you have a solution?"

"Yes. And Nigel's ... not here. I can solve that too."

"How?" Alex asked, but was interrupted by Gemma saying they were ready.

Alex assumed his position behind the camera, while Cameron stood in front of the camera and Ravi held the script up for Cameron. Then Cameron began the report. It finished with little or no incident.

Ravi looked up after Cameron had finished the report and said; "I'm not doing that again."

"Just because you wanna impress Gemma, eh?"

"What do you care about me trying to impress her; you're equally as guilty."

Gemma was confused, "what, so you both actually ... I mean it's not just a joke?"

Ravi cut over her with a line he'd been rehearsing, "The invention of the shovel was ground breaking, but the construction of the broom was the one that truly swept the nation. On the contrary soap washed away the competition and the invention of the CD broke a lot of records. Okay, you can say that, so why the hell can't you just admit you like her and ask her out?"

Cameron couldn't think of a viable response. "Uh ..." He didn't see the car coming from behind and no-one else was

paying attention, due to these latest remarks.
He felt it, though.

Chapter 12: Truth Is Stranger than Fiction

Gemma wasn't sure what to do. That was the sum total of the situation. Ravi was frozen in shock and Gemma knew she needed to help but was unsure as to what she actually needed to do. In the end, she settled for calling an ambulance. By this time, Ravi had regained focus and moved Cameron out of the middle of the road.

"So what, we just wait?"

"Well, you might but I still think we can try to help him," Gemma said as she hung up the phone.

"How?"

"I am so gonna regret this," Gemma muttered as she closed in on the unconscious body of Cameron, and began to perform CPR.

"Hey! What are you doing?" Ravi protested.

"You want him alive, don't you?" Gemma replied while coming up for air – which made her journey slightly pointless.

"Well yes, but there's no need for that".

Gemma was pissed off now, as she continued applying pressure to Cameron's heart. "You want to help him in some other as-yet-unclear way then do by all means get up off your arse and actually do something for a change-" she gulped and continued CPR.

"I – I never realised you had such a low –" Ravi was hurt by Gemma's remarks and Nigel stepped in to the conversation. He'd appeared from nowhere

"Don't be like that man, there's no time." He waved at the ambulance which had just come around a corner of the road, which then pulled over and medics piled out, with a stretcher. Gemma was forced away from the body as he was piled on to a stretcher.

The ambulance ride was short, but uncomfortable.

At the hospital, Cameron – who was by doctor's accounts, simply unconscious – was taken into a ward to rest. Then something went wrong somehow, Gemma was never quite sure, and Cameron needed to be hooked up to a life support system. Perhaps his heart gave up or something.

The doctors stabilised Cameron and then relayed this information to the team waiting in the hallway.

It seemed Cameron was now in a coma, and only time would tell whether or not he would wake up.

Cameron opened his eyes.

He was in the production 'office', lying in a hospital bed and taking up the majority of the space in the room, except for the desk. Slowly getting out of bed, he looked around, somewhat confused.

"Either I'm at work, or Heaven looks like a crappy news station".

"You're at work", Alex's voice could be heard – Cameron looked around and saw him at the doorway.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough. And you might want to put something on over that hospital gown; you look like that woman from Kiss Me Deadly".

Cameron complied, putting a jacket over the top of the gown.

"Where even were you just now?" he asked Alex.

"Steve's funeral. He was tragically put in a woodchopper about a week ago. All that was left ... was a shoe."

"Was it like the party you planned years ago?"

"Yeah; only me there. Anyway we have work to do."

"What work, exactly?" Cameron asked his boss.

"Um, I don't know – you'll find something."

Cameron looked over at his desk where papers had mysteriously appeared as if by magic.

"Did you -?"

"What, put those there? Nah ..."

Gemma walked into the office on the phone to a client; "Yeah, I'm the boss now. What do you mean 'what do you mean?' We got him out of here. A strange combination of a wrongly sized ruler, a run-in with a drunk traffic cop and a fall from a third-floor window and he went and had a heart attack. Something about stress, he said. But we run much better now ..." Ravi follows her in with a mischievous look on his face.

"Breaking News!" He cries and then smashes a vase on the floor, "Broken News!"

Gemma just looks at him like he's insane for a minute, then rushes over to Cameron and kisses him.

"Are you OK?"

“Uh – wha – what the hell was that?” Cameron recovered from the shock of both preceding events.

Ravi replied, “Well we’ve just sent out the midday broadcast live and planned the evening one, so we were having a break”.

“Okay, that’s one of two,” said Cameron, still mystified.

Nigel appeared at the door and said “Cameron, basically what’s happened is the team is working properly for once, the girl of your dreams is yours and your competition for her is dead”.

“Okay, cool. Wait how did you get there?”

“Magic,” Nigel made a vague occult gesture.

“Ohhhhhhhh. This is all a dream isn’t it?”

“Whatever makes you say that? You could just be very lucky.”

“Well, the work I had to do appeared as if by magic and as you say these things keep happening and that’s just two of the three reasons I think this is a dream.”

“What’s the third?”

“You’re dressed like a nineteen-seventies magician complete with top hat, cane and twirly moustache.”

“Ah yes. That.” Nigel looked down at his outfit. “So. Yes this is all a dream. You got hit by a car and then some complication of some sort happened and now you’re in a coma. Doctors aren’t sure if you’ll ...”

“Oh. Well. When I die, I want to go peacefully like my grandfather did – in his sleep. Not yelling and screaming like the passengers in his car.” Cameron said, looking around the room at the team.

“So. Let’s get working.” Even Nigel had caught the ‘work properly’ bug, it seemed.

Cameron took a sip from a spontaneously-appearing glass of water. “Say that again”. So Nigel repeated it and he spat the water out, just as a joke.

“Don’t think I’m happy about this,” Cameron told Ravi.

“As one door opens, another one –” Ravi began to reply, while Cameron slammed the office door in his face. This was just one of the meetings he’d had with Ravi in the last however-long-he’d-been-in-the-dream. Nigel had shown up intermittently in different attire, the magician outfit, a cat costume, dressed as a crucifix – and those were just the memorable ones. By and large, though, the team was working correctly for the first time.

Cameron and Alex had engineered the most successful week of stories that the Special Corporation for Authentic Media (SCAM for short) had ever done, helped by Nigel chipping in meaningfully from the side-lines as opposed to his normal chipping in counter-productively from the side-lines. Ravi had managed to actually focus and not be too much of an idiot over the week as well; which further strengthened the team’s position in the market they were trying to work in.

Then they won the award for Excellence in Broadcasting and were noticed by the wider community. Cameron, of course, thrived because of these, receiving promotions to basically the same job as Alex and being in control of half of the operations. And then there was Gemma all over him too. Cameron couldn’t be happier ...

The team stayed beside Cameron’s bed for the week. Well, one at a time they left to keep the station running – but Ravi had been unable to get through his broadcast without crying and Gemma had minimal knowledge of the systems the team operated. Ultimately this meant that the station’s situation became worse than it had ever been and the inevitable cancellation notice drew ever nearer.

“Actually,” Gemma said, “I need to go and see Alex’s dad.”

“What’s wrong with him again?” Ravi had the tact of a wrecking ball on a bowling green.

“I think he has some heart thing. I don’t know if it’s curable ...”

“Well, that’s a bit shit.”

The station was an absolute success, in the dream. Cameron had ascended the ranks and was now in control of well over a hundred employees – news reporters and cameramen, editors, even sub-companies producing other shows for the network. He had also been going out with Gemma for at least the past year (he couldn’t tell – the dream time was unreliable).

“Yeah, just make sure it all works then stop there, and I’m sure your scripts will come in before six o’clock tonight for broadcast. Hold up, I’ve got a call coming in, it’ll be about your scripts. I’ll call you back.” He presses a button on the phone and another call begins. “Hi, how’re you going with the scripts? Yeah, I know it’s called Late Breaking News, but that doesn’t give you an excuse”. He hung up the call, and redialled his earlier number.

“No, I’m sorry, but your script won’t be ready before Christmas. Sorry for any inconvenience this may cause-”

He pauses as Nigel walks around the corner, “please hold”. Playing his iPod into the phone speaker, he sets the two devices down and moved off to talk to Nigel. He could only assume that the person on the other end of the phone

was extremely frustrated and getting more anxious and annoyed by the second.

“So, what’s up?”

“Not you – you’ve been in a coma for the last two weeks”.

“Low blow, man”

“Somewhat; you’ve been at about waist height – not moving much. That happens when you’re immobile in bed.”

“You came here for something – what?”

“Easy. It’s time for you to come back”.

“Back?”

“Yeah, to reality.”

“But I like it here.”

“This is all in your head. If you wake up, you could make this reality”.

“Well I suppose I wouldn’t have to talk to you all day”

“That settles it,” Nigel flicked a lever which had somehow appeared out of nowhere, and Cameron was jerked upwards and into a white space.

He opened his eyes in a hospital ward, with the team surrounding him. As touched as he was by this, he had ideas he needed to share and wasted no time waking up Nigel and Ravi.

They laughed at him. Didn’t even remotely take his plans for saving the station seriously.

Gemma was asleep; he’d tell her later – she’d listen.

Then a hospital worker burst through the door with Steve in tow.

“Excuse me, this gentleman wanted to see you”, he said, and Steve began to speak.

“Guys because of the inactivity over the past two weeks, the executives have decided to shut you down. You have until the end of the week to somehow, although I don’t know how you can do it, reverse the ruling. They gave me a letter”.

He placed the letter on the table.

Chapter 13: And Now, It’s Six o’clock

The report opened on to a field outside the Beehive. Ravi was standing, holding a large vox-pop mike and using it to speak into.

“So, in the run-up to the election it seems most parties have made mistakes. Well, I say run-up. I mean ... okay it’s like at school how you do the long-jump and then about two seconds before the actual jump you look at the bar and think ‘wow, that’ll hurt’ and sort of decide not to jump, but then you carry on because you haven’t fully told your legs to stop and you end up smacking your face on the very bar you said would hurt; yeah, instead of a run-up, it’s a little like that.” He paused, proud with his extended metaphor.

“Get on with it”, Alex tutted from the side-lines, and Ravi straightened up.

“We decided we’d do a decent-length article every day to educate the public, or at least the public that watch us here at the Special Corporation for Authentic Media –”

Cameron cut in from the side line; “All five of them”.

Steve paused the clip. The team were all sitting in the production office.

“So, up to there, it’s sort of okay. I mean there are professionalism errors and whatnot, but nothing I haven’t convinced the executives isn’t an issue in the past. Then we continue ...”

He pressed play again, and the clip continued.

Ravi had again gone off-topic.

“I mean there was a time where we ran out of things to do every day, so we ran stories like ‘Breakfast as normal’ in the morning just for something to broadcast. And then we got complaints from the people whose breakfasts were not, in fact, normal – like this one guy who’d woken up to find a man in a balaclava in his kitchen with a sharp knife dicing all his Bran flakes.”

“Cereal killer”, muttered Nigel, off-frame but it could still be heard at a reasonable volume.

“Anyway,” said Ravi, hiding a smile, “we’re going to set off fireworks to start off this daily thing we’re doing”.

Steve stopped the clip.

“Okay,” he said, “this is where we have problems. Because not only do we not have the budget for said fireworks, but you guys are irresponsible at the best of times (and this is clearly not the best of times), but also, you basically caught yourselves setting fire to the houses of parliament on film. So I think it’ll come with little surprise that I am forced to terminate your operations here. The executives were wary of you anyway, what with how you guys

handled the station during Cameron's, erm, absence. But this is –"
"The final match?" Ravi chipped in, and Steve leant over and hit him. Hard.

The team sat there in silence. It was finally over. Then Cameron says, "I think I know how to fix this."

"Yeah, sure you do, what are you thinking – knock them out with frying pans again? This is serious this time. I really don't think we can."

"No, I have a plan," Cameron was already moving. "Ravi, if you get the executives on the phone and say nothing else to them at all, Steve – I need you to go as far away from Gemma as possible so she can actually work properly. Nigel, I need you to set up the green screen and camera and make sure it all works, and Gemma you should field incoming calls from people with complaints."

Gemma begins to protest this and Cameron cuts her off, "I know, I know, you don't like dealing with people. But you have to do this."

"What will Alex and you be doing?"

"We'll be as far away from the rest of you as possible, trying to make a sustainable plan for the future."

Nigel was in the studio, mucking around with the green screen and camera, and using After Effects to edit the material. "And the final story of tonight; a group of teenage boys mysteriously murdered all employees at the local media centre, and police want to know – hang on. Umm, [shuffles his papers] that's all for tonight on 8 News." He pauses and a thought occurs to him. "Oh, but before we go, entering our 'Who killed the employees of TV 8' competition is really simple. All you have to do is email a four-digit code to the head of BCB 8 Drama, who will then forward a copy of the code to me, and simultaneously send you a second entry form which can be used to get priority so we may place you in the draw. What's the big prize? Who knows?" He pauses again to tap his nose knowingly. "You'll have to wait and see." Shuffling his papers, he closes off, "that's all for tonight. Goodbye." He stops.

"Yeah, all works."

Ravi had the executives on the phone, and Gemma was bored because the other phone wasn't ringing. So he decided to go for broke – it wasn't like he'd ever see her again after this if she said no.

He spoke hurriedly, nervous. "I umm... heard you umm... like coffee. I was umm... wondering if we could umm... go and get some?"

"Sorry, what?" Gemma had barely understood any of this.

"Forget it. Why would I even bother doing this?"

Ravi walks away, with his head in his hands. Gemma calls after him, and he turns back around.

"Ravi."

"What?"

"You did just ask me out, right?"

"And look how that turned out for you..."

"I'll let you know."

Cameron and Alex had planned out the future – Cameron had told Alex what had happened in the coma. Cameron was just getting a celebratory coffee when he ran into Steve.

"So, what's up?" Cameron was wary of Steve due to the whole Gemma thing.

"Not much," Cameron didn't normally talk to Steve, so he was also wary of Cameron.

"Look, were you thinking of asking Gemma out before this whole thing goes tits up?"

"Yeah I thought I would. You?"

"Probably. Well okay, that's three of us, because Ravi probably will as well."

"So, let the best man win."

"Or all men lose, that is a possibility," Cameron replied.

"I might've already said something to her – I must have. She's all over me."

"Well, it is possible. You'd remember something like that though?"

"I definitely said something to her ... I may not have opened my mouth, used words, or anything but I did say it."

Cameron was confused by this. Luckily, Ravi came over and distracted him.

"I asked her out," Ravi was slightly confused at the fact he'd actually done it, "so what do I do, just be myself?"

"Just be yourself? Oh god no, don't do that."

In the two hours that followed, the attack plan of the team came together nicely, and a pitch was put forward to the executives. Gemma was asked out thrice by Cameron, Ravi, and Steve – all of whom were told the same thing.

Then the team received a reply from the executives that ran something along the lines of “No. Go away.” After all of this and just before packing up their stuff, the team all found themselves in the office.

“So, can we play the Game?” Ravi was bored as happened if he sat still for more than a minute.

“No.” Cameron cut over Ravi straight away.

“No?”

“Yes, no.”

“Yes, No?”

No – yes.”

“Yes?”

“No.”

“I’m so confused,” Ravi said, and the team relapsed into silence. During this exchange, Gemma had walked out of the room and talked to Alex.

“All three of the other guys asked me out.”

“Oh. Not Nigel, I presume. And what are you thinking of doing?”

“I don’t know – I need your help.”

“Honestly, I think you should do what you think. Because look at us, Nigel and Ravi can’t do their jobs to save their lives. That might actually be an interesting tactic to try ...”

“So how should I let them know?”

The game in the office had stopped and the boys looked up to see Gemma and Alex talking. Craning to hear what was being said, the silence became even more silent as Gemma got her phone out and dialled a number. Then all three of the phones went off.

SIX WEEKS LATER.

The station had long since closed and the team had decided to meet up for dinner. Naturally, the team placed their orders and the resulting wait for the actual food was a better cause for discussion than anything else that had happened to the team in the interlude. At the very least, it got the conversation going, and the team each went around the table (clockwise), telling their story.

Gemma and Steve had been ‘going strong’ since the disbandment of the news station. She still can’t watch old 8 News archival footage or any other news program for a great length of time without getting flashbacks. She prefers to watch topical comedy every Friday to keep up with the week’s news. She had rung Steve to accept his offer.

Ravi and Cameron had a heated argument on the last day of operation of the news station (on the doorstep on the way out), involving Gemma and stopped talking due to the various jealousies and superiority complexes present. Naturally this means Ravi’s main advisor and confidant is Cameron, and vice versa. Their phone calls had been for ‘mis-sold health insurance’ for Cameron and ‘a reminder to call the vet’ for Ravi.

In the six-week interlude, Cameron had applied for, been accepted into and started attending classes at Auckland University, where he found very quickly and to his great dismay that he shared all his classes with Ravi. As is the law of nature surrounding things like this they sat next to each other in a slightly bitter stone-cold and rather awkward silence in all of these such classes.

Alex became a rather successful investment banker who, much like Gemma, ends up in the foetal position if he watches News programs or even remembers the running of the news station. Over the first year of his career he amassed a somewhat large wealth, for investment somewhere at some point in the future ...

But, for now forgetting the fact they had the rest of their lives ahead of them (as well as that they would probably never speak to each other again after this meeting), the team enjoyed the dinner – the first non-awkward occasion of its kind. This is likely how the team would remember their time in S.C.A.M; so, as Gemma laughs at a joke Ravi told while Cameron mimes a choking manoeuvre around his own neck and Steve puts his arm possessively around Gemma as if to say ‘mine, go away’, the invisible camera with which these events have been chronicled pans up to see the whole restaurant of similar groups of people being happy, the team continue their dinner. Over this, it may come with little surprise that we shall draw a veil.

Chapter 14: The Disappearing Car Bomb

SIX MONTHS LATER

Alex and Cameron had acquired a small studio above a bar. That was pointless, really; no time of total silence, ever. And the one time a person had been flung through the roof while they were in mid-broadcast. That had been awkward. They ran a satirical YouTube channel that got almost no hits. Maintained it almost out of a sense of duty – hanging on to what they’d lost. They were talking about the current geo-political climate, and the ‘proper’ climate.

“And we have an expert’s advice on what to do as global warming dries up our water sources. We cross to him now.” The expert showed up on a screen. “Thank you.”

“So, what should the public do about the decreasing amount of water in New Zealand lakes and pools?” Cameron’s first question stumped the expert.

“Well –”

“Thanks for the advice.” Then he cut off the interview at exactly the wrong time, to give their viewers front-row seats to what happened next.

The lighting rig shuddered due to a particularly violent pub quiz downstairs. After falling off its perch and smashing on the ground, Cameron’s patience with the temperamental situation was at an end; “no, that’s it,” he said tersely, “I’m done. I quit”. And he walked out of the studio, slamming the door behind him, leaving Alex slack-jawed and unsure what to do, with a camera still rolling and a mess to clean up.

“Uh, sorry about this guys”, he said to the camera, even though he’d be able to edit that whole bit out, “but I think we’ll stop there for now. I only hope to see you again in the future.”

He got up and walked over to switch the camera off, standing in silent confusion looking at his empty and slightly messy studio, wondering what to do now. He switched on the TV, checking the late-breaking news.

Ravi was on summer break from Drama school, working most days in a fast food chain. He thought that was what the first question on the Drama exam should have been; “What exactly made you want to work in McDonalds?” He figured he may as well get used to it, he’d probably be doing it on and off for the rest of his life. The station closing down had emptied his life completely – and while Drama School had partially refilled it, there was still an emptiness. He sat in an apartment in the city, watching all the cars go by and feeling slightly nostalgic and regretful. The TV was on and the 10 o’clock news was playing, not that Ravi was focussed on that.

The river was an unnatural shade of green. Gemma wondered if she took her hairclip out and threw it at the water, whether it would bounce off. She noted an approximate hex code for the shade of green (#42a34e) that she would use in a square on her blog later. She also took a picture, but she probably wouldn’t use it. She’d done five posts in the last week, mind you, she was good at this job. She’d done it before in a proper news station. Well, they’d messed almost everything up at almost every opportunity but it had sort of worked for the time that it had been active. She certainly had some good memories, and missed it now it was gone. She saw a news car following a police car, which then both stopped. A policeman got out and gave some sort of statement to camera. She supposed she’d find out what statement had been given later on. She packed up her gear and walked back to her flat.

“You need to take a minute to fill out this survey,” Nigel approached a guy in a suit with a clipboard.

He wasn’t having it at all. “You, young man, need to take a minute and fetch it.” Then he threw the board over his shoulder. This is what his life had been like since taking the job as a runner at the local ‘proper’ station.

Nigel’s legs were sore. They had been sore for the last month, ever since taking this job. He kind of hated Julie for getting him it, but then again sometimes he saw her around the office. Sometimes he liked to sneak in here after hours and just sit on the concrete studio floor working in After Effects. He liked the size of the room and the way it was lit when the big lights were turned off. Atmospheric, casting huge shadows against the far wall from the windows looking into the corridor. But most of the time he ran around on errands from the producers of the news show he was working on – making sure the anchors were ready, making sure there were no technical difficulties, getting the producer a coffee. An unusually specific coffee. Then making sure everything was cleared and the lights were off at the end of a show. Not his specialty, which was editing and visual effects. He’d get there eventually, he supposed. But for now, he just had to run his legs off, and remember a better time ... then he snapped out of it. Apparently there was a story that he was needed for. Immediately. On location.

The assignment in question seemed fairly risky. Because it involved, in increasing order of dangerous-ness, a terrorist, a bomb, and live reporting on national TV. At this point, Nigel was stressed, and this was just the beginning. The report they had received said that a bomb would go off in a carpark outside the Houses of Parliament. Sort of like Guy Fawkes, but not really because there would be no deaths. Nigel didn’t see the point if there’d be no deaths. He guessed it was some kind of demonstration. For what, nobody knows. The last political rally Nigel had been to had been a charitable race set up by the Labour party. That race had ended with seven deaths and five burning buildings, but as the press officer at the time had said, no-one could be held responsible for those. Just one of life’s little mysteries. Nigel had just finished attaching (attacking) a microphone to its associated boom stick when he looked up and saw Gemma standing a reasonable distance away on her phone. Then he saw a reporter ready to record, so he turned his attention back to the report, which went without incident for two minutes until Ravi walked

through the frame absent-mindedly. After tripping Ravi up, Nigel finished the report and saw Alex and Cameron. They were standing an equal distance from Gemma on the other side, writing down stuff in a notepad. Nigel called to Gemma, having the unintended consequence of drawing Ravi; who had picked himself up, Alex and Cameron over as well. The whole team had gathered before the awkward conversation began.

“So how’s it going?”

“Well, it’s been better,” said Gemma.

“So, we’re reporting a terror threat right?” Cameron asked.

“... Yeah?” Gemma was suspicious at Cameron’s line of questioning.

“Okay, so question; when terrorists feed their little children, do they use the airplane method of ‘open wide’ while making airplane noises? Or do they just smash it into their faces?” Cameron could barely keep a straight face.

This pissed Gemma off. “There is a situation of enormous danger, and you guys are thinking up cheap jokes?”

“Yes.” Cameron was resolute. “Also it doesn’t matter whether the jokes are cheap or not because the concept of currency exchange ...”

“Stop.” Alex knew where the boundaries were, and that Cameron was currently standing a decent pole-vault with a jet engine over the ‘acceptable’ line.

There was awkward silence for about ten seconds, while Cameron looked and felt like a plum. Then Nigel’s phone went off and he answered it. Swearing under his breath, he began to pack up his equipment.

“What’s up?” Gemma and Alex asked simultaneously when Nigel put the phone down.

“The bomb went off outside the houses of parliament”.

“Hahahaha we blew them up first,” Ravi hadn’t quite caught on to the gravity of the situation.

“But ... that’s across town.” Cameron looked beaten at a game that had not yet started.

“Okay then,” Nigel said, “I propose a race. This race has two components – get the best story possible, and get to the location as quickly as possible and without looking like an idiot. I need to prove to Julie that --”.

“Julie? Bitch one is she? Which – I, I, I mean which.” Gemma must’ve had a negative impression.

“Negative impression, huh? Are you jealous?” Nigel was as close to flirting as he’d ever come.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I’d rather stick pins in my eyes. But she really is a total --”

“All right, calm down. I think she’s nice. Funny. Sweet. I mean, she’s a good friend.”

“I can hear wedding bells. But I mean seriously she brought a book. A book. A. Book. To a party.” Still not impressed.

“Antisocial doesn’t equal bitch. It’s because you and her are similar, isn’t it?”

“On what fucking planet --? You know what, nevermind. Just try not to look stupid.” Gemma gave up and moved on.

“Impossible for Cameron or Ravi,” Gemma said, who then got the evils from the team’s two resident ‘idiots’.

The race began immediately, and with Nigel tripping up Ravi again. Alex and Cameron had the largest advantage, as Ravi was on the floor, Nigel had to pack up his equipment, and Gemma had to finish her notes first, such was her perfectionism. The journey across town was reasonably uneventful, except that Alex and Cameron were stuck in traffic, which Ravi had created by ploughing into a lamppost. Upon arriving at the scene, Gemma was in the lead and Nigel not far behind; but when setting up his equipment took him time, Gemma was convincingly in the lead. She set to work interviewing the people nearby, and attempting to get information – although she largely failed to do so. When Alex and Cameron arrived, they began similar interviews. Ravi’s introduction to the post had taken him out of the race. Alex and Cameron’s interviews meant that most of the witnesses were offended and unwilling to talk further to news reporters; and they were no better or worse off. Nigel faced a similar fate, so the team called an impasse; except for Ravi, who was clearly last.

Then Nigel received some news from his supervisors. If he could get the best story, compared to other news outlets, he could get a promotion. So the team decide to pull together to help him get the job.

“Okay, so you get the cameras all set up and do the lead-in and whatnot.” Alex took charge immediately.

“But it’s live, so ...”

“... it’s have to be someone that looks alive, and not like they’ve been rotting for two years.” Nigel had changed in the six months and was no longer concerned with your feelings. (Well, even less than before, which had been small. That was an achievement). Even though the team was helping him.

So they set to work. Alex made sure everything stayed on the rails (surprisingly accurate, because they carried out an interview on a train at some point), Gemma made sure the audience would like it and clapped Ravi across the face at least once (take [unspecified number] for the team), Ravi did the performances although he was distracted by about twenty things before even taking his first step, Nigel kept the tech up and running (literally when a magpie stole one of the SD cards). Cameron did basic editing and before the close of business hours, the report was done.

“So, gents”, said Nigel. His voice echoed through the empty studio, well empty except for a stone statue. The lights still hadn’t been switched on, so the unusual lighting he liked was the current lighting of the room.

“So gents, this is where we’d work if we get the job.”

“You’re saying this like it’s a sure thing.” Ever the sceptic, Gemma needed to make sure they didn’t get carried away.

“Sure, but if I do get it, then I’ll try and let them give you guys jobs as well.”

“And if you don’t ...” Cameron began.

“Don’t?”

“Let’s just say my therapist once told me that I have this obsession with seeking revenge... we’ll see about that”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“So now we wait.”

There was a pause for about five minutes. Then Ravi said, “Seriously guys, what do you think of me?”

Nigel was first to reply; “There’s only two things I don’t like about you – your face.”

Then Ravi sulked for the next hour, and after another five-minute pause, Gemma spoke.

“How about I put on some music?”

“The last time you put on music, it was like we were at a funeral. You might as well have called the disc ‘Now that’s what I Call Mourning’. Your music taste is ... questionable.”

“Well, I’m putting my foot down,” Gemma said as she got up and locked the door. “You are now hostages and you will listen to my music.”

Then the others left the room through the back door while Gemma went to put on the aforementioned whale-noise-like sounds.

“... Guys? Anyone?” But Gemma’s voice echoed through the now-empty room.

An hour later the team gathered in the room, anxious to hear the result of their story.

Nigel came in with his boss.

“Well,” he said, “they liked it. I needed to also show them our showreel from last time, but aside from the incident with the beehive, they were confident in our abilities.”

“The incident with the beehive?” Gemma was puzzled.

“Before you joined us. Best not ...”

“Any other questions?” the boss said. The team signalled no, so he left. Then Alex looked up and asked “actually, there’s an urn in the bathroom – what’s in it?”

“Oh, that. That’s granddad. We figured he’d been creepy in life, so why not?”

Alex was confused and freaked out by this reply.

“So what are you saying?” Gemma wanted clarification of the whole situation.

“Well basically I’m saying that because of our report, the new bosses want to assign us a workspace and ensure we use it correctly and keep it clean. They’ll do it at some point in the near future.”

“So what do we do now?”

Alex turned away from his team, and muttered at such a volume that they couldn’t quite hear.

“Back into the fray,” he murmured. Then he moved off to sort out their workspace by moving the gargoyle out of the studio without scratching the floor (he didn’t manage it).

Chapter 15: Four Men in a Car

It turns out a five-seat car driving up to Auckland from Hamilton for eight hours is rather uncomfortable. For a start, Ravi had a scrabble board out across the back seat. And the budget was expected any day now, so the tension was palpable.

They had just stopped for fuel – but would have to stop again just after entering Auckland because the car was small, which posed its own set of problems. The scrabble board, for instance. Right now, Ravi and Cameron were playing; Ravi because he wanted to, and Cameron because he had no choice.

“Oh, look I’ve got one,” Ravi said, as he prepared the letters. Then he casually said, “this car’s very saxqith”.

“Saxqith?” Cameron asked, suspicious.

“Cramped, claustrophobic”.

Cameron gave Ravi a look that said ‘you don’t fucking say’, which of course Ravi entirely failed to notice, while also saying “Ravi you can’t just make up words to fit the seven letters you have left. If you’re gonna play, then play properly, otherwise shut up and read the script. I know you’re going to drama school now, but you’re really not that good at acting.”

Ravi looked hurt as he sullenly placed the word 'six' down, and got a triple word score.

"At least I'm learning from my past mistakes – where are you with Gemma?"

Nigel cut in from the front seat; "Never in the same room, even though her and Steve have broken up. He's like a scared little girl. Which is funny, because if I were Gemma being chatted up by Cameron ..."

Cameron stopped Nigel's interjection with a palm to the back of the head.

Alex was browsing Facebook and alternating that with the bank website, waiting for his budget and beginning to get a little cheesed off with the noise; "could you all just shut up and be quiet and stop talking?"

"YES THAT'S IT, TALKING" Cameron yelled as he placed 'talking' down on the scrabble board, edging out Ravi on the score board.

"Okay fine. So gents, how much longer?" Ravi was curious. A curious Ravi was a dangerous Ravi; you were allowed to use force to stop him. A warning system hadn't worked.

"About another hour, but then we have to stop for fuel. We could play a game ..."

"We already are." Cameron gestured at the scrabble board he was playing against his will.

"No I mean another-'nother game," Alex said. "I was thinking 'things they say in Hamilton'."

"What about 'things they say about Hamilton?" Cameron mused.

"So then it's 'ARGH WHY THE FUCK WOULD YOU GO THERE' as the only acceptable answer?"

"True, true. I vote awkward silence and Scrabble."

The freedom of non-local reporting was intoxicating for the team. They especially enjoyed the freedom of having a road trip with no Gemma. Although, they had done a full technical briefing before they left. Well, they'd tried. Ravi had ended up with a fly swat in one hand and the camera in the other – using the wrong one to swat a fly and accidentally smashing it into the wall. Then Nigel had pointed out the fuel budget was missing a zero and Gemma entirely misjudged both the audience and the quality of product the team were providing. But Gemma had let them go, on the proviso she could vet what they had taken upon their return.

Despite having shot the report on a Windows Phone (other phones are available) and editing in the car on the way back up North, the team were on track, barely.

Then the renewed sense of optimism and purpose felt by the team was completely and entirely crushed when the car broke down.

Then they were sat by the side of the road waiting for the AA.

So they started to talk, mostly about Gemma.

"So, when you two were after Gemma; did you actually ... you know, want her?" Nigel asked Cameron.

"I think it was just kinda something to do, really. Although my standards are so low that I'd say yes to a brick wall if it asked."

"But for that to happen, you just need to yell 'will you go out with me?' at a brick wall."

"So if that ever happens, I'll be set." He paused, then; "Nigel, why did you get this station set up again? We left it not entirely badly last time ..."

"Because life was boring without it. Even though we were shit ... it was something. And it has improved, for one we're getting a budget and paid this time."

Alex and Ravi cut in at the same time, "there's the truck". And sure enough, there it was. Then the reasonable forward pace it had built up – stopped. Alex ran to check it out, and the truck had broken down. "Well that fills me with confidence," he said.

Nigel pressed the export button and then sat back, impressed. The team gathered around to see what the report had looked like.

The camera panned out from behind a tree to show Ravi shuffling some papers in his hand in a field. Then he spoke.

"Auckland house pricing has risen to the point that first-home buyers are having to move out of the city, and even to other cities to buy land. I mean seriously, why else would you go to Hamilton?"

"To give someone a really good fu –" Cameron cut in from the side-lines.

"Yeah, well I suppose there is that. But they invented archive rooms in law firms for a reason, didn't they?"

"Ravi, carry on with the report, you're making us look shit."

"Well, ex-cuse me, Mister Hypocrite," Ravi was mock-annoyed, with an exasperated look that Cameron entirely failed to see. Then he continued, "Foreign house prices have gone in similar directions, so, over to our foreign correspondent; DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?"

Alex sighed. "I suppose that's good enough, by our standards, and on no budget. I mean, we are kind of getting paid for this – doing the open to a story and then some jokes." They carried on driving in silence for the next five minutes,

then were back at the studio.

On the way back, Nigel received an email about a competition they could enter, so he looked it up; it was a half hour film concerning some kind of sustainability. They could probably do that; it closed in about two months so that was ample time. In theory. Although Ravi would probably find a way to mess it up. Touch wood.

The team pulled into the driveway outside their studio, and looked across at their reception area. All was not well. The façade of the studio was glass, giving a clear view into a space that looked like (pardon the cliché) a bull had been let loose in a china shop. As such, it appeared they had been robbed. Nigel snuck around the back and detached a piece of drainpipe from, well, the drain. Then Gemma walked along the road in much the same way that the boys had driven. She was carrying coffee. Was, because she soon dropped it, with a look of shock, horror and disgust. Then that look intensified when she realised what she'd done.

"... my ... my coffee ..."

Chapter 16: Mysterious Creaks and Paranoia

The team were cautious on entering the building. Cautious, as in careful to preserve their own life, rather than ensure the safety of the whole team. As it were, they entered separately and cautiously, like sheep navigating a minefield. Nigel had a baseball bat, although it looked as though the property was unoccupied. That being said, Ravi looked as though he had a brain until he opened his mouth. So it pays to be sure.

"Nigel, did you finish the export of the ad? It needs to go out at 6 o'clock tonight." Alex started speaking before walking through the front door. Then he did, and immediately wished he hadn't. The team's property was strewn all across the floor of the room – and presumably all the other rooms too – like the toys of a child who'd just had a top-tier temper tantrum. It was immediately obvious the report would not go out at 6 o'clock. So they figured there'd be no programme that evening, and after a short and slightly confusing phone call to their bosses (who claimed they'd already arranged back-up viewing), they set to work tidying up.

For a while the team worked like a well-oiled sandshoe, in that they did the job they were meant for in a slightly better fashion than they would normally have done for slightly longer than they would have done it.

Then the sun went down. This is roughly the point at which all prior plans went out the proverbial window. And the reason for this is simple; the team started hearing noises. Not over the top noises, like a dog barking, the skid of car tyres on the road, or cats fighting; but small noises – creaks here or there. The odd scratch outside. Muffled voices. It was going to be a long night, and Alex couldn't decide whether he was glad they'd stayed to keep the studio safe after it had been robbed, or wishing they were all at home in bed.

It was going to be a long night, he thought as the sun dropped below the studio's perimeter fence, plunging them into darkness.

"How does this sound?" Ravi read from a script he had been working on, "economic news ... we're all fucked".

"Bit blunt, but it does summarise it rather well," Gemma said, while thoughtfully twiddling with a pen.

Nigel spoke, "We need some dinner or something, otherwise we won't survive the night."

He got the phone and rang through the order, "who's speaking please?" The voice at the other end said "You are."

Then Nigel decided to stop messing about and placed the order. It would be ready in twenty minutes. Ravi went out to get it, after losing a lively game of 'not bitch' where he was also hit with a chair. Then Ravi was gone and Cameron spoke; "I play guitar, why do people not like me?"

"I thought you were gonna do the fingering a minor gag", Alex replied.

"But seriously ..."

But he never received an answer because there was a particularly loud creak accompanied by movement outside and a scratch at the door. Gemma screamed, and Cameron turned white. Well, whiter.

Then the noise stopped for a while, so Nigel spoke.

"You can sound like an expert on anything if you say it with enough confidence."

"Yeah? How'd you know that?" Gemma replied.

"I got a degree in basic psychology from AUT."

"Did you?"

"No. See, I told you it was easy."

Then Nigel took over the script Ravi had been working on-and-off on over the last week, and the rest of the team settled into silence.

"Hey, Alex," Ravi was curious about something.

"What?"

"You know when Julie was an intern? Did you know Nigel and her would –" he stopped after receiving a stony glare from Nigel then decided in the interest of public information to carry on.

"Did you know they'd ... have a thing?"

"A thing?" Nigel interrupted.

"Well, ok. How's the sex?"

"Sex? I'd no idea that was on the table."

"Table, chair, bench ... I won't restrict you ..."

"This script is shit. By the way. Just saying." Nigel had the last laugh, as Ravi was hurt by this.

Then the phone rang and Alex answered. It was his dad.

"Oh, hi ... yes ... what'd they say ... oh, right. Is that what they're thinking? Fine, fine, fine; no need to get smart; I know they'd only have told you it if that was what they were thinking it. Okay. See you later in the week, yeah? Right, bye." He hung up.

"Was that your dad?" Ravi asked, while shifting on the couch and jumping at the resulting noise.

"Rock, a – bye baby ..." Nigel sang, as he coughed and straightened up. He continued to read from his script; he'd been in character, "And it seems the man lacked a convincing lullaby. Oh, wait, sorry, alibi."

Then Ravi texted Gemma and she went to the back door to let him in. Ravi, traumatised from his experiences retrieving the pizza, refused to talk about his experience. Either that, or he was just being a dick.

So they ate the pizza in silence. Well, silence except for the persistent creaks, grumbles and noises from outside that kept the whole team on edge.

"What do you think is outside?" Gemma was the first to say what everyone else was thinking.

"Ravi probably knows. After all, he did go outside to get the pizza."

"Yeah, but he won't talk," Cameron pointed out, looking at Ravi who had gone pale and was slowly rocking backwards and forwards.

Ravi said something, but not what anyone wanted him to say; "hey guys, do any of you actually like me?"

"Yeah, you're all right," Alex said.

Nigel cut in with "there's only two things I don't like about you."

Ravi motioned him to continue.

"Your face." There was a pause. Then Nigel said, "but seriously if I disliked any of you do you think I'd have even worked with you last time?"

"That's true I suppose," Ravi said. "Never thought of it like that."

Then the break was over and the team resumed the tidy-up. Alex was in the lobby, Gemma in the studio, Cameron in Alex's office, Nigel in the edit suite and Ravi's job was to ensure all the hallways and bathrooms were the right way up. After some time, Alex called a meeting via walkie talkie.

The team set down what they were doing and tuned in for Alex's address over their walkie talkies. But all they actually heard was a creak, and Ravi jump because he heard a noise and knocked over a statue. The resulting smash deafened the team, although they heard three loud knocks over the intercom, instead of Alex's comments.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

It turned out that there was indeed something or someone outside. They were on their way in. The team braced for the defensive, as Alex clicked off the intercom and his attention turned towards the door. There was a cracking sound, then the door began to swing open ...

Chapter 17: Protect The Station

Running at the door didn't help. And it gave Alex a sore back. Well, the door didn't close. But it didn't open any further. Alex was thinking fast – well, reacting instinctively and therefore not thinking at all. He saw a medium sized boom stick. He whacked the door with it, and heard a faint 'ow' from the other side. But then the stick broke and the intruder forced his way in ...

Gemma and the rest of the team weren't faring much better. They had run into their respective guard zones and were frantically ensuring the integrity of the rooms. Needless to say, this was failing. Gemma had the most success; having locked the windows in the studio and drawn the big thick curtains that made it pitch black. That would be hard to get through. It also made it impossible for Gemma to see, as she tripped over a rogue tripod on her way back to the light switch. But after a particularly interesting experience with one of the legs, she had secured the studio.

Ravi had less luck, mostly due to the fact that his job was to roam the hallways and bathrooms and secure all of it. But he figured out the only outside-facing room of that lot was the bathroom, and securing that was easy as there

was only a relatively small window above the toilet that he didn't think a man could get through. Then he picked up his walkie talkie and jokingly said; "the bathrooms are secured ma'am and we await further orders." He clicked off and saluted at nothing.

Nigel had no work to do at all, or so he thought. Alex's office had no external walls. So Nigel did what Nigel did best; wasted time until the shit hit the fan, and even more after that.

Cameron had secured the window in the edit suite, but was on edge, and with a stick. Then he noticed the door was still open and ran to slam it. Gemma screamed from the studio.

"Would you like me to put the kettle on?" Alex attempted humour, and by and large failed. The man who entered looked as though his father was a brick wall and his mother was unfortunate by way of looks. Fortunately, he was wearing a balaclava.

"So ... what's up?"

"Like hell I'd tell you that." His voice even sounded like an avalanche.

"The fact is ... the police are on their way here, so you may as well."

"Yeah, nah. You didn't call the police. Your outfit has a hashtag '#TeamAlex' and is absolutely useless, so you didn't call the cops."

"So what would you have me do?"

"Kiss my shoes or just surrender? Also; your female employee – I'd ride that like a stolen bike".

"Don't remind me. That was six months of company time I'll never see again."

"So you and her ...?"

"Good lord no. But two employees ..."

During this conversation they had been slowly moving backwards, they reached the door, and Alex picked up his walkie talkie.

"Hey, guys," Alex said into the walkie-talkie, "I've lost the foyer". Channel 8; 0. Intruders; 1.

Cameron was in the edit suite and about 70% sure all was well. Then Alex's communication came through, so Cameron braced himself against the door to secure the room. This backfired when an intruder opened the door from the outside and knocked Cameron out. Channel 8; 0. Intruders; 2.

Nigel hadn't been paying attention at all. He'd been on Facebook, in fact. Convinced he was safe in Alex's office. So he wasn't expecting a balaclava'd intruder to knock him out and tie him up against the desk chair. The only communication he sent through was "yeah everything seems secure; oh fuc-" Channel 8; 0. Intruders; 3.

Ravi found himself in the toilet when a hand reached through the small window and grabbed his head. Then Ravi's head was smacked against the window until the glass cracked and the assailant climbed through, looping Ravi around his shoulders in a fireman's lift. Channel 8; 0. Intruders; 4.

Located in the studio, Gemma was on guard when Alex's walkie talkie went dead. Then she heard scratching at the window. Finding a cricket bat randomly lying around, she prepared to give her assailant the surprise of his life. Then he opened the window from the outside, but immediately proved he wasn't as impressive as he could be by falling clumsily through. He had minimal time to dust himself off before Gemma swung the bat, fair play be damned. Then she tied him up against the radiator, which has a whole set of accompanying jokes.

"The studio is secured".

Channel 8; 1. Intruders; 4.

Quite some time later and the team ended up in the studio. This meant that Gemma was entirely in control, and she had to deal with the team slowly waking up. For anyone that's ever tried to get a teenager out of bed on a Monday morning (or any morning, for that matter), you'll appreciate the difficulty and frustration of this task.

At the time, Alex hadn't thought about this turn of events; Gemma being in control was highly unusual simply by virtue of fact that there were also five balaclava'd men in the room. The intruders. And they weren't even unconscious. Eventually everyone was awake, and Gemma started off the proceedings.

"So. What were you all doing here?" she said with a knowing smile.

"We came to inspect the property." One of the balaclavas spoke. So it sounded like he had a mouthful of cotton, which, in a way he sort of did.

"Why?" The smile continued, and Alex began to suspect that all was not as it seemed.

"To ensure your working environment was adequately, well ... safe."

And then it made sense, and the team had been wrong all along. Alex moved to apologise for their behaviour. Not the half-arsed apology given by someone who's had a fight with their lover and doesn't know what they did wrong, but the apology of someone who thinks they ran over your cat.

One of the hoods waved him to stop, then removed his balaclava before speaking.

"Don't worry about it", he said. He was the one that looked like he'd been mashed. "We expected something like this; just a question – did you let us win? Or is that what you're like at sports?"

The guys all looked down. "We let you win," they mumbled, sharing a guilty look saying that was a lie.

"But Gemma knew all along," the hood continued. The shared guilty look turned to outrage, "DID SHE?"

"Well ... yeah. Everything since you guys got back has been an act, including the dropped coffee."

"And Ravi found out too."

The look of outrage left Ravi's face and transferred to Gemma's. "DID HE?"

"Yeah, when I went out for the pizza. I am a good actor, see?"

"And ... long story short, we cleared you to continue to work here," the man said. Then him and his cronies picked themselves up and left.

Alex looked at his phone. "Oh look, the budget's gone through. And Nigel, prepare to screen that thing we made in Hamilton."

Chapter 18: A Case Of Identified Mistakes

Gemma was conflicted. She knew there was no real place for her in the firm, as she'd always be knocking heads with Alex for control. But on the other hand, these people had given her a job. Sure, because not one but two of the guys had fancied her, but you take what you can get, while simultaneously telling the two somewhat undesirable gentlemen where to shove their affection. And where not to shove it, under any circumstances.

Then Alex called. He was cool, Gemma thought. He'd never fancied her. Or at least been good about hiding it. There was a meeting, apparently they had a job. A job that absolutely mustn't go wrong. Gemma loved those. They never went to plan.

So the team assembled, like a puzzle that actively disliked the thought of being put together, in Alex's office.

"An on-the-side job came through yesterday evening after we all went home. We need to do exactly what we normally do in a day, but without time to edit. So everything in one take and done properly with no messing up. And we have to be able to prove it. Do you guys think, if we waited for the rest of the day to write it all up and learn the stuff, that we could do that?"

"Have we managed to do any of the other jobs you set us over the last year or so?" Gemma interjected

"Well, sometimes. Not a lot."

"Like the time that cat food heist went horribly wrong, and the armed defenders' squad was called. Or the other time where Ravi got the laziness award, but couldn't be bothered to collect it." Nigel added his two cents, and got a funny look from Alex wondering why he still had a two-cent piece in his wallet.

So they wrote and rehearsed. And rehearsed. And re-wrote. And re-rehearsed. And re-re-wrote. And so on. Until later that evening, they had a functional script and everyone knew what they were doing. But no one cared anymore. They prepared the equipment and devised a way of proving they were in fact doing what they said they were doing. Nigel called it a 'camera'. Then they recorded everything and wrote it all down. Alex checked the tapes, and there weren't any mistakes.

They set it to air overnight and then left for the evening.

The next morning, the team arrived to a bulging email inbox. Or it would be bulging, if it had a physical presence. Many of these emails were complaint emails. From the more sophisticated "what are you guys thinking?" to the "the fuck is this shit?" end of the spectrum.

Alex was confused. The report had been exactly as specified, and gone out with little trouble, as proven by the record of transmission. Gemma received a text from the bosses at the station, saying she would need to find the team members who were responsible for the mess-up, and then they'd most likely be fired (from a cannon at 50 kilometres an hour).

So Gemma began the interviews straight away, and immediately wished she hadn't. Ravi categorically denied doing anything other than following the provided script, while Nigel avoided the questions when prompted, instead electing to point out that his animal-shaped biscuits had a label that said 'do not eat if the seal is broken'. Gemma filed Nigel's unwillingness to answer the questions in her 'let's come back to that' file. Although security tape footage showed Nigel at the edit desk for no more than twenty minutes; the approximate time it would take to import, stitch together and export the video. So Gemma could be about 60% sure he hadn't done it. (But not more,

because he had done this sort of thing in the past. Nigel had been introduced to the concept of being serious about a year ago, and had taken to it like a goose being told to cook a gourmet meal). Alex wouldn't have done it, and she couldn't have (she would have remembered, unless she'd been roofied but then a) why hadn't the boys done other less forgivable things to her and b) she wouldn't have even then because she would have been unable to move).

There was still one interview to go at the open of business hours the following morning. But Gemma was distracted, because she'd walked into the office to see Ravi eating tomato sauce straight from the bottle, hence cutting out the middle man (that being any food to put the sauce on), and eating raw pasta in alternate mouthfuls. The resulting confusion meant she was off her game when Cameron sat down for their interview. As she suspected. He denied doing anything to mess up the footage. So now Gemma was confused, because none of the team claimed to have done it, even in error – and yet one of them must have.

Nigel interrupted Gemma's train of thought with a "How goes the investigation, Chan of the Yard?" and Gemma threw her pen at him, told him on no uncertain terms to go away, then continued thinking.

Gemma still had no idea who had done it. If all the stories were accurate which she just sort of assumed for the sake of her sanity) then none of the team would have done it. So, in that case, who got into the studio in the middle of the night and switched the broadcast tape before its intended broadcast time. There had been no forced entry, no broken windows, no smashed doors, no ominous scratching ...

She shivered at the memory. Even though she'd been acting, it was still a little bit scary.

Ravi walked past. "Was it Professor Plum in the Library with the spinning thing?"

"It's revolver, Ravi. Revolver. And yes, yes that's the answer," Gemma said sarcastically. Some days she wished she could just up-and-leave this place. Then she remembered the resignation letter she was drafting.

A letter filed through the letterbox the next morning. It summarised a lawsuit.

Chapter 19: A Minor Hiccup in Proceedings

The lawsuit was serious. A slander suit for the content of the video, from the owners of a whiskey firm. At least in as far as Gemma could work out. It looked like a proper lawsuit from a law firm, not one of those fake ones you sometimes get from 'Nigerian Princes' that look like a four year old sat on a keyboard and printed the result. So the team were summoned to court and assigned a legal counsel. He was a nice chap, not much past 30 and with sandy brown hair and a permanently surprised expression that looked like he'd just seen a shark in the water (read: absolutely terrified expression. He was probably new to this ...) He set down the case files a little too heavily on the table, making a loud bang and then skidding across the table and over the other side, to make a satisfying splat as they hit the floor and scattered. He was here to brief them before the trial.

"So, my name's Jeff," he said, without laughing at his own joke. "You need to stick to the facts of the case and not get drawn into emotion too much. So far as I can see, the facts are that none of you did it. They will want to know who did. So they may bend those facts a bit, although I'll try and stop that from happening."

Then he questioned them each in turn. And took them to the courtroom. But all the preparation they had done was for nothing, as the judge simply gave an outline of the case, and then requested the offending clip be shown, for the record. There was no jury, it was likely this would be settled out of court, anyway.

The clip was played;

Open to Ravi standing in the TV 8 studio, holding a script and a vox pop microphone. He began to speak.

"This is a public service announcement about whiskey," he said while trying not to laugh because Nigel was probably pulling a face off-camera or something. He takes a swig of the whiskey and spits it, "good lord that's horrible. It's like that board game that's rules actually state 'the Game is over either when a player collects all cheeses, or when Daddy has a tantrum and kicks the board across the room'. Where was I? Oh yeah. A thing happened about some stuff that did a thing and stuff. That is all. Back to the studio.

The clip stopped, and the judge looked vaguely confused. "Why did you file a lawsuit over that?" he said to the opposing counsel, who then panicked and came up with a poorly thought-out response.

Nigel sarcastically whispered to Alex, "this would be a good legal comedy show – Jeff Sod's in 'Sod's Law'. It'd be brilliant."

"Maybe. It could be like this one guy that makes deliberately bad choices that somehow turn out well."

The next day, the team met up at their lawyer's firm. This was to do depositions that would form the basis of the case when it transferred to the courtroom the next day. So, naturally, gathering the team in the conference room took some time, with Ravi distracted by a cat outside the building, Gemma distracted by the building itself, and Nigel entirely failing to show up on time. To be fair, the building was worth looking (and so, to be completely precise, was

the cat), with a large and ultra-modern reception/lobby area where Jeff met them. He then led them through the steel, wood and just general overall glitz that was their offices into the conference room; a room that made the reception area look like a slum in a large city. For one thing, Gemma was nearly swallowed by the foam on the chair she sat down on. Which was annoying, because she soon had to try and get back out of it, to go off and do case research.

No sooner had she done this than Jeff began the depositions; electing to start with Cameron.

He admitted to faintly hearing a phone call that may (or may not) have been relevant between two members of the team. Both Ravi and Nigel, in their testimony that followed, stuck to their stories.

Then Ravi piped up; “can I ask a question?”

“Yes, what?” Jeff waited.

And waited.

Still nothing.

Nope.

Jeff motioned Ravi to continue.

“No, that was it.”

So, anyway, the best you can hope to get as a settlement –”

“is a nice house in the suburbs. But Auckland house prices ...” Nigel had showed up by now, and this interruption earned little more than a shake off the head from all involved.

Then Jeff admitted he would be unable to attend court the next day.

The team panicked. Not a subtle panic by the guy who has perhaps-but-maybe-not-after-all left his keys at home, but the full-on panic of a high-school student that has yet to sort out their life priorities and thinks forgetting there was a test today is a big deal. By once again resorting to a lively round of ‘Not Bitch’ that resulted in at least one stapler being chucked out the window, Ravi was elected as lawyer. And because the word of Not Bitch is final, they didn’t move to change that.

In court, things went roughly as expected.

The judge asked for a plea, and Ravi (entirely unsure of what was going on), just blurted “guilty”, then “just let us off, pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeease.” Then regretted that decision. So the judge allowed each side to make their cases, and when it was Ravi’s turn, he began getting testimonies with Nigel.

Gemma, who had (at least for the moment) skipped court to research the case, had figured out the phone call was between Alex and some businessman. Then she thought about that for a minute. If he testified ... that could be trouble, big trouble. So she raced back to court while texting Nigel to stall.

“... and then we left for the evening to let the broadcast play out.” Nigel continued, as he received a text. He looked down before he continued his testimony. “Now, let’s think about that for a minute ...”

Gemma had told Nigel to stall, and he would probably need to for some time. Due to Sod’s Law, the Auckland public transport system was at a standstill.

Ravi was confused, so requested a five-minute break to talk to Nigel; in which he discovered what he had been told to do. This was a bad idea, because now Ravi panicked.

The judge, upon returning to the case, asked “do hurry up. We don’t have until Christmas. Who’s your next witness?”

“A guy called ... Ravi Sharma,” said Ravi, reading the next name off the list. “Huh. Someone has the same name as me.”

“That is you, you idiot.”

“Oh, right.”

“So, where were you that night?” Ravi asked his own questions from the sheet then also dictated his answers. Then realised he was still stalling for Gemma.

He panicked, froze, unfroze and spoke. “I- I- I claim insanity.”

“Lawyers aren’t allowed to claim anything. Only the defence can claim insanity, although in your case I think that’s about right.”

Gemma burst in. “Could we request a day to get our shit sorted out,” she panted. Look of outrage from the judge because of her language, followed up by a guilty look.

Outside, she told Alex why.

“Am I allowed a short, violent exclamation?” he asked.

“Yes?”

“DAMN.”

Chapter 20: One Day to Save the Station

So they had one day to sort out their problems. Everyone involved knew that a court decision would shut down the station, but no-one was particularly prepared to address it. And because they had just one day to find out who this businessman was, why he was suing them, and stop him, as well as finding out who had committed the crime and how they had done it – Ravi took the opportunity to have a nap. And Alex came clean about the email.

“That was the guy who hired us asking us to do that job. He later called me and said some weird stuff, like that he’d need to collect the tapes pre-broadcast. I convinced him not to, and to just record it from the TV. Then I never heard from him again.

Then the executives got in touch through a phone call in which they said they’d shut down the station if they lost the court case, and Alex pretended he wasn’t listening and that the line was dodgy, even though he just crinkled paper in front of the receiver and banged the phone on his desk. But after the it’s-a-bad-line-on-my-end-oh-what-a-terrible-shame-i-can’t-hear-you-byeeeeeee of the phone call, the writing was very much on the wall. Both literally and figuratively because it turned out there had been graffiti over the last week.

Alex showed the team the email, and set Cameron and Ravi; who wasn’t in the best mood after being woken up, on to the task of arranging a meeting with the businessman. Then Alex arranged the papers on his desk (because bad organisation got you nowhere), and saw Gemma’s resignation letter on the top of his paper pile. She must have put it there recently.

To their great credit, Cameron and Ravi at least tried to be professional. Although the person who answered the call was bombarded with puns until he passed the phone on to someone else. Basically it started at; ‘I’m Richard Dawkins. Thank you, good night, and God Bless. Shit.’ And went to ‘I’ve called the SWAT team; that should sort the fly problem.’ Eventually, however Cameron found himself talking to the right person and arranging a meeting for later that afternoon.

Meanwhile, Gemma had been called in to Alex’s office to discuss her leaving, if she was leaving.

“Is there anything I can say that’ll make you stay?”

“I don’t think so. You could promise that there’d be no stories like “Breakfast as Usual” we broadcast on a slow news day a few years back. Or try to actually do the jobs properly, is that too much to ask?”

“Yes, I think so. I mean, Ravi once printed a script at size 200 font, after being asked to print a picture sized 200px and a script. So, yes. I think that isn’t going to happen. Have you definitely made up your mind?”

“Not definitely, but I’m pretty sure, especially now.”

“So let me know in a week.”

“You never know, I might walk out before then.”

Julie showed up to work nice and early, and Gemma went red and her whole face tensed with anger when she saw.

“We’re going to be working with that bitch?”

“Ugh. Her. We’re probably in this mess because she couldn’t keep her bitch mouth shut.” It turned out the feelings were mutual and all that was needed here was a referee.

“So, anyway, Alex,” Gemma moved on, “what did you actually say?”

So they wrote the whole thing down and panicked. Gemma and Julie sorted through the testimony trying to manipulate it so it might make them look good. The whole meeting room table was covered in files. About midway through, Gemma looked up and said; “You’d look a lot better if you didn’t wear glasses.”

“Yeah well you’d look a lot better if I wasn’t wearing my glasses either, bye.” Then Julie walked briskly out of the room.

Gemma followed; “and what’s happening between you and Nigel, huh?”

“Happening? What do you mean?” She didn’t even flinch.

Then Alex walked around the corner, “who started the talk of sex lives?”

Both girls made the same movement but Julie was faster and Gemma only did it in response; “It was her, she started it.”

“Well, okay. Let me know how it goes ...” Alex wandered off, disinterested.

“Bitch.”

“Bitch.”

Then they headed in opposite directions.

The executive (turns out they sent Steve, Gemma's ex) met them in their offices. Which may well have been a mistake. Because their client met them there at the same time.

Alex started the meeting by alternating questions to the two people which in hindsight he probably should have met independently.

And then he remembered something.

The businessman had a posh and nasal voice and seemed oddly familiar. Then he stuck out a hand as Alex said "and what may I call you?"

"Sir. Call me Sir".

Oh, yeah that's right. That guy.

"What do you want?" Ravi had remembered him, and obviously decided he didn't like him very much.

"Okay, stop the hostility. I can explain."

Everyone was surprised. They were all expecting an angry lecture and now looked like a fifteen year old that had driven through a fence and then been told 'don't worry, we didn't want it anyway'.

"Does the basis for the case even make sense to you?" he asked in a patronising tone, which was at least fair because none of the team knew what was going on. "Did it never make sense to you how none of you could possibly or would possibly have done it?"

And then Alex and Gemma began to understand at the same time.

"So you got a key somehow and snuck in to swap the key?"

"Well yes." Sir stopped, to let the drama of that remark settle in, although there wasn't particularly much drama there in the first place, so the silence became a tad awkward.

"Well," Steve was the first to move, "thanks for wasting all our time, Sir". And he left.

Then the team stared angrily for the next ten minutes and the man felt uncomfortable breaking the angry stalemate that had formed. Then Gemma said, "so there must be a point to why you did all this."

Sir replied, "yes, that is why I came here today. I have a serious job for you and needed to see if you coped well under pressure. It seems that, at least in the short term, you can. So this is the job. In a month, there is a local election somewhere up North and they want live coverage on a network, but none of the majors will do it. So I want you guys to. Basically that's it."

"And that's worth a whole court case?"

"Well yeah. Oops. Hadn't properly thought it through."

"So, remind us to ask you what we had to do in a month then we'll do it," Nigel cut in.

"How does that work?" Cameron was confused.

"Easy. If you ask him what he reminded you to do, then he'll tell you what he reminded you to do, and so remind himself to do it in a position that he can, meaning that you won't have to do the thing he asked you to do in the first place."

"Riiiiiiight. Why don't I just write it in the calendar?"

The woman called a week later, and at first Alex thought it was one of those recorded messages, but it wasn't. Which was awkward. Then she asked Alex to do something for her. A meeting ...

Chapter 21: Police, Secrets and a Large Dose of Confusion

The police station was darkly lit so huge shadows were cast across the walls by the single lamp sitting in the middle of the table. The whole team were being interviewed, one at a time. Lightning struck and a faint cackle of a witch could be heard in the distance. No, it couldn't. But that was how it felt.

"So, tell me in simple terms exactly what happened." The policeman interviewing Alex began.

"It started when a rival TV station got in touch. They wanted to meet us and eventually it was decided that I'd go".

Alex received the email from a girl called Helena who worked at the other broadcast network, requesting a meeting. He didn't tell the others about it at all.

Gemma was being interviewed by the policeman. "He told us about it after he realised what she wanted. He wanted to know what we thought ..."

"ABSOLUTELY NOT."

"Oh, come on it can't be that bad, can it?" Alex was on the back foot here, he hadn't expected this level of backlash from the whole team.

“Look, we just can’t let you do this. What if it goes wrong?” Gemma was the voice of reason in this particular case, although everyone except Alex had been against the idea, just less articulate about it.

Cameron spoke to the police officer slowly and carefully. “He must’ve done it anyway. We wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t. I don’t know any more than that, though.”

Alex met the girl at a coffee shop somewhere in the City. It was expensive, but going on the company card. That’s the best sort of first date; let your workplace pick up the bill. She was his sort of person, too. In control, sophisticated. Or the sort of person he liked to think he was.

Nigel had his head in his hands. He probably had work to not quite be doing. “So we all met her; well, except Cameron, he wasn’t in.”

“Guys, this is Helena.”

“Yeah, cool. Nice to meet you.”

The way Alex and Helena were standing made Nigel uneasy. Then there was an awkward silence, so Nigel said “should I go and stick my head in the oven?”

“We’ll need you in a few minutes.”

“Microwave, then.” And he left.

Ravi wasn’t really paying attention. Which was funny, because the policeman wasn’t either. “Then, after Nigel left, Helena wanted to know our secrets of success.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Alex almost spat out his water.

“You guys do realise your channel is quite successful ... apparently people like watching idiots mucking around.”

“Certainly explains the popularity of Top Gear. So what exactly are you asking?”

“You give me your secrets and you can have ours.”

There was a faint ‘ding’ noise somewhere in the distance.

“So I figured out a way we could do the trade, so it was ensured that we both got what we wanted.” Alex continued his interview.

“BUT IT’S A CRIME.” Gemma was livid. Alex guessed this was probably the final straw that broke/is breaking the camel’s (although he’d never call her that to her face) back.

“Well okay, it’s not like we’re going to get caught and what of we learn a lot from her? It’s not like she’ll learn anything from us!” Alex was also exasperated now.

“All the more reason she’d turn us in afterwards! It’s like fake rape accusations by women that are disappointed.”

“But he went ahead with it anyway, around the time of the monthly office ‘do’.” Nigel laughed at the memory – his own private joke.

“Do come in,” Alex said to Helena, who was standing apprehensively at the door of the studio that had been decorated with balloons. Well, balloon. You couldn’t waste money on these things.

Nigel, Cameron and Ravi were all crowded around the door.

“Don’t you guys have stuff to be getting?” Alex asked, and they went off. No sooner had they done this then Alex moved a desk chair and a few tripods to block off the door, and beckoned Helena to sit down. Then he pulled two cans of V from a nearby drawer and opened them with a nonchalant flick of his wrist. Then his can exploded over his shirt.

“Well,” he said, looking down at the mess, “cheers.” He passed the can over.

“Look, Alex,” Helena said, “I fancy you, at least I think I do. Never really done this ... sort of thing.”

“So if all this works out, you’re saying we could ...” he didn’t finish his question. He didn’t need to.

“Yeah. If it works out. But if it doesn’t then ...” She didn’t finish her statement. Her slightly threatening tone made the finish of the sentence clear.

Nigel was being interviewed. “I would think that she hung him up with duct tape, if you like. Made sure that his case against her wouldn’t have a leg to stand on.”

“By doing what?”

“Cutting off his legs. Metaphorically, of course.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, she could do many things. With Alex, asking him out is probably enough. That would certainly explain

why he did it.”

“He did it? You don’t know it was him”.

Nigel said nothing, but a glint in his eyes told that he knew more than he was letting on.

“So I don’t know what to do.” Alex was conflicted, and had chosen Nigel as his moral compass.

“What you need is someone who could plausibly have got their secrets and be framed for the crime, but who wouldn’t lose too much from being fired.”

Gemma chose this precise moment to walk in and rather loudly announce “I’ve made up my mind. I’ll leave in a month.” She placed her official resignation letter on the desk.

Then two things happened at once; Cameron and Ravi, who had heard this, looked at each other in surprise, and Alex and Nigel looked at each other as if all their problems had been solved. Because, in fairness, they had.

Gemma was fed up with answering questions, but she carried on anyway. “Then I noticed something was wrong and began to investigate. Alex noticed, but I covered my tracks pretty well, I think.”

Gemma looked through Alex’s computer to try and figure it out. But then the man himself walked in and she panicked.

But recovered.

“What’re you doing?”

“Typing up the meeting with the executives from this morning.”

“Gist?”

“Program is shit, go back to the zoo.”

“Ah, yes. That meeting.” Then he moved on.

Cameron and Ravi leaned back around from the door in a conspiratorial manner.

“So,” Alex’s interview continued, “I decided against it. Gemma must have stolen their secrets – that’s the only explanation.”

“Well, someone else may have done it. So no.”

“Cameron and Ravi are the kind of people that use our cameras as fly swats, so I think that unlikely, and Nigel wouldn’t do that; he doesn’t care enough about the station.”

“The effing camera won’t effing go for the effing shoot this effing morning.” Nigel was pissed off.

“Here, I’ll fix it,” Ravi took the camera, while Alex wondered aloud, “Is that wise?”

“Yeah, but that was just once. He’d only be able to break it if he literally dropped –”

There was a massive smash sound in the distance, followed by a loud “oops” from Ravi.

“Too bad Ravi’s just a massive idiot. That’s not covered by the extended warranty.” Alex to Nigel, in low tones.

Then Gemma came in. Cross. “You guys need to tell me what’s going on.”

“And that brings you pretty much up to date. After that, the other station filed charges. Then we were called here.” Alex’s interview. Near the end.

“So, let’s sort out the chronology of events here, just to see if I have it down right.” The policeman was checking his facts and probably bored off his face. It didn’t help that he was scooting around in his office chair while talking.

“All right,” replied Alex. “First, we received an email.”

“Yup.”

“Then she wanted to meet me, then the team.”

“Yup, and yup.”

“Stop interrupting. Then she asked for our secrets, then she said she fancied me. Then I gave her our secrets which is insider trading if anyone had a problem with that, but on our side we don’t. Then she gave us her secrets, which IS a problem.”

“Okay.”

“So Gemma gave out our secrets and received theirs.”

“So Gemma’s at fault here?”

“That’s about right, yes.”

Gemma walked in to the hospital because Alex couldn’t make it. The room was slightly lighter than it had been before.

“Hey, um sir? Alex’s dad? Um, yeah, hi. I’m Gemma. I work with Alex.”

“Oh yes, hi. I was expecting Alex ... you don’t know where he is, do you?”

“Something came up, so he sent second-best,” she said, gesturing to herself.

“Is it really as bad as he says it is?”

“Not really anymore, but it used to be. Julie’s just started working as an intern, so the workload’s calmed down a bit.”

“Julie? Did she used to report for TV7?”

“I think so. Why?”

“There was some scandal or something. I should tell Alex next time he’s here.”

“I’ll pass it on. At least the life is interesting. It’s like we’re in some sort of sitcom.”

“I miss the days when my life was interesting,” the older man said, shifting in the bed and looking nostalgic (if that’s even possible), “when you could get up whenever you liked and anything you did that day would be interesting. After you turn thirty, it’s just work-sleep-work-sleep-work-die. And by that I don’t mean you die at work – but that can happen sometimes if you work as an accountant and someone decides to buy a combine harvester.”

“Wh-what?”

“And then you settle in to the monotony of debits and credits.”

“Yeah, but I suppose it doesn’t really matter anymore, does it?”

“No – I’m stuck here. Hey, could you turn up the morphine?”

Gemma did so, and soon after Alex’s dad was tripping.

“It’s funny how you can live vicariously through other people sometimes,” the older man said, then; “Tell Alex that I –” Then he stopped and Gemma waited for him to continue. And waited.

Then a nurse came in, and asked Gemma to leave; apparently he’d died.

Sometime later, Alex met with Gemma, where she was officially fired. For some reason the charges had been dropped on that condition.

Cameron and Ravi stood outside Alex’s office listening in through the door, and they heard all of this. Then Ravi got a bloody nose when Gemma opened the door on her way out.

“So, do you want to go out sometime?” Even with a bloody nose, Ravi had no tact.

“As I’ve said, I’ll let you know.”

Cameron interjected, “that’s not very close to a date.” Then he laughed.

“Closer than you’ll ever get, you swine.” Gemma threw the contents of a glass of water at Cameron, then swished out of the room, closing the door gracefully behind her. Cameron looked very confused by this last conversation, but Ravi changed the topic.

Holding his nose to stop the bleeding, Ravi said to Cameron; “Alex’s unfit to lead the station, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes, I would. But who would replace him?”

“Who indeed,” Ravi said, tapping his nose knowingly, “ouch, fuck.” The bleeding started again.

Two more weeks passed. The team prepared to travel up North to film the election for Sir. All appeared calm. Like a duck. Calm on top but paddling like hell underneath. Something was brewing. It may just possibly have been Ravi’s apple cider.

Chapter 22: Once Upon A Time In The North

Let’s imagine for a moment that the camera of the mind’s eye is focussed on the wedding venue, and all the chaos that includes.

Had Ravi got his way there’d have been a food fight by now, but no. Nigel had been told by more than one person to keep the event civilised.

The whole team including all relevant hangers-on were present. This event could not go wrong.

Which, of course, meant that it would, as soon as Nigel started speaking. So he tried again. He couldn’t let down the people who were getting married. This was their wedding day. He looked for Julie’s face in the audience, then tried to begin speaking. No-one was listening, but he started talking ...

Nigel thought quietly, so as not to offend anyone, *why’d it have to be them?*

Shift back to the present day.

Ravi and Cameron had it all carefully planned out. They’d gather intelligence for a while; by bugging the station in Auckland and then placing five strategic ‘bugs’ which were cicada shells with webcams in) in discreet locations in the workstation in the village; which had a long and unpronounceable name.

Eventually they had set up base for what was thought to be a two-week election campaign and coverage. Suffice it to say, the town was boring, and the team were suffering because of it. This was evident in a number of ways; the team

had spent all of the second day of coverage – where literally nothing happened at all – in the studio attempting to record a weather report blooper in which the green screen falls off the wall. And failing, mostly because that way it wasted more time. There was nothing to report – the election was running smoothly, debates were on Friday and there wasn't any scandal to speak of.

The drive to the place had been similar to the group's previous road trip; games and jokes. The game 'fake road signs' had filled the time rather neatly, with Nigel's 'if you can taste the sign, you've crashed', and Alex's 'You are now 200 meters beyond the junction that your piece-of-shit sat-nav is telling you you're approaching now' being particular highlights.

Then they arrived and found that the building they'd rented needed tidying up. So Nigel did it.

"Oh, he's using a vacuum cleaner now?" Cameron was being smart, but Nigel had a reply, "I was using it to suck the life out of the room. But you're here now, so I can stop."

A week later, and Alex was on the phone, to Helena. Well, Helena's answer machine. Ravi and Cameron were listening through the door using a glass to amplify the sound. Every so often they would move and whack heads accidentally.

"So," Cameron said, in minute-long intervals, "how are we gonna do this?"

"I don't really know, but he needs to be gone before we're back home."

"So, would we just tell the executives about bad practise?"

Cameron was confused as to what this would achieve. "They'd just blame us and it'd backfire. We need a way that we'd be able to control the station."

"So ... what?"

"I'll let you know."

Alex was still on the phone, and making a somewhat awkward phone call to Helena's automated receptionists (i.e. answer machine).

"Helena, it's Alex here, and this might be a stupid question but do you like music? No, I mean do you want to go to a concert? I mean of course you do, but do you want to see it with me? Oh I give up. You get the idea. I'm asking you out to a thing, just y'know. Let me know or something. Or don't. I'll be emigrating to a South Pacific island at the end of the day. So ..."

"This reminds me of you asking Gemma out," Cameron said.

Then the candidate of the election screwed something up. Well, someone. But there was a fiasco, anyhow. And they reported it, and tried not to make it worse; in which they by and large succeeded. But the candidate still had problems with the team's faintly mocking and satirical tone. But the greater majority of the team was not really paying attention to this or the campaign, because the greater attention was, as always, on the overthrow of the station. Cameron was editing the footage of some election coverage for broadcast in the afternoon, while Ravi was attempting to sneak around like a spy to gather intel. He only ended up getting weird looks from almost everyone in the village and a constipation prescription from the doctor. So Cameron called Ravi to see progress.

"Dude, have you found anything?"

"Well, no. But I have got some lovely new tablets if you want one ..."

"What?"

"Never mind. Oh but I did hear something –"

Then Alex and Nigel walked past, deep in conversation and going the other way. Ravi heard the word 'Gemma' used multiple times. Dropping the phone, he went after the two, in an attempt to glean this gossip. Unfortunately, this had the side-effect of leaving Cameron hanging.

"Ravi? Where have you gone? Hello?" He spoke desperately into a phone to a person that was no longer there.

"Ravi, you hare-brained fu –" he started, then hung up the line.

They did it right for once, and the jokes were all correct, and they didn't screw anything up and they were (for the first time) happy with what they'd done. And the candidate still didn't like it. Apparently the "have a look at this clip" joke; in which Ravi pulled out a paper clip and held it for five minutes, was one step too far.

So he had a few words to say to Alex. Which were, as is often the way, said on an empty field with both parties wearing boxing gloves.

"You really should control your team," the candidate said to Alex, as if this was new news.

"I've been trying but it's like a rip in the ocean. You're better to just let it take you then call for help."

"So call for help."

"But why? All that's happened is you don't like the way we present, so why hire us?"

“Sir hired you, not me.”

“Huh. I never thought to ask him what he thought.”

“The blithering idiot likes your style, says it’s endearing. Like Top Gear.”

And the chat went on for a while. Then they had an obligatory round of boxing, which Alex won. He still won’t tell anyone how.

Then the team met in their offices, and the shit hit the fan.

In which, Ravi and Cameron wanted to take over station, and were prepared to blackmail him using their knowledge of the insider trading. In which they had in fact already done all of this and were telling him with just enough warning to leave the station. Jump before he was pushed, as they called it. In which, Ravi spent the first ten minutes of the discussion thinking that ‘insider trading’ had to do with people.

Then two things happened at once.

Firstly, Alex received a call from the executives demanding that he step down; that Cameron and Ravi were on hand to hear, and then take credit for.

He asked just one angry question, while he was throwing things into a large cardboard box; “Why’d you do that for?”

“Gemma” was the unanimous reply from Cameron and Ravi.

And the other thing that happened was that Rangitoto Island erupted.

Chapter 23: A Blanket of Chaos

Gemma experienced the eruption first-hand because she hadn’t left the city. First there was an almighty rumble and a cloud of smoke, then the smoke just didn’t stop. Then the ash cut off air travel and confined the city to their homes. She didn’t know too much more than that, but apparently the ash was high enough that by mid-afternoon the whole of the North Island had been blanketed. She’d been paying attention to the coverage of some Northland election, when the newsroom did something stupid and she heard a familiar voice (Cameron’s) go “for fuck’s sake, Ravi”. Then the reception went blocky and, after a time, cut out altogether.

In an unusual way, she missed them, but then she remembered why she’d left. Even though she could’ve set up the print division and had a proper job. But she didn’t want to work there anymore. Oh, well; she wasn’t sure what she wanted, exactly. She sat back in her lounge and listened to the patter of ash on the roof and eventual groaning and creaking, and hoped like hell it would hold up.

The team started the morning peacefully. Then by about lunchtime, the ash began to be visible over the horizon. Cameron held a meeting that Alex, unsurprisingly, was not in attendance for.

“So, gents. We don’t have a lot of time to get our shit sorted and get back to the City, before the ash gets here, and means we can’t move around”.

“Why would we go back to the city?”

“All our stuff’s there, and people will be wondering if we’re alive.”

“Really? Give me a decent shovel and a clean shot and I can fix that.” The team saw Alex standing in the doorway.

“What are you here for?”

“My stuff. I’m certainly not here to help you. Pity the station’s the Special Corporation for Authentic Media. Should be something with the anagram C-U-N-T-S.” Tense, as you would expect.

“Ouch, man.”

“Not my fucking fault. You sacked me for fuck-knows reason and you expect me to be civil and *help* you to do your jobs. Well, I’m sorry, but I tried that and the three of you are simply beyond help, especially mine. So I’ll get my stuff and leave, then care less what happens to you people and whether or not you get back to the City.” Alex left, slamming the door. Then there was a stunned silence for twenty seconds, until Ravi got out his phone to ring Gemma.

The nerve of it. They wanted her back. It was as if they had no recollection of what they’d done, and how she’d been humiliated. She wouldn’t go back and she told them that. Nigel had been the lucky caller, so she’d had no troubles telling him where to stick his questions. If it had been Ravi or Cameron, she may have been a little guiltier about the fallout of being rude to them. But it wasn’t so she didn’t care.

Air travel had, by the evening, been cut off because of the ash. Also by this time, Ravi’s innate paranoia and panic had set in. He was pacing around, ranting.

“I only need to make 34, then I’ve beaten Jesus at living,” he said. Cameron was quick to point out that this would occur 16 years in the future. At which point Ravi just stopped talking and carried on pacing at a faster rate.

Alex's phone rang. It was the hospital. Given the slightly twisted narrative logic in this story, we already know what it's about. So we'll leave Alex to think; process the information, among other things.

After some time, Alex realised he needed the team. To get home, mostly. He didn't want to spend any more time with them than he had to. But he was stuck here if he didn't. So he packed up his stuff, not that it had been unpacked from its transfer from the station basecamp, and went back across to ask for a lift.

"Could you guys possibly give me a lift back to Auckland?" There was an awkward silence. "Of course you could," Alex answered his own question because they weren't going to.

"Why would we help you?" Cameron was hostile and to be fair, he had a right to be. Nigel hadn't been the brunt of Alex's earlier rant and Ravi wasn't paying attention because he was pacing around muttering about life insurance.

"Sure," Nigel said, earning an evil glance from Cameron, and grateful nod from Alex.

"Why would you do that?" Cameron asked, as if he'd forgotten what Alex had done for them.

So Nigel said why. "Because, like it or not, we need him to run this. And he's no good to us here, is he?"

So they set off in a car; which was risky, but desperate times call for desperate measures. It turned out they couldn't leave after all, and were waved back by an unfortunate policeman getting buried in ash on a roadside. They convened in the team's headquarters.

In general, Alex seemed preoccupied. Nigel wouldn't quite have called him sad, he knew sad too well.

"So what do we do now?" Ravi asked, while Alex was taking a drink. He stopped, and with one smooth move, emptied the glass over Ravi's head. Then was told to grow up by Nigel, which is almost ironic.

"Look guys. We don't have to forgive each other just yet and I do think there are solid reasons to be pissed off, but could we at least stop being childish until we get out of this thing?"

Then Alex, Ravi and Cameron all grumbled responses that could be construed as "ok, fine." But Nigel couldn't be sure. Then Ravi called Gemma back, on loudspeaker.

Gemma was on the phone already to the journalist.

"It turns out, as a journalist," Gemma was saying to the politician, "we need access to the city and you need us to have whatever we need because we decide how you're seen by the public. So if you want to win the campaign you'll get us out of the town up north and back into the city. Because believe me, we can fuck you up. Clear?" Then she hung up the phone. And Ravi called.

She said she would come back to the station. She said that, if the station survived, they could make a print division. She also screwed up slightly, and let it slip she 'wouldn't say no' to either Cameron or Ravi if they asked her out.

Then both Cameron and Ravi asked her out at the same time. Like, exactly the same time. To the word. So she had to say no to them both, at least for the time being. So she laid the phone down with a slight smile.

Ravi put the phone down. Cameron said to him, "you look tense, man."

Ravi fidgeted and said, "I'm not tense at all."

Then there was a loud creak from the roof, and Ravi shot about a foot up in the air screaming "FUCKING FUCK THE FUCK OFF – I'm fine."

And something occurred to Nigel. "Hey guys, you know how when volcanoes erupt there are sometimes earthquakes and we're on a small little island in the middle of the ocean?"

Everyone slowly turned and went "... yeah?"

"I'm just thinking, there could be tsunamis."

The team turned on the radio, to hear about any new damage, and right on cue, the first of the waves was announced. It would hit Auckland city in an hour.

The team felt helpless. No transport, no communication (any more), no way out.

Chapter 24: Under The Blanket

The ash had cut off all telephone and broadcast communications except radio, and the team didn't possess a radio. Then the town started rationing food, and, by their strict definition, Ravi didn't count as a person. He couldn't work out what that definition was, then Nigel told him he'd taken his name off the list as a practical joke. Which backfired, because it couldn't be put back on. It seemed the rest of the North Island was rationing its food in this manner, and other restrictions (to 'improve public wellbeing') were going to be imposed before the end of the week. Because of the added stress, Alex became the de facto leader of the station again, and they recorded a short and by-and-large reassuring message for the public; Ravi telling them to stay inside and keep to the rations, and that everything would be OK. This didn't quite come across, because he seemed to be about to cry.

The team met up in their offices, as they often did, and decided the only way to leave the town would be to ‘fake’ a medical emergency. But then Gemma pointed out it wouldn’t work. A lively game of ‘not bitch’ ensued, in which Ravi’s leg was broken by a stray piece of doorframe. Without needing the ‘accident’ cover story (because, as it turned out, it was completely true) the team tried to get help. Eventually, they were notified that a helicopter would arrive in about two hours, if the ash kept low. Nigel singlehandedly edited and exported the messages in under twenty minutes, a new personal best (his previous had been measured in days). It was almost like he was committing to the station more. Almost, because then he turned around and ‘accidentally’ threw his packing list out the window, where it was immediately buried. The helicopter arrived, and was branded with the politician’s campaign logo. The team were confused by that.

In the air, and with all their stuff, the team finally had time to relax and ask the important questions.

“Ravi, do you know how we can monitor what’s going on in Auckland when we land?”

“Well, no. But I do still have a few of these,” he pulls out a few webcam-infested cicada shells that he’d used for bugging the station.

“That’s really clever. But also annoying that you did it. And then it’s clever. But a bit annoying. But mostly clever. Well done, Ravi”.

“Is this it for the station?” Nigel asked while on his laptop doing God knows what.

“Yes, I would think so. Delete all reports from the D Drive, we only have one more show.”

Nigel looked up in a pissed off manner from his screen, where he was editing explosions into some old footage.

“Whatever you say,” he sulked.

They looked down at the city, and couldn’t see much because a thick blanket of ash covered the ground, and made the roads highly risky and unstable for cars. The smoke around the whole city was beginning to clear and show the extent of the damage. Especially to the Harbour Bridge, which had collapsed. Then a phone rang, which shouldn’t have been possible. It was Gemma; she was put on loudspeaker.

“In dystopia films, you know how you always wonder why the rest of the world’s doing nothing about it.” Gemma asked the question idly, although she earned everyone’s attention because they had not, in fact, ever thought that.

“No, what do you mean?” Cameron. Unsure whether his concern was genuine or faked to impress her.

“It’s just that we know why. The rest of the world doesn’t care, not really.”

“Oh.” Then they neared landing, and Ravi piped up.

“Oh but before we go, entering our “Who killed the employees of TV 8” competition is really simple. All you have to do is email a four-digit code to the head of BCB 8 Drama, who will then forward a copy of the code to me, and simultaneously send you a second entry form which can be used to get priority so we may place you in the draw. What’s the big prize? Who knows?” He tapped his nose in a knowing fashion. “You’ll have to wait and see”. Aimed at the pilot, Cameron supposed.

Then Nigel’s phone rang. It was Julie.

“Where are you guys?”

“Honey, calm down. We’ll be back in town soon.” This language was thoroughly perplexing to all the others.

“Stop patronising me. Actually you know what ...” she trailed off and then a tinny rendition of Taylor Swift’s ‘We Are Never, Ever Getting Back Together’ played like holding music until Nigel decided she wasn’t going to stop.

“So are you actually dating her or not?” Cameron had heard the whole thing.

“I don’t know.” Lapsed into silence.

The helicopter landed, and Nigel was the first to move and get out of the awkward situation.

“See you all back at the station,” Nigel said, as he unclipped his seatbelt.

“Gemma, in case we don’t make it back,” Ravi paused, unsure, then continued, “I think I love you.”

Gemma didn’t respond because they’d landed, and she’d hung up. She could deal with that later. She met them at the runway although there was no time to talk.

Seeing the damage to Auckland City, the team realised they would have to broadcast genuine disaster messages. Ravi began working on the script immediately, which began with the joke; “Hello and welcome to 8 News, we say what we like because what does it matter?” Then the helicopter landed and the team filed out quickly, to head back to the station. But Alex had a better idea, so he stayed to talk to the pilot. The team were all running the two blocks from where the chopper had landed back to the station, except Gemma who had taken all the gear and conned a young gentleman out of his car using a snog-and-flash combo.

Cameron saw a building that looked set to collapse, and some of the workers milling around concernedly outside said there was still a person inside, and that the building would likely fall down in five minutes unless they were rescued. There was movement inside the building and the person could see outside, meaning Cameron could also see them. It was Helena, and just as this registered a hail of bricks and mortar collapsed in the doorway of the building. Cameron would later liken the situation to Schrodinger's Cat – where he was unsure whether Helena was alive or dead. So he made a life decision, in that he took his life in his hands, and began trying to help Helena out of the rubble.

Two minutes. There wasn't much time.

On her route back to the studio, Gemma took her eyes off the road for a minute and a minor pothole made her veer off the centre of the road, and then hopelessly close to the edge of a 10-meter chasm that had been created. Two wheels over and the car looked to be stable, but Gemma was in the driver's seat. So the weight distribution could, at any minute, tip and send her plunging to her death.

Ravi and Nigel had been faster than anyone else, and arrived back first. They had prepared the report and were waiting for it to broadcast, while simultaneously packing up their stuff to leave. It was unlikely they'd ever come back here after this. Then they noticed two things; a loud bang on the roof meant that ash dislodged and blocked the doorway, sealing them inside; and Ravi looked to where he'd left the camera, and it wasn't there.

Alex was late getting off the helicopter, and the pilot needed to take off before the ash covering meant they were unable to fly. So they did that, and Alex realised he'd met the pilot before – Steve. Steve must have realised this too, because he mucked up a control of some sort and sent the helicopter into a downwards spiral ...

Chapter 25: Desperation, a Quest and Riding on Horseback

An image abruptly cuts into the otherwise empty broadcast station. It is Ravi's face, which is perhaps not the best of beginnings. Then he speaks, urgently, and panicked.

"Hello, everyone," he says, looking over his shoulder off-camera. He seems to get some form of assent, then he continues, "I don't have a lot of time. You need to stay in your homes if possible, and try to keep calm and hydrated. Because there are some people that have travelled unnecessarily, and are suffering for it."

Gemma is still in her car teetering over the edge of the chasm, Alex and Steve brace for impact in the helicopter mid-spiral, and Cameron dons a hard-hat readying himself to help Helena.

"We'll do what we can to help you, but more or less you're on your own. Good luck." The image disappears.

Gemma decides on a plan of action, Cameron begins to dig, and Alex and Steve hit the ground tail-first, with an almighty bang.

If their lives had a title sequence, this is where it would go.

Alex and Steve felt the impact. There would have been no way possible not to feel it. However, due to their low altitude and the angle of impact, they got off reasonably lightly, with bruises and the like but nothing else serious. Stumbling out of the wreckage, they then slowly hobble their way along the road back to the station.

Gemma made a decision. She unbuckled her seatbelt and began to move out of the driver's seat by standing on it and climbing over the back. Had she stood on the carpet, the car would've tipped; as it was the whole thing wobbled like a panicky bank robber's conscience. But she'd made it, for want of a better term, into the back seat. Using a tripod to smash the window of the car door, she got out and called for some help. A passing white van (driven by a nice old woman doing a furniture delivery) picked her (and all the gear) up about ten minutes later, and they headed to the station.

Cameron figured out very early on that it wouldn't be easy to move the rocks and rescue Helena without collapsing the building. With Helena's assumed help from the other side, Cameron began chipping away at rocks, stopping after every blow from his axe to wait for the creaks in the now-unstable building to subside (which may not have been the best practise, but Cameron didn't care). After about half an hour of hitting rocks, Helena could be pulled through. No sooner had she been pulled through than the front half of the building collapsed; she must have nudged a rock on her way through, Cameron wasn't sure. She had, much like Alex and Steve, scrapes and bruises but nothing serious. They set off towards the station together, with Cameron keeping his hard hat on because it could be useful. While the other were all fighting for their lives, Nigel and Ravi were bored. Well, the report was still being transferred to the system for broadcast, and they'd lost the camera. To pass the time, Ravi had gone full-on Sherlock Holmes. Meanwhile, Nigel was taking run-ups at the door to dislodge the ash, and stopping for breath after every run.

"So if we had it over there, and you're looking at me like you know something, then you've done something with it," Ravi murmured, walking over to Nigel. "What have you done?"

"Oh," Nigel was laughing, "I've done nothing." He took another run, made a satisfying crash sound against the door, and hurt his ribcage, but other than that did absolutely nothing.

"Then what? You must know where it is."

"I know exactly where it is, but you just need to look." BANG. "OUCH". Collided with the door.

"WHERE IS IT?"

"Under your chair."

"Oh."

Nigel took another run up. The door made a slightly hollow cracking noise and then split in half, showering Nigel with splinters and ash – some of which was unfortunate enough to land in his mouth. "Well, that's it open," Nigel said dryly.

It had smashed in its fall, and was therefore useless. Then a fax came in with a job on it, and they realised that they'd have to use camera phones for the job (not for the first time). They also realised that in the current situation, the job was becoming exceedingly complicated and difficult. They needed to film disaster messages on location in the city, and take them to Sir's house on Waiheke Island.

"Yeah, that'll be hard," Nigel was thinking aloud, "I mean we'll be able to use the trains for a bit, and the busses for a bit, and probably a ferry or something, I'm not sure. Nothing for the whole journey though. But I suppose the first step is getting in contact with the others to let them know.

So he rang Julie, because; priorities.

She was fine and relieved that they were too. Other than that, nothing worth reporting. Then they set off with no idea of where the others are.

Luckily, they saw Gemma relatively soon after setting off. Or, more accurately, Gemma saw them and pulled over, startling them because all they saw was a white van approaching. Nigel and Ravi filled her in on the task they had been passed down.

"So we have to get to Waiheke island in a day with the completed messages, and won't be able to use any one method of transport for a long stretch of time."

"So we have to use transport, but without ... using transport?"

"Pretty much. And we were thinking head loosely to the port, stopping at the Sky Tower to film."

"Yeah, that should work, it's all pretty much in a straight line from here to there. And the journey shouldn't take more than an hour."

Nigel and Ravi looked at her, and she remembered the 'no transport' thing. "Oh ..."

"So how do we get in contact with the others?"

"Shouting might work, to be honest".

Alex and Steve received a call from a payphone a short while later. Then they had their instructions and set off on the quest across the city.

"I'm not being nosy, but what are we actually doing?" Steve asked.

"I don't think you're nosy and we're going to Waiheke. Gemma, Cameron and Nigel need to film some stuff and they'll meet us there."

"If you don't think I'm nosy, then why'd you write that in your diary?"

"So, better start walking." They set off.

Cameron and Helena had just begun walking back to the station, and Helena was exhausted from her near-death experience.

"So what happens once we get there?" She was already thinking ahead. Cameron could see why Alex had picked her.

"I don't know, but we'll be able to think of something as a team when we get there."

"And to get there we, what? Catch a ride?"

"No."

"What then?"

At this point, Cameron's phone goes off, with a rather loud and tinny rendition of The Proclaimers' "I Would Walk 500 Miles". Cameron silences the device, looking apologetically at Helena. "Sorry, my ringtone." Then he took the call, it was Alex, giving him the instructions. He hung up, and they changed course, heading to the port. Then his phone went again, this time it was Gemma saying the exact same thing.

Gemma and Nigel had mastered the art of equine dressage (which is essentially what it was) reasonably quickly. Ravi, however, had initially found himself on a horse that could not stop, but soon found himself on a stubborn beast unwilling to *start*. “My horse has broken down”. Then after a particularly strenuous tug on the reins, the horse began moving in the wrong direction, looking to Gemma and Nigel like he had his shoes on backwards. So they abandoned it, after letting the owner know first, of course, and Ravi rode with Gemma.

Alex and Steve were still walking and passing the time.

“I spy with my little eye,” said Alex, “something beginning with r”.

“Road?” Steve answered

“No.”

“Umm, this is hard. Is it ‘road’ by any chance?”

“No, it isn’t road.”

“So what is it then?”

“Redundancy, never a good way to tell bad news is there?”

“You’re making me redundant?”

“Not as such, but it’s only a matter of time. Think about it.”

Then a bird landed on Steve’s shoulder and he exaggeratedly waved a tick at the bird, which then flew out of his hand and smashed a nearby car window.

“Oops.”

On the horse, Ravi and Gemma could talk.

“So did I miss anything,” Gemma yelled back to Ravi.

“There was a thing that happened, and then stuff and then a thing and stuff. That’s all really.”

“That was ... helpful ... I guess?”

“Look Gemma, what are your feelings about me? Could we give it a go?”

“I guess we could. May as well, what’s the worst that can happen?”

“Explosions, death and hot coffee everywhere?”

“Well. I guess we’ll see, when things get back to normal.”

Two bikes passed them and they could hear Cameron yelling “ow, ow, ow, ow” as the bikes faded into the horizon.

Then the three groups met up at the port, and Cameron was immensely relieved not to have to cycle any more. But there were only three spots left on the only ferry brave enough to cross the water, so Cameron, Helena, Steve and Alex had to find another way across – with Steve and Alex electing for a kayak, and Cameron and Helena choosing to Jet Ski.

On the other side of the water, the seven could talk properly.

“Look, Gemma, I’m sorry about setting you up for the insider trading. But we did manage to get the charges reversed.” Alex started.

“I’m not actually mad at you for that,” Gemma replied, “I’m mad at that bitch,” she pointed at Helena, “for setting it up.”

“So would you work for us again?”

“To set up a newspaper, sure. I never felt there was enough room for me the way we were.”

“And you sorted out the ... thing ... with Ravi?”

“Yeah, that’s sorted.”

“So. That’s all our shit sorted, should we drop this bastard film off?”

“And all without me having to write any fake obituaries, too.” Nigel interjected as they walked.

They arrived at the house just before sundown, so that they could stand out on Sir’s illustrious balcony and watch the sun go down. Anyone that wasn’t either a) extremely exhausted or b) a hardened cynic would have called it romantic. Unluckily for the great Cupid in the sky, the team were all knackered, so the romance of the situation was lost on them.

“So what now?” Cameron asked, while looking over the water at the thoroughly damaged city. The haze caused by the ash had subsided just enough that a faint skyline could be seen. It was quite pretty actually, and Gemma took a photo of it to use as her desktop background.

“So, we all go back to our old jobs?” Alex switched to admin mode.

“Except that we form a print division?”

“Of course. The Special Corporation for Authentic Media lives on. Or S.C.A.M for short.”

“Actually, I’m not going to.” Cameron said this quietly and it was almost missed by the team.

“What do you mean? You’d be a good leader,” Steve this time.

“Exactly, and there’s only one leader spot, isn’t there?”

“So you could work with me, get a promotion of sorts.”

“Really? Would you do that?”

“Sure.”

Then the team saw no reason to stick around, so they made back to the shoreline. But someone was waiting for them there. It was a guy, barely older than the team, who looked as though his brain had trickled out through his ears.

“A while back, we gave you some drugs. What. You. Done. With Our Drugs.” He said in clear yet dim-witted-sounding English. Cameron knew what the guy was referring to but looked at Nigel confused.

“I thought that was sugar?”

“Oh, fuck.” Then Nigel ran away, as did the rest of the team. And the thug pulled a gun, although Cameron would have thought he wasn’t sober enough to. Although the sheer amount of physical evidence to the contrary meant that Cameron didn’t make that assumption.

“Give. Us.” The thug wheezed.

Cameron hesitated, which was excuse enough for the thug, who shot him, then staggered away down the waterfront and into a particularly deep hole some kid must’ve dug during the day. Deep enough that he couldn’t climb out.

Cameron didn’t feel the shot although he heard it and was staring down the barrel of the gun. He stood for twenty seconds in total confusion.

“This is normal, is it?”

YES. Cameron hadn’t heard the voice, as such. It was just sort of ... there. It also appeared to come from everywhere at once. IT IS NORMAL TO FEEL NO PAIN IN THE INSTANT OF DEATH.

“So I’m dead?”

YES. The same word in the same way. Then something tapped him on the shoulder and Cameron leapt about forty centimetres in the air. Then he quickly spun around and beheld a skeletal ‘man’ in black robes with a scythe. As you would expect.

“So what now?”

FOR THE LAST HEADLINE YOU’LL EVER DO, Death intoned, I WOULD RECOMMEND SOMETHING LIKE ‘NEWS JUST IN, EATING PLASTIC APPLES DOES NOT KEEP THE DOCTOR AWAY’.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Cameron said.

WELL, said Death, IF IT HELPS, YOU CAN MOVE ON WHENEVER YOU LIKE.

“So, this is a dream?”

PERHAPS. BUT EITHER WAY, THE FACT REMAINS, YOU ARE DEAD.

“Well,” Cameron said, finding that he had no feelings as he looked around at his own murder scene and feeling nothing whatsoever, “there’s nothing for me here, is there?”

IT CERTAINLY IS RATHER ... GRAVE LOOKING. HA HA HA HA. Death laughing had an odd and robotic sound to it. Then he sobered up. SO, ONWARDS?

“Yes, I think so,” Cameron said.

WELL, OKAY, Death said. GROOVY. He grimaced. I’LL NEVER SAY THAT AGAIN. Then he swung the scythe and Cameron wasn’t there anymore.

The team heard the shot and came running, but Cameron was already dead. Over the following week, they sorted out his stuff and sent it back to his family, then attended the funeral (fun-eral, as Ravi liked to call it when he blasted one of those streamers in someone’s face).

Nigel had bought flowers and he carried this fresh bunch across the road in the sunshine. Then he relaxed a bit, and held the flowers close to his chest.

“These good for you?” he said.

“Yeah, they’re good. Just place them there.” A female reply. So Nigel put the flowers down and then he looked up.

The whole team was standing at the graveside, including Helena.

“So,” Ravi said, “I have Gemma, and Alex has Helena. Who do you have?”

And then Nigel tapped the stone of the grave.

It crumbled away, leaving just a small and ornate urn on top of a foot-high plinth, with Cameron’s name on it and the phrase “It’s been taken care of”. He picked up the urn and walked off.

“Well, come on then,” he called back to them, and Alex was the first to move.

“How’s the teleprompter coming along?” Alex whispered, for some reason he didn’t want the others ‘in’ on Nigel’s next scheme.

“Yeah, they’re just fine, no need to whisper. Also I nearly finished Cameron’s obituary.”

“They’re ... oh god, what have you done?” Nigel smiled, and Alex knew he was getting nowhere.

“You could at least have cooked the chicken.”

And then Ravi laid a frying pan next to the flowers, and stood there for a bit.

“So we killed them all,” he murmured.

Then he’d been left behind and had to sprint to catch up with the rest of the team.

Chapter 26: An Unmarked Card

TWO MONTHS LATER.

Nigel hadn’t left the studio. Someone to water the plants, that’s what they’d said. Then he heard the rustling and thought nothing of it. You always heard rustling in the middle of the night (although that could’ve been to do with the owl in the rafters). Then he started to feel a breeze on his face, but couldn’t explain it. He wrote it down, and then printed out another card, addressing it to Gemma, he’d take it to the post office before he went home. Then he straightened the collar on his jacket. It was cold in here.

At a parallel time somewhere else entirely, Alex was being shot at. Mind you, that’s what happens when you decide to report in a warzone. So he was, as you might expect, armed. He wielded the gun like you see in those first-person shooters, and smacked himself in the face every time he turned a sharp corner. He was only here on business though, and had thankfully not had to use the weapon (yet, although if Ravi walked through the door, he wouldn’t tempt fate).

Gemma received her unmarked card at the worst possible time (for her). She suspected what it was for, but wasn’t totally sure. But the main reason this was the worst time probably had something to do with the interrogation chamber and lamp in her face. She knew why she was here, but couldn’t do anything to help (this is always the case in these situations). Something had happened about a year ago that cost a diplomat about \$15, and Gemma had been sent on an espionage mission to get the full story. And she would, if she survived ...

All four team members received unmarked cards in the mail. They headed back to Auckland, Gemma with a slight limp and heavy conscience. Tying those men up underneath the running shower had seemed such a good idea at the time.

Cameron looked out a window in the Afterlife. He was about ten floors up a skyscraper that seemed to go on forever (it kind of did), and wondered what would happen to him. Then he turned, and beheld Death in his traditional Grim Reaper form. Fact is, Death’s appearance worked like a desktop background in that he changed it every thousand years when he got bored with it (he’d been a burlesque dancer once – that wasn’t a sight you’d forget). The voice of Death surrounded him and reverberated off the walls

HOW’S IT HANGING HA HA HA – OH WAIT, YOU WEREN’T HUNG. DAMN, THE JOKE DOESN’T WORK.

“Yeah, it’s fine, just a bit boring is all.”

Death looked put out. Or as put out as a skull in a black cloak can look. WELL FINE THEN, he ‘said’ huffily then sulked off into a corner in a somewhat joking fashion.

“Wait a minute, what did you want?”

SO HE WANTS MY ADVICE NOW, Death mused in what he probably thought was a murmur, but came out at around the same volume as his normal voice, WELL I WAS GONNA TALK TO YOU ABOUT YOUR FUTURE.

“Oh, really, that’d be cool. When do I start?”

WHY, DO YOU HAVE SOMEWHERE TO BE HA HA HA, Death intoned sarcastically. You could hear the pause between each ‘HA’ making his laugh seem disingenuous. It wasn’t, as far as Alex could tell.

“Well no. But admin, you know?”

ADMIN? AH YES, THAT. Death mused and Alex heard a monumental crash from somewhere far in the distance. I TOLD MY AIDES NOT TO STACK THE PAPERS LIKE THAT, IT MEANS I HAVE TO LOOK AT THEM WHILE TIDYING THEM UP ...

“Maybe that’s the point, getting you to do it?”

WELL THEY’RE BASTARDS THEN, I GUESS. I’D HANG THE LOT OF THEM, BUT ...

Cameron laughed. “Yeah, I guess. So, tell me; what’s your plan?”

WELL, HOW'D YOU LIKE TO BE A GHOST?

"Sounds cool – I'd be able to haunt people, right?"

WELL SORT OF, YOU HAVE TO STAY NEAR WHERE YOU DIED, OR IN AN OBJECT THAT WAS NEARBY.

"Which gives me the choice of ..."

A TEN METER RADIUS AROUND YOUR DEATH SPOT AND ANY CLOTHING ON ANY OF THE PEOPLE WHO SURVIVED IN YOUR TEAM; BECAUSE THEY WERE NEARBY, OR OF COURSE YOUR KILLER, ALTHOUGH MOST PEOPLE CHOOSE NOT TO GO THERE.

"Nigel's jacket ... ?"

Nigel felt the temperature of the room change. He couldn't explain why (although he suspected the heating had randomly decided it was mid-winter, like it often did. But he didn't have much time to celebrate the newfound coldness, because the door creaked open and Gemma walked in, followed at close range by Ravi, who tried a dramatic entrance and ended up whacking himself in the knee with the rebounding door. Not too long after, Alex arrived and the meeting could begin properly.

"So, I called you all here ..."

"I know why I'm here," Alex replied, while the others motioned him to continue.

So he did, then they all knew.

"So the envelopes are wedding invitations?" Gemma was slightly surprised, as there was only one couple it could refer to. That is, one couple other than her and Ravi – and she was about 100% certain it didn't refer to them.

"Yes, that is what they are."

"So ... you and Helena ...?" Gemma paused, the rest of that sentence going unsaid.

But Alex never got the time to finish, as Ravi leant down to tie his shoes (even though they were clearly fine). He straightened up, halfway.

"Gemma Chan – will you marry me?"

Gemma looked at him confused for twenty seconds in total stunned silence. Ravi broke the silence; "I am serious." Gemma's resulting scream could be heard down the street and resulted in Nigel falling sideways out of his chair.

The station had taken on Julie as a permanent intern since they'd become somewhat popular. Nigel approached Julie's desk.

"Um, Julie?" Nigel was visibly nervous.

"Yes?"

"Would you go with me to Gemma and Ravi's wedding?"

"As a date?"

"No, as my secretary." Sarcasm. "Of course as my date."

"I don't see why not. How many previous partners have you had?"

"Let's see ..." Nigel mused, "one, two, three, you, five, six." He was counting them off on his fingers.

"So you must be a real smooth operator."

"Of course," said Nigel as he leant against the door in a flirtatious manner. Then the door swung out and Nigel misbalanced and fell over. "I'm fine. What colour tie should I buy?"

"I don't know, but I'll fill you in when I get my dress."

"Okay. So. Um. What would you think our ... erm ... relationship ... is?"

"What would you want it to be?"

"They all think we're going out anyway."

"They?" Julie was still unaware of the degree of openness through the team.

"All the others. They sort of pay more attention to our lives than their own. And I've found that my life works out fine if I play a minimal role in it."

"So, are you asking me out?"

"I've already done that."

"But out-out, like properly."

"Well, the others seem to have made the bed, so I may as well lie to it ... I mean in it."

"It's settled then. I'll be in touch." Professional. The relationship couldn't get in the way of work. The only question was how long they could keep the relationship secret from the others – although a loud 'awwwwwwwww' from Ravi told them they'd failed.

Chapter 27: Last Night Of Freedom

It is at this point that the ‘past’ we have been looking at and the ‘future’ we’ve been looking from collide.

Having two receptions at the same time presented a number of issues.

A fork tinkled against a glass and the noise-level in the room subsided gradually, although Nigel was sure he heard a conversation about the fact that these particular guests didn’t like Gemma or Ravi very much. He suspected they knew; or at least that Gemma did. Ravi, as a general rule, only cared about something if it was able to be chased around a room at high speeds for an hour or more. That had been a fun evening with the laser pointer.

The ambience faded slowly into silence, and Nigel felt obliged to begin speaking.

“If you take one thing away from this speech, could it be your litter; we’ve had a real problem ...”

He paused, then continued. “Yeah, so I’ve known these two fuck-knuckles for a long time,” he said, gesturing towards the two grooms that were sitting next to each other on the long table, their respective brides on either side of them. “Let’s start at last night ...”

The invisible camera in the mind’s eye pans away from Nigel’s speech, as focus swims out and then back in to reveal the team in their studio as Nigel places a leaflet on the table.

“Stag do.” Nigel said this as if it answered all relevant questions, even though he was dealing directly with Ravi (he had no idea how the human brain worked; but in Ravi’s case, Nigel suspected there was a rubber band involved).

Alex hated parties, and people, and alcohol. Nigel had taken them to a bar – something of a doomsday scenario. Although, pleasingly, it didn’t look as though either of the other two were enjoying themselves either. Ravi probably wished Nigel and Alex would go away and leave him to pull girls on his own, while Nigel wished something would happen, as he’d gotten up especially for this and right now it was a waste. Needless to say, none of them had been particularly lucky with girls, and viewed the opposite gender either as total equals that did not warrant inappropriate behaviour in any way, or like a completely foreign species that they really did not know how to deal with.

Then something did in fact happen. But none of the trio was expecting it. A female approached them, as if she liked the look of someone in the party. Nigel, elated, pointed out Alex as being a worthy specimen, and then as an afterthought did the same gestures concerning Ravi – who had also excitedly jumped up and started waving in a massively over-the-top way. The female was confused by this. She, instead of paying any kind of attention to the gesturing and embarrassing behaviour, approached Nigel and introduced herself. She was Kate, and thought Nigel was cute (they still haven’t let that go).

Cameron was glad of his choice. Nigel was wearing his jacket, meaning Cameron had a front-row seat to all the gloriously awkward action.

HOW’S IT GOING?

Cameron didn’t even turn around, he just replied, “Yeah, they’re on a stag night. Double wedding, I think ...”

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Cameron laughed, as Death clicked away into the distance. He couldn’t tell whether Death had been legit.

“I wish Cameron had been here to see this,” Nigel said, as his fringe fell over his eyes and Cameron fixed it for him, causing a mild look of confusion before the thought was dismissed.

“Yeah ... he would be on the floor laughing at how shit we are at this game.” Cameron was disappointed the Afterlife didn’t come with emotions. Because he definitely would’ve found this funny.

“Funny, you get so used to someone not being around, then things like this happen and you miss them and wish they were.” Nigel had lost his earlier sense of mischievous-ness, and he just sounded nostalgic, wistful and sad.

“I don’t think so, you just get better at blocking out the fact they’re gone ...” Ravi had a similar tone.

Now Cameron really regretted not having feelings. Or maybe that was a relief. He might have cried. Then another girl approached Nigel, leaving the other two looking defeated and crestfallen, which snapped all of the four of them out of the varying states of reflectiveness.

Let the mind’s eye swing back to the wedding reception hall, and Nigel’s speech.

“So the clubbing was unflattering. But we ended up back at the studio, which was perhaps not the best thing to do while we were totally buggered.

It turned out that being over eighteen and in a bar is a bad combo. Or at least it was in this case. The trio ended up back in the studio at about eleven o’clock at night thoroughly smashed. Eventually they played hide and seek (or a massively corrupted version of it). There was a lot of tripping, falling and staggering around with large amounts of volume, making the game easy. Except that everyone else was drunk as well. So the game consisted of hiding in the

same places, then holding minor and inconsequential conversations with the person who was ‘finding’ instead of ... being found. Then the one time that Ravi was the only one still in the game, and he joined the search for himself.

Cameron looked down on the scenes of drunken hide-and-seek and the team absolutely dying with laughter because Ravi had caused a three-person pile-up. He wished he had feelings. He wished he was involved. He wanted to be alive. He was angry, or as close as he could be in the circumstances, and had begun to realise that haunting wasn’t as much fun as it had at first seemed.

Nigel carried on his speech, and the audience were thoroughly enjoying the sarcastic yet slightly monotonic voice that he had adopted. “I found this out mostly through the news and second-hand gossip, but at least one of the weddings nearly didn’t happen at all ...

Fade out and then in to a kitchen. Helena is washing some dishes in the sink, while Alex dries. The TV is on, set to Helena’s station; TV7.

“You would never have thought we met after you blackmailed me ...”

“Well, I never had to, did I?” Helena washed a plate with a rather large amount of vigour and the top of the scrubbing brush came off.

Then a somewhat edgy silence ensued, to be broken by ...

The newsreader speaks and the volume of the thing is far louder than Helena might perhaps have intended.

“It turns out, that after a lengthy campaign in post-war Africa ... sod this. I’m so bored, so here is a video of some cats. Because who listens to the proper news anymore anyway.”

“But that’s our secret ... how does he know our secret?”

Helena gave an expression equivalent to a drug smuggler that sees the safe zone outside of customs, only to be stopped by a security guard. “Uh ...”

Chapter 28: Give Her a Ring

Helena couldn’t give a straight answer and escape the situation without pissing Alex off. So she turned to the dishes and washed them in silence, letting the TV news dig her a deeper hole to climb out of at a later date.

“So yeah, that’s all from us here at TV7, and you can thank one of our producers for the change in format. Next up on TV7, it’s ‘Good Evening’”. Then the camera panned away and focus blurred in time to cheesy music.

“No but explain,” Alex was annoyed but not yet at ‘bounce-off-the-roof’ level. “Explain to me how that guy found out the secret of TV8.”

“Well he just explained it himself – I told him.”

“Right.” Alex’s tone was one of frustration.

“Right,” Helena’s was not.

Nigel was still speaking at the wedding, stopping to look around the hall for people’s reactions to this most recent development. He could see about a hundred people all-up, which wasn’t a bad turnout, seated in groups of six or seven to limit the awkward conversation that happens when someone is stuck with another guest they don’t especially like or can’t really be bothered talking to. Which Nigel had planned for because he had a large amount of experience; and yet he’d still failed. Ravi’s family occupied about a quarter of the total guests at the thing, and approximately every five people or so weren’t talking to any of twenty others because of various elements of ‘he said this, she said that then someone threw a chair’ that had taken place at previous gatherings. His was a family in which you needed only one sane and independent person there; a referee.

Looking back down, he continued; “it didn’t help that we were preparing a report for a competition, and there was a TV7 one in direct conflict.”

The team met in Alex’s office. It had been a long time since they had met there; this was especially obvious in the team’s work log which ... had stuff in it. Actual, proper, completed jobs. It might almost have been said they were ‘doing well’.

“Did we all get the footage needed for the report?”

“Yeah, but how’s it going to be cut together?”

“Like a broadcast; story then an intro into the next one then that, then an intro, and so on.”

“Ah, so our normal then?” Ravi piped up and got stern looks from everyone; “NO. Not like that, Ravi. Properly.”

“Helena’s done a thing which may be a problem, but it means that this has to be better than anything we’ve ever done before, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t piss me about on this project, thank you very much now go and do the

work you need to do to finish this project on time.” Alex was stressed and short-tempered.

“What’d she do – ?” Ravi hadn’t noticed the shortness of Alex’s voice and kept pushing.

“Later. Now GO.” Ravi ran.

Nigel and Julie were having an in-depth discussion about linguistics at her desk.

“... and I’ll just forward you the link when I get back to my desk.”

“Sure beans.”

“If there’s a ‘sure beans’ why isn’t there a ‘certain soup’?”

“Doesn’t rhyme.”

“Neither does ‘sure beans’?”

“Yes it does.”

“Explain.”

“No. Oh and I hear you got chatted up in the stag night.”

“How-how’s you hear that?”

“Ravi and his big mouth talking rubbish. It’s not true, is it?” She was calm; too calm. Even Nigel had the presenc of mind to be scared.

“It’s true, yes.”

And thus they ‘broke up’. Not that they’d ever really been dating at all. And over the next few days both parties would act as though they weren’t desperate for the other party to apologise but would inadvertently show their true feelings in subtle ways; Julie checking her phone every five minutes and ‘answering’ it when the doorbell rang; and Nigel would consider calling but ultimately decide against it – every ten minutes, without fail.

Cameron sat on the bed. Well, hovered slightly above. To the untrained eye, it may perhaps have looked as though he were sitting in Nigel’s lap. But he wasn’t, or at least that was what he liked to think. Every so often, Nigel’s focus would wander, and Cameron would slap him gently to bring him back. This worked, after the standard ten-second ‘wonder-what-the-heck-just-flicked-me’ moment.

“I might write some more for my story,” Gemma said, in full outfit. The team, minus Julie, were in Alex’s office.

“Oh yeah? What would that be? Someone bugging the station?” Ravi replied sarcastically.

“That reminds me,” Alex reached into a drawer and pulled out a cicada shell, and threw it at Ravi. There was a hollow clunk noise as it hit his forehead; the camera must have still been inside it. Then another, then another, then another.

“If I’m wearing this outfit and have my camera, people tend to take me seriously as a journalist – there’s no point investigating if you’re in the wrong clothes, people don’t notice you and they need to for the whole thing to ... work.

“Work?” Ravi was confused by the argument she’d put forward.

“That thing you never quite have time to actually do.”

“Also,” Nigel said, turning slightly around, doing something and then turning back again, “I have a good headline.”

“I don’t think a photograph of a thick line across your forehead in marker will suffice as the lead of a story.”

“You don’t know our viewership.”

“Yeah, I do, there’s about five, who all seem to live in la-la land.”

Cameron was sure he was in la-la land, and equally sure that he didn’t have TV8 reception. He was sure of the latter point because he’d tried, and the former point because there was an octopus in a hat sitting against the door (well, not quite but ... oh go away). The octopus was called Bob. He could speak proper English, too. Pull focus and then back in, to show the wedding reception venue.

Nigel’s speech continued, as the sun began to set, streaming in through floor-to-ceiling windows at the back of the hall and blinding Nigel.

Cameron sat in an empty chair on one of the tables, and just listened, although the man sitting next to him had absentmindedly put his hand on the chair and right through Alex’s imaginary groin area, making him very uncomfortable.

“Here’s a joke, here’s a joke,” Nigel nattered excitedly, and the whole venue knew roughly what was coming. The collective facepalm could be heard through the walls. “What do you call a relationship with no real future?”

There was silence, as the whole room readied their rotten tomatoes.

“A marriage.” Nigel finished, and then he quickly sat down to avoid the barrage of the aforementioned fruit; although in doing so, he put himself in Alex and Ravi’s direct line of fire and got a slap from both sides.

Fade back out and into Helena's apartment.

"Look, I know we're not talking, but ..." Helena started, diplomatically.

"Well, you seem to be." Alex cut her dead, or that was the intent. But it failed.

"I'm – I'm really sorry about what I did and ..." her voice trailed off. She'd seen something under the couch, at such a distance where if you knew it was there you'd see it, but it wasn't meant to be seen by normal people. It was marked "DON'T OPEN THIS BOX."

She looked in the box.

"There's a ... ring in here."

"... Yes."

"Who's it for?"

"You."

"Why would you give me a ring?"

"Why'd you think?"

"Wha – I don't – uhh ... Fuck."

There was a lengthy awkward silence, broken by Alex.

"So ... is that a yes?"

Chapter 29: Death At A Wedding

Cameron's daily chat with Death was ongoing.

ARE YOU STILL FINDING IT BORING HERE?

"Yeah, a bit. But you know ... it has its moments."

I KNEW A GUY WHO HAUNTED A JACKET THAT WENT TO A THEMEPARK WITH A MANIC DEPRESSIVE. HE DESCRIBED THAT AS AN EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER. Death's deadpan humour hadn't failed him yet.

"Yeah. So. What are you going to be doing today?"

ME? OH, I HAVE A WEDDING TO GO TO.

It was of course at around this point, that Nigel's speech took a turn for the weird.

"Malaties, malaties, malaties, malaties. Well, that's the formalities over with". He didn't even smile at his own joke. Gemma leaned across to a guest that had decided fancy dress was the way to go, and had come as the Grim Reaper. She apologised for the jokes.

NOT TO WORRY, said the guest, although Gemma was about eighty percent certain his mouth hadn't moved, I'M ONLY HERE FOR THE DANCING.

"Huh," she answered quietly, "I leave weddings early to avoid it."

GOOD LUCK WITH THAT.

"Now, I'm feeling calm and collected, and by that I mean I'm not nervous, and I got a lift here." Nigel's speech continued, with no discernible drop in quality.

"I'm sure you've all heard the theory that people look like their pets – you, sir, have you got a llama?" Pause. No laughter. "I always say that to the person sitting there." Pause. Nigel looked back at Gemma and mouths 'but he does look like that though'.

"Now, let me tell you something I didn't realise -- the word mortar has two meanings as I discovered when the house I built blew itself up." He paused, as you do; got nothing for his joke; as only HE can do; then carried on without losing any momentum, as only an idiot would do. "So this guy asked me, 'Does every sentence have to contain a vegetable?' and I replied 'Not necesscelery.' Come on."

Then he changed tact, because his current method wasn't working, he said, "Anyway, Ravi's inherent weirdness was obvious even as recently as his own wedding ceremony ...

Pan out, focus blurs, and then clears to show a church with people in. Because an unattended wedding is an affront to tradition, style, and the production budget. The ceremonies by-and-large, went as planned, except for one bit at the beginning where Helena mixed up the genders of her parents, thinking for a moment that her mother would walk her down the aisle. She recovered with the line; "mum, dad, it's all relative". This is a favourable result, given that Gemma's car broke down and it looked as though she wouldn't make it, so Ravi started singing to entertain the audience that is captive in all but name; "Waiting ... can sometimes be ... lots of fun but not always". This last line was delivered as Gemma reached the bottom of the aisle. The rest of the ceremony went without incident, except where Alex put Helena's ring on the wrong finger. And the bit at the end where the two grooms left the church to the tune of the Death march from Star Wars.

Crossfade back to the speech, with Nigel continuing his onslaught of shit puns.

“Cameron used to live with his parents but he got kicked out – turns out he couldn’t camp between the headstones.” There was a slightly shocked groan as way of reaction to this line. But this deterred Nigel not at all. He noticed a woman sitting down about halfway down the room.

“Have you just arrived? I’m nothing if not thorough ... I’ll start again.”

The whole room vibrated with the volume of the “NO” that followed, mostly because Death joined in. Ravi leaned across to face Death, and wished he hadn’t, but then he asked; “why are you here?”

BECAUSE I GOT ATTACHED TO THE PEOPLE. MY FAULT I SUPPOSE, TALKING TO CAMERON.

“Cameron? You mean, the Cameron? Our Cameron?”

YES. HE’S NICE ENOUGH.

“We miss him.”

NATURAL ENOUGH I SUPPOSE.

Then Alex saw journalists outside, and the focus of his attention shifted to getting out without being seen, at the end of the speech. Some time later, Nigel finished speaking, and the team gathered to think their exit through.

“So, what would it be? Just going through the door – no. The back door, they’d get us. Thing is, it’s their move now, and if we –”

“Their move?”

“Yeah, this is like an RTS game, and we have to get out of here. So if you go around the back ...”

He disclosed an exit strategy for after the finish of the thing.

Then he stopped worrying about it.

Later; the dance was slow and tolerable, much to Gemma’s surprise. The only issue with the thing was the fact that a hundred people were watching. Mind you, they worked in the media, so you’d think they’d be fine. But it still gave her shivers. Alex and Helena were likewise moving slowly around in circles and trying to pretend there was nobody watching; until Helena needed a bathroom break and moved off. This wasn’t working. But it didn’t as such need to. Because some messenger of some point who was wild-eyed as if he’d been shot at (which is bad form – don’t shoot the messenger, unless it’s a cartel and you’re high, in which case it doesn’t matter what you do, or think you do, the messenger will end up dead) and handed Cameron a note. Which Cameron struggled to read because he was dizzy. Then the hundred-strong crowd that had been watching the dance all collectively yelled “what does it say?” So he shared its contents with Gemma and Ravi. Who panicked. They were almost certain they heard a faint scream in the distance.

“Helena?” Nigel called out, “Julie?”

Alex looked around the venue but to no avail. So the note wasn’t a joke. It read *‘I swear it wasn’t me. It was all her. She made me cover it up. I’m so sorry. Help.’*

He looked at the note again; *‘she made me do it.’*

At this point Nigel piped up, “Julie helped me with that report that time, and didn’t seem too bothered when I nearly got fired”. Gemma; “then she helped us with that legal case.” Alex himself whispered, almost breathless “it was *her*. And we made her an intern. Always in the right place at the right time; just enough information to take us down.”

Nigel wasn’t affected in quite the same way as the others; “*awesome.*”

Then Gemma said; “OH. I knew your dad had said something about her. He said there had been a scandal at 7, where she used to work.”

Alex stopped, confused; one shock after another. “No, he didn’t – when did he say that? You spoke to Dad?”

Ravi burst in, ruining the moment. “Helena’s been kidnapped.”

Alex snapped out of his temporary confusion and finished off Ravi’s sentence; “Julie’s on the loose and there is half the city’s media outside. We need a plan of action. Any ideas?”

Chapter 30: Kidnap, Betrayal and A Good Old-Fashioned Car Chase

“The last time I saw you was about a year ago – tell me why you decided to come back,” the psychiatrist asked. He had been pleasantly surprised that only Nigel had showed up. But that meant a reduced rate ...

“I couldn’t really be bothered to get up this morning.”

“Why not? Anything specific that’s happened that would cause this, do you think?”

“Well I’m not sure; I mean our lives just got a fair amount more complicated but other than that I can’t think of anything.”

“Tell me the whole story.”

“It started when Helena got kidnapped ...”

Chaos. It could only be described as total pandemonium. People were *everywhere*. Made it hard for the team to get out of the reception. And that was just in the venue. Then there was a solid sea of journalists outside. After about three concussed journalists and many other ‘accidental’ knockings-over, the team had cleared the journalist barrier and split off into two cars. Then spontaneously decided to race.

Consequently, this next section should be viewed like a segment of a Fast and Furious film, with all associated music and narrowing of the field of view.

“Just drive,” Nigel said, then Ravi pressed the wrong pedal and drove backwards into Alex’s car so that the airbags went off.

Ravi still managed to pull out first (please don’t), although after a kilometre long stretch of motorway, Alex’s car had overtaken.

“Damn, we’re losing him – car numberplate EZ1234,” Nigel was trying to be like a policeman in a car chase and Ravi wasn’t having it.

“I’m driving; shush.” Ravi’s response achieved the desired result because of sheer shock value.

Alex saw Ravi about to overtake and increased his speed marginally.

From about this point, things took a turn for the worse.

Because Ravi didn’t notice, still turned and caused minor scratching and a dent to Alex’s car; who then proceeded to make obscene gestures. But the teams did arrive intact and conscious.

It was after this arrival that Alex smacked Ravi out, ending the arrived-and-conscious streak.

Helena gave up yelling after the fourth hour. Then she looked around the cell. It was basically a prison cell; white walls and a steel door with a slot. She’d been given food about an hour ago. So she started planning a way out; although in a weird and twisted way, being in a cell kind of made up for framing Gemma for the insider trading. But she planned anyway, just in case. She’d use her steel cutlery to wedge the door open the next time a guard came in; and he’d have to get knocked out or killed, also using the cutlery. Then she’d run. And hopefully not get recaptured. Even though she had no idea where she was.

“Don’t think of escaping,” Julie’s voice could be heard through the door.

“Why’d you kidnap me?”

“Well, my boss wanted me to. And not only that; we’ve had secret meetings where I told all your secrets. The station is over, and you know it.”

“Your boss? And secret meetings; that sounds dodgy.”

“You met him, I think. You covered his election campaign and he hated you.”

“Oh, him. But also I’m not sure what Nigel would say about all this.”

“I know what he would be like; he’d think it was pretty cool I think. I think. Right?”

“You really like him – can’t see why but okay.”

“I would think you’ll see why soonish.” She knew something Gemma didn’t.

The team sat in the meeting room on their computers.

“If I look at her phone’s GPS, then we should be able to isolate its position. Then work out an optimal route to get there and get her back.” Nigel took the lead.

“Yeah, sure; looking it up now. Actually, what was it again? Fuck, the computer’s frozen.”

“Ugh, Frozen’s horrible.” Nobody laughed. Then Nigel continued on a different track; “Hey guys; the doors were unlocked when we arrived. That’s not a problem, is it? It’s not like people wandered in and recorded whatever random crap was on their minds. Is it?”

“I’ll just go check while I look up the phone.” Nigel moved and the power cable got caught, making his computer fall to the floor with a clatter. He picked it up and got a minor shock reconnecting the charge cable.

Nigel went to check, wobbling slightly and sparking on contact with the ground. It turned out Julie had in fact let random people in.

Nigel continued his story to the psychiatrist.

“So, then what happened?”

“Shush, I’m getting to that bit. Anyway, in the tapes there was this one guy that just stared blankly at the camera for five minutes.”

“Are you sure that wasn’t Ravi?”

"It's possible I suppose. But probably not, eh ..."

"So, the story."

"You know your interruption is the only reason I stopped telling the story was because you interrupted. Anyway ..."

And Nigel continued the story while the psychiatrist sipped tea.

Helena knew Alex was on his way. She suspected Julie knew that too. Even so, she prepared herself to knock the guard out.

The plan wasn't necessarily straightforward. In fact, it was the most complicated plan they'd ever come up with. In fact, it was basically guaranteed that it would go wrong.

And it was when Nigel was dressed as a security guard that he realised this.

Ravi had stayed at the station because he was in a helpful mood. And a Ravi in a helpful mood was actually worse than having no Ravi at all. So they'd given him a dictionary to read and he hadn't yet figured it out.

Helena had nothing to do. If not for the inherent stress and anxiety of the whole situation, she would be bored. And the first thing she heard about the rescue was when Alex, Gemma and Nigel were thrown in to the cell at the same time.

So Julie decided to get in on the fun.

"Um, hi." Gemma almost threw Helena's fork at Julie.

"You do realise I only kidnapped you because that's what my boss wants."

"We've been through this." Helena interjected.

"Shut up; not talking to you." Julie disregarded Helena with a flick of the wrist.

"Yeah; now that you mention it, Alex's dad said something to that effect a while back," Gemma started and wished she hadn't because she realised she'd have to explain.

"You saw my dad?"

"Before he died, yeah."

"You were ... there?" Alex was shocked; not something Gemma had seen too many times before. Only once; when Ravi had accidentally broadcast a Skype conversation. A team meeting, no less.

"Yeah. He was happy. Well, high. Tripping on pain meds."

"Th – thanks. Look, I'm sorry about the whole insider trading thing ..."

Had the rest of the team not been present, Alex may well have hugged Gemma. But they were, so she didn't think too much more about it.

"Anyway, my boss wanted to know your secrets." Julie cut over Gemma, and Alex went back to sulking.

"I don't appreciate the betrayal." Alex was sulking; as close to sitting in the corner as you could get in the cell.

"I personally thought it was pretty cool." Nigel's standards of loyalty were clearly different to other people's.

Then Gemma had an idea; "hey Julie, could we have water?"

"Yeah, sure." Julie was surprised at the lack of backlash. She left and made the mistake of leaving the door open.

"RUN." Gemma led the charge out the door.

The chase was not necessarily a short one. Well, it wasn't really a chase, either. Although, bystanders certainly would have found it hilarious. Three men with suits and two women in long white dresses running down a street in a particularly striking fashion. An untrained eye could be forgiven for thinking it was a wedding party. So, as it turns out, could a trained eye; as it was in fact, a wedding party. They arrived back at the station after an hour-long walk looking over their shoulders to see if they were being followed.

They weren't. They'd got away.

Then Alex got a text.

The CEO of TV7 wanted a final challenge; to see which of the two channels was best once and for all. A final broadcast at six o'clock that evening that would mimic the style of the other network.

Ravi was standing behind the TV8 newsdesk, drawing attention to the fact that while he was wearing a dinner jacket over his shirt, he was not in fact wearing trousers.

"Good evening and welcome to TV8 News. I am ... bored. In leading news, I think I'm in love."

"Doesn't take you much, does it? That checkout girl telling you to keep warm when it was frosty kept you going for a week." Nigel chipped in from the sidelines; he just couldn't help it.

"Anyway, back to serious news ..."

And it carried on like this for the next five minutes, then crosscut between the footage that had been recorded to the tapes when the door had been left open. Ravi would try to link the stories; which became very awkward when he

linked a story about children and a story about sex.

And then a sketch where Nigel tried to ask Julie out and suggested Countdown as a date destination. (NOTE: Countdown is, generally speaking, not a valid date destination. Except if you're courting a bargain basement prostitute. "You can count on us to keep prices down". Wait, that's not Countdown; it's Warehouse Stationery). Eventually it stopped. At half an hour long. Hopefully the audience of seven would find it funny.

Nigel and the psychiatrist had almost finished talking.

"So that's almost all of it."

"And what would you have me do about it?"

"Well, you yourself said that I seem to have mild clinical depression, so what do you think?"

"Well, I think," said the psychiatrist, "that you needed to talk your issues through with someone. And that was me. And I think that's all you need. So you could always come for another session if you need it. But," he said, reaching into a drawer, "here is an antidepressant; enough for a week – which I don't think you need even that."

Nigel took the packet and finished the story; he'd started, after all.

The final showdown.

Nigel and Ravi had a plan. It was exactly the same plan from opposite sides of the issue. Time would tell if it would work.

Alex and the Julie's boss were to meet up in a field. And they did.

"So." The CEO said, coldness evident in his voice.

"Hey, you're that guy."

"Yes, I'm 'That Guy', my name's Sam, no thanks for asking."

"So, we've done the thing. Let's just get this done so we can all fuck off."

Then both their phones rang at the same time, and they both said the exact same sequence of replies at exactly the same time; "Hi, yes. Your name is Spartacus? You'll deliver the tapes? Well, okay but – right. Fine. Bye."

They looked at each other, very confused, for about a minute.

"You got called by a Spartacus as well? For exactly the same thing?"

"Well." Sam broke the spell. "The time for pleasantries is over." He checked his phone for any updates on their export. Alex did the same.

Sam looked at his phone again, then back up at Alex, who was doing much the same.

Nigel texted. The TV8 film was ready. Alex prepared himself to call Gemma and send the order though.

Sam had already got his phone in his hand and had begun to dial the number.

Alex allowed Gemma to broadcast the TV8 report.

Alex needed to do something, and quickly. His heart fell as Sam raised the phone to his lips and said 'hey –'

IS THAT THE END?

NOT YET!

Alex kicked Sam in the shins. This distracted Sam for just long enough that Alex could approve the transmission and allow Gemma to lead into the tape in the studio; then broadcast it.

"You've lost, Sam. Give it up now."

"Well, maybe. Okay, fine. Fact is I have better things to do anyway. Maybe I was wrong and we can both exist in the market."

"You do realise collusion is illegal, right?"

"Anyway," Ravi said, and this was never a good sign; "we've been doing other crap today as well – rescuing Helena from the kidnappers, hacking, car chases, letting people wander into our studio and just record stuff ..."

"And the randomised floodings." Nigel interjected at the wrong time.

"What about having the airwaves back?" Alex tried to steer this trainwreck back on course.

"Sam already said you can't." Gemma tried stating the obvious.

"Trust me, honey; the word wasn't 'can't'." Ravi had figured it out.

Sometime later, and news of the broadcasts came through. "TV 7 won. Even after the cheating."

Gemma was angry and Alex was the closest punching bag in range. She slapped him. "Wha – what was that for? Why'd you slap me?"

"Sorry, honey; you're just the closest in range."

"Come on, why'd you slap me?"

“Twice.”

“Once?” Alex asked, and then Gemma slapped him again.

“Don’t argue.”

Then the weird-meter broke, when Ravi and Nigel walked into the general vicinity. Ravi’s phone was on speaker.

“I’m Spartacus.”

“No, I’m Spartacus.”

“No. On the phone this morning, I was Spartacus.”

“That was me – remember being a temporary security guard?”

“But a guy called Spartacus arranged to deliver the tapes.”

“That was me.”

“That was me.”

“Then who – oh fuck.” Sam paled and phoned his PA.

“But seriously, I’m Spartacus.” And then the fistfight between Nigel and Ravi started, and Sam could do little more than stand back and say, very quietly; “you people are fucking insane.”

IS IT OVER YET?

NOPE!

And it was; the mockumentary won several awards and minor fame for the team. Ravi’s press interviews were always interesting – in one, Ravi held a sign with the word “reality” on it and let it go, claiming that he had always had a loose grip on reality. In another, though, he pretended the reporter (who was wearing camo trousers) was invisible throughout.

By and large, the team ran successfully, and (especially when compared to their beginnings) it seemed the bull had found the china shop, walked in carefully and bought a teaset.

Cameron and Death were talking.

IT’S TIME FOR YOU TO MOVE ON.

“To what? The Afterworld Proper?”

YES. WELL, YOU CAN IF YOU WANT. YOU COULD CARRY ON HAUNTING IF YOU WANT.

“I think I will; at least for now.”

OKAY. I’LL CHECK IN WITH YOU IN FIFTY YEARS OR SO.

“Fifty years ... that’s quite a while ...”

YES. BUT I HAVE OTHER MORE IMPORTANT SHIT TO DO.

“Fair enough,” Cameron sighed, “see you then.”

The Grim Reaper disappeared without so much as a goodbye, and Cameron sighed. The next fifty years stretched out before him like a rubber band in a toffee machine.

So the team met, in their regular Friday meeting, and discussed their new situations.

“The two proposals were both equally ridiculous and unsatisfactory – given we all now know the result and have quite a bit of money, do you wanna redo them?” Alex asked, clearly angling for a certain response.

“Nah, not just yet.” Gemma shot him down.

“Well, ok. And about honeymoons ...”

“Two years off, full pay.” Nigel tried. You should always, in the situation.

“You know that invisible line? I think you just sorta crossed it.”

“At least it wasn’t the flying leap in a Ferrari when Ravi decided to comment on the Prime Minister’s weight.”

“True. I think the restraining order’s still in effect ...”

“On a good day, I can still feel the slap, too.”

Epilogue: Three Couples And A Ghost

And then the story finished. Not in the cheesy, vignette-looking-into-the-setting-sun way, but the ‘well, folks, that’s kind of it, really’ way. Because the ending wasn’t necessarily neat and tidy, and not everyone ended up permanently and irrevocably happy because of it – it was just ... there. You can’t, when it comes to stories, guarantee happy endings; you can only guarantee an ending with the trust that the various situations involved therein will work themselves out for better or for worse. And the ending associated with these characters goes something like this;

Gemma and Ravi went on a honeymoon around the country for six months (although Cameron stacked them up with reports for that time period, so they never **really** stopped working ... but given TV8's past form in terms of procrastination – they hardly noticed they were still doing stuff. Ravi better recreated his proposal on the top of a mountain in the sunset; which was nice, except for a minor incident involving a bull and being blinded by the sun. Ravi is now perhaps the most level-headed and reasonable member of the team (and staunchly denies being anything else – as if he's just forgotten the first eighteen years of his life). He expects to live happily ever after, although this is mostly due to a botched attempt at fortune-reading where the psychic (a diminutive leaf-reader on the run from the cops; a small Medium at large) told him random crap to stop the stupid questions. He'll probably end up in a Psychiatrist's office one day, demanding for a refund at a computer system that doesn't work and occasionally ducking to avoid getting hit on the head by rogue small, circular objects. And Gemma will play the so-called 'straight man' to this occasional eccentricity, looking in an exasperated fashion towards a camera that isn't there like she's on the Office. Both are expected to continue their jobs at TV8. Both are reasonably famous.

Alex and Helena, similarly, are expected to remain on-track. Helena found that the popularity of the station, coupled with the newfound maturity of the team, meant they could manage themselves; and therefore made Steve redundant. So she offered him a job doing a similar thing for TV7 – which he gratefully accepted. Steve's resignation speech to the team started with the line; "I won't be doing this job much longer – I fear I'll wind up an old man, and he'll attack me."

Alex continues his no-nonsense approach to running TV8, remarking to Ravi on one specific Monday morning; "If you're looking for sympathy, it's in the dictionary between 'shit' and 'syphilis'". And the money is well-managed, mostly because Alex is still training to be an investment banker in his spare time.

Nigel, meanwhile, still does work for TV8, but from a peaceful and isolated island in the middle of the Pacific ocean, sipping some form of cocktail while looking out into the sunset (the same sunset, incidentally, as has already been discussed multiple times) and patting himself on the back for his life choices. With Julie (who resigned her position as intern), because why not? What he, of course, doesn't know (while being faintly aware of it at the same time) is that even now, while his old and battered jacket that has been mislaid in transit to the island, is in a box and midway through the lengthy process of being returned to him, there is a ghost attached to that jacket, that has yet to pack up his meagre possessions and move onwards into the Afterlife. Much as Death may berate him for this, Cameron quite enjoys the ocean air (and optional extra of being trapped in a box so that people can be scared when they open it). Nigel is expected therefore, to remain in self-imposed quarantine and (for want of a better term) happy. Cameron hasn't decided what the future holds (given that there is quite a lot of it for him, he's in no rush), and is almost literally 'between jobs' at the moment.

So we close, as might reasonably be expected, looking at the three couples and a ghost; looking at Gemma and Ravi frantically try to keep the station from being snowed under with work and fanmail, Alex and Helena working collusively (which is technically illegal – don't they ever learn; at least Alex didn't suggest a corporate merger and the opportunity to 'get my hands on your assets'). And Nigel and Julie mostly sit on the beach and stare into the middle-distance, wondering precisely what happened. Until every Christmas where the team meets up and discusses the year with those they haven't seen, before sitting through the only-slightly-awkward Christmas dinner. Gemma and Julie appear, by and large, to have made up, after suggestion from Nigel that there was 'no time like the Christmas present – Christmas present ahahaha hah".

And that's it. Or at least, that's the interesting part. The station should continue operations in much the way it started them (minus the frying pans). And, with that knowledge, we shall leave them, at least for now – possibly forever. If this were a media product of much the sort the team create, there would be a fade to black followed by credits. It isn't and there won't be, but the theory's the same.

That Limerick on Maths

Over a year ago, I mentioned that the school yearbook implored people to complain about stuff. At the time I was studying for Maths, and wanted to complain in the form of a limerick. But I couldn't because I couldn't think of one. I can now. Kind of.

I once tried to do maths
Couldn't get hang of the graphs (does that count as a rhyme, I think so)
All to no avail
I likely will fail
That's all I can say about maths.

I realise it is a little of a cheat to repeat a word in order to create a rhyme, but I couldn't think of one and don't care what you think.

In similar and almost totally unrelated news, I redesigned the site and stylesheet, as well as a new archive structure. I'll probably create an archive of all non-current code that I have used in the past that is not current so there is record of it. But maybe not. Depends whether I can be bothered or not.

Anyway, back to whatever it was you were doing.

A Year in Review (2014)

This is always fun to write, and I can only hope it is equally fun to read. In this year's edition of my review of the news; an explosive entrance, some highly controversial protests, political change, disappearances of large lumps of metal and whether or not certain celebrities' names sound humorous. Then the headlines. That's my favourite bit.

I always wonder how best to come crashing through the door every year on this thing. This time, I've decided for a particularly explosive entrance [...] explosions. Because there were many, many explosions this year. Not least the fighting going on in Gaza. Many, many explosions there. Then the ISIS stuff in Syria and Iraq. I can't even make jokes about that. I mean I'm probably about as much a Muslim as those guys – I don't appear to follow any conventional religion and am bad at interpreting the Quran ... anyway. Then the annex of Crimea into Russia that started a civil war in Ukraine. Putin probably made all of that political manoeuvring while shirtless and wrestling a bear. On horseback.

Then we move to conflicts of a somewhat more peaceful nature, democracy protests in Hong Kong and the protests in the US (and internationally) because of the unjustified killing of an unarmed black man. I'd use the 'blind leading the blind' analogy for racism – but if the people were blind, they wouldn't see colours and there'd be no racism ... so it doesn't work.

But there were more successful politics as well. Well, successful as in 'didn't start a war.' The Scottish independence vote returned a 'no' result by approximately a 58% vote, and Fiji held its first democratic election since the coup in 2008. Or something. I wasn't paying attention back then. Had Scotland become independent, The United Kingdom may perhaps have become the Untied Kingdom. Certainly cheaper than other renaming options like RUMP UK and United Kingdom 2.0, or instead of Great Britain, it would become "good Britain".

And, locally in New Zealand, we had our (very) own election. Where Kim Dotcom (he's the one that either looks like a Russian doll, or he's eaten several too many park benches) tried to stir up some dirt about spying and people's right to privacy. Which fell flat. Unfortunately he didn't literally fall flat, that would be fun to watch. Colin Craig (who looks like either he's been electrocuted, he's a paedophile or looks like Norman Bates from Psycho) attempted to get the Conservative Party into Parliament and failed. The spying stir-up actually resulted in Labour (the perpetrator) decreasing its share in parliament, resulting in a larger majority for National. Confusing.

So now the moving and slightly malevolent eye looks for mysteriously disappearing pieces of metal. No, I'm not talking about wedding rings, I'm talking about the two (yes, two) plane-related events we've had this year. One was definitely shot down, so it doesn't really count as a disappearing plane, but I wanted to make the plane/wedding ring joke, so there ya go. I'm pretty sure they haven't found it yet ... the game of 'Where's Wally?' continues. And there's also the Ebola outbreak in Africa that resulted in Band Aid covering the song from the 80s by not changing many of the words so it doesn't really fit the situation. Apparently we're ready for an outbreak here. I guess we'll hopefully never know. Because if the public health system is like the public transport system, we're all buggered.

And the moving finger (yes, I know – first it's an eye, then a finger; I need to make up my mind) points to the media in the final section of my review. Disappointingly little change here, with regards to representation of minority groups and women – very much still an 'if we have to' filling in of quotas, rather than a judgement of actual merit. Except for isolated cases, so yeah that's a bit sad. But if there could be an upside of that, then it is the names of some specific individuals. I mean, I thought that Ariana Grande was a Starbucks coffee, Lana Del Ray a Spanish holiday destination and Kanye West a train stop. And, of course, as this is obligatory; Christchurch seems to have calmed down a bit in terms of the shaking (for anyone who's interested, there's a Taylor Swift song that covers my thoughts on the issue reasonably well).

So, that concludes this year's round up. And now, for this year's headlines that I could find;

- Potato chip factory burnt to a crisp
- Disgusted Central Park mugger rejects Victim's flip phone
- Missing woman unwittingly joins search for herself
- SWAT team heroically ends 6 hour standoff with empty apartment
- Statistics show teen pregnancy drops significantly after 25.

Financial Literacy in Schools - Improving the Wellbeing of Students?

Tuesday, period five; Economics class. The mid-afternoon sun isn't immediately noticeable as none of the windows are facing the right direction, but the room is heated to around the temperature that puts people to sleep. A teacher is lecturing, pointing vaguely at a diagram drawn on the board and expecting the students to understand what the diagram means. Which they do, because it has been explained to them.

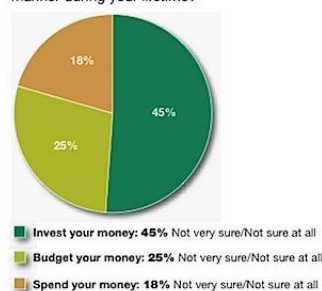
But what if there was no diagram? Would this full class of students be able to apply the knowledge in a meaningful way? How many of the 25 students actually understand how what they're learning can be used? Even though these students know about how rises in interest rates affect the real estate market, not many have considered their own individual spending habits, or even know exactly how the real estate market works. Even though these students are studying the economy, are they financially literate?

The world of business is seen by the layperson as a foreign and faraway landscape. A place where people get rich very quickly and no-one knows how, but then equally quickly can be completely chewed up and spat out. Because of this mentality, people don't seem to know that an understanding of the world of business can lead to an understanding of the world, generally.

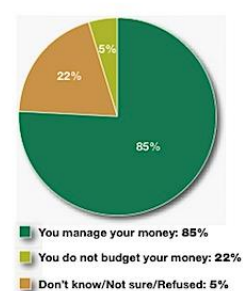
Financial literacy refers to the basic skills and knowledge needed to navigate the 'grown-up' world; things like tax, interest, dividends and the real estate market. Understanding these economic concepts is the first key step in being able to contribute meaningfully to society. It has been suggested that students should learn financial literacy in school. Specifically, a policy has been seriously considered over the past few years to implement a financial literacy program at Mount Roskill Grammar School.

Many teenagers don't even budget the money they earn, if they earn money at all. This leads to teens making financially irresponsible decisions with the cash that they have -- mostly because there is no real need to be properly [thrifty](#) with their cash, as parents pay for and provide essential services. This leaves the money that is actually earned to be used for 'recreational' activities or luxury items. This graph to the right shows that even intelligent people are not necessarily financially literate and able to hold on to and manage their money - done in a survey by Felix Salmon for an article on that topic.

How sure are you that you can effectively do each of the following in a responsible manner during your lifetime?



Which, if any, of the following apply to you in terms of managing your money?



This 'cycle of financial irresponsibility' means teenagers don't cultivate good spending habits or have any real concept of what money is actually used for in 'the real world' until it is far too late and they have left home. Implementing a financial literacy program in schools would mean they received advice on good spending habits and maintaining these long before they leave school.

High-school student definitions of [financial literacy](#) vary, from "Do you mean 'don't give your money to the Nigerian scammers?'" to "Do you mean in terms of teaching people what assets and liabilities are, or more in terms of economics?" These two specific definitions came from Mount Roskill Grammar School students James Ashworth and Diana Qiu -- both Commerce students who should have some form of financial literacy and understanding.

However, the dictionary definition of financial literacy is actually relatively simple. "The possession of knowledge and understanding of financial matters", as found [here](#).

The simplicity of this definition, of course, undercuts the complexity of the issue it defines -- as becoming properly financially literate and knowing how to use this knowledge takes possibly years of experience and practice. The definition (in this context) means the skills and knowledge required to understand business matters in relation to personal finance -- so the ability to budget and understand concepts like tax and interest in relation to the loans and everyday situations teens would find themselves in in later life.

There are several reasons suggested in [this article](#) for why financial literacy is not taught in schools. The fact that not many teachers have actually taken courses on teaching personal finance and that many of the others don't feel qualified enough to teach it are just some of these suggested reasons. Being forced by law to teach these classes

with a lack of qualification would be detrimental to the learning of students, as they would be 'learning' incorrect facts.

Students also had some insight as to why financial literacy is not taught in schools -- Miss Qiu again said that "there's no place for it. I mean, NCEA takes over most of the curriculum. The conversation about financial education should be had between friends or parents and their kids?" Mr Ashworth had similar opinions on the subject, suggesting that schools were too lazy to teach it or that it was unrequired by the curriculum.

Another key argument put forward is that there is simply not enough money to teach financial literacy as a subject without removing money from the budgets of other subjects.

"In an increasingly difficult economic marketplace, consumers must be relied on to make well-informed financial decisions ... financial illiteracy is widespread even in well-developed economies" (as [this paper](#) states).

As discussed in this article, that would mean consumers must become more financially literate. Therefore, some form of financial education should be provided in schools. This would help students to cultivate better spending and saving habits, and therefore make better economic decisions. Promisingly, in 2011, the Australian Securities and Investments Commission launched a [National Financial Literacy Strategy](#), which aimed to improve financial literacy in Australians.

So, the twenty-five economics students in that period five class are probably more financially literate than most of the country -- with [fewer than 260 schools](#) (out of 2,600; this number includes all schools in NZ, public, private, primary and secondary) fully integrating financial literacy education in their curriculum. Along with these figures, questions of teacher qualification lead to two potential solutions; students have to be willing to try and work out these things by themselves, or specially trained teachers can teach the students financial literacy.

Ultimately, whether or not the financial literacy program suggested to be implemented at MRGS comes to fruition, financial knowledge and awareness needs to be enhanced. This applies not only to MRGS, but also across the country. This could mean simply discussing it with family and friends or having properly taught classes. In this case, anything is better than nothing.

I Still Haven't Written the Limerick on Maths

Things that are happening;

For one; school. So I probably won't be here very often any more. You'll cope. All four of you that read this.

Anyways that has been ... interesting thus far.

Peer Support -- I mean I get the point but it comes off as a ginormous waste of time and seriously there are better ways. No point me suggesting them, no one hears me screaming on here.

And the documentary. We have to make a documentary for Media. That's sooner than I expected, but good nevertheless, got some ideas. I may post some stuff here that's relevant. I dunno.

Finally, as the title suggests, I have not yet had time to write the limerick on Maths from a reasonable time ago. I probably never will.

Anyways, peace out suckers.

And leave comments. Otherwise my email inbox is empty and bleh.

A Year In Review (2013)

This is my (now traditional) review of the news in 2013. I can only hope it is funny enough to be entertaining, but possibly not, because I've never been that good at this sort of thing – or as good as I like to think I am. Again, had we filmed an episode of Bad Jokes, this would have been its content. But no, again we have not. So this will, once again, be the only news-based project I do.

So we look to the news, and begin with the obvious stories that have run for years now; Christchurch and the Economy. These are the boring ones, not least because bugger all has happened in them over the year. The economy worldwide seems to be recovering overall, but nobody is really sure about this and people appear to have stopped caring. Certainly Europe is either in exactly the same amount of shit it was in last year, or the situation has gotten better, but either way they didn't win the Nobel Peace Prize this year, and there haven't been many anti-German jokes. So I shall continue that trend. Earthquakes continued in Christchurch as well, following on from way back in 2011, but this year without the benefit rock concerts (which I personally have always found offensive – never mention rocking in an earthquake stricken area. Not good). And there, ladies and gentlemen, is this year's mandatory earthquake joke.

Adding this year to the trend of disasters throughout the country and overseas there was a drought in the North island through February and March, with a massive typhoon in the Philippines in October. I won't do jokes about these events, because that would be mean. There were some births and deaths – the Royal Baby, and Nelson Mandela, to name – that it would also be mean to take the piss out of. Then there was the thing where the Mayor of Auckland had an affair, which no-one really cares about but he might have to resign blah blah blah. I personally just hope it goes off into a corner with Mr Mandela and dies. Oops, I said no death jokes.

Then there were some byzantine economics-based cockups this year too, starting with the Fonterra health scare in July/August, where NZ exports fell by loads and we looked set to completely fall off the world stage like a drunk comedian halfway through an act. And the United States countered this health scare by doing something (God knows what) about a health care scheme in the USA that no-one could agree on for ages and ages, so the COUNTRY HAD TO SHUT DOWN TO SORT IT OUT. I MEAN WHAAAAAT?? Ultimately the issue was sorted out by females in the Republican party being smart and not characteristically stupid.

And then, because the media has to balance the opinions it represents, even the one that women are actually capable of being strong human beings, along comes (pun, you decide) Robin Thicke. Now, it seems the media has taken to people shaking this year, as the frenzy surrounding twerking in the late year, also surrounded the Harlem Shake in the early year. The only thing missing from that list is naked entry into a room, swinging from a wrecking ball, but I'll stop that train of thought before it becomes physically scarring.

And with that, my review of the year, funny or not, draws to a close. But not first before sampling some headlines I came across in my research across the internet;

- Stolen prosthetic limb found in second-hand shop
- Would the congregation please note that the bowl at the back of the church labelled 'for the sick' is for monetary donations only.
- Health warning: laughter could leave you in stitches
- Two men charged with money laundering after police found a pile of bank notes in a tumble dryer

You Will Never Know – Series Archive

Introduction: The Rules

This is the beginning of my summer holidays. This means I have quite a lot of spare time at the moment. So I'm gonna start a thing on this blog, and hope I finish it (at this point I intend to - and that is a really big point).

This is a series of posts that are going to be called "You Will Never Know". Basically what the idea of "You Will Never Know" is, is that each post will be a piece of fiction about new characters, and hopefully in a different genre. All these pieces will end with a cliffhanger, then there'll be a final piece where I resolve all the cliffhangers.

This series is a strictly "When I'm Bored" Project - you may get two in a day then nothing for a week, I don't yet know.

Okay, because you can't have fun without rules, here are my four guidelines for cliffhangers;

1) They're very powerful, but very annoying, so they should be used very sparingly, and only when there's a good reason.

2) You can't use a cliff-hanger instead of an ending. Some shows do, but I think it's cheating. Any episode that ends with a cliffhanger must also have a satisfying conclusion in itself. Ideally, the main question of the episode should be answered - but the answer should then throw up an unexpected larger question, which provides the cliff-hanger.

3) The cliffhanger has to be an emotional one, or at least a direct dilemma for a central character or characters, not a physical or external one. The question left unanswered must always be 'What will he or she do now?' not 'What will happen to him or her now?'

And most importantly of all:

4) A cliff-hanger is a promise to the audience. It's implicitly saying 'I'm withholding the gratification of giving you the answer now, but trust me, when you get it, you'll think it was worth the wait.' And if you're going to make a promise like that, you'd better be able to back it up, or at least think you can.

There are my rules; digest them, and then the first of the posts.

Godspeed my non-existent readership (to set this off, use the contact form in the menu - I promise I DO check it).

Chapter 1: Who Wants To Be A Millionaire

Chris Tarrant sat in the office, accompanied by his boss, a lab-coated official with stethoscope around his neck. The stethoscope was just decorational, or at least that's what the official always said. The official was talking, and had been for some time, but Tarrant hadn't been listening. Strange packets of powders, pills and solutions lined the shelves in the office and it had often been said the sheer content of chemicals in the office were sufficient to topple the Government by force. Oddly enough, this hadn't happened yet.

Tarrant looked up as the official finished speaking and slid one of the bags across the table towards him. Tarrant was unsure what exactly the purpose of this particular weapon was, and perhaps should have been paying attention, but then the official clarified the situation; "This is the one we'll use if we feel we're getting nowhere. That okay with you?"

Tarrant nodded his assent, dazed. Obviously he didn't approve, but they wouldn't know that. Tarrant collected the bag and left the room quickly, he had planning to do.

So how would you stop a biological weapons attack on the world? Was it even a biological weapons attack on the world? He hadn't been paying attention. He should've been. Another lab-coated individual walks past, as Tarrant gets up to stretch, taking three long steps and "accidentally" punching the individual in the face (it was a complicated stretch).

Tarrant walked out on to a loading bay, deserted except for a military-style truck.

"Hey you," the driver of the truck yelled, directed at Tarrant, "Got the goods?"

"Yes", Tarrant replied. This had been the plan for a while now, wait until the eve of the epidemic, then steal the virus. It seemed the only way to stop it, and even that was sketchy at best.

Handing the package over to the driver of the truck, as one of Tarrant's superiors walks out on the loading bay, seeing this transaction. Tarrant looks up, exasperated, the bag being dropped on to the loading bay floor, pills rolling in all directions. They would be useless now, at least that had been done.

The jail door swung shut with a bang, leaving Tarrant on a cold, metal slab that doubled as his bed. Tarrant noticed a small splinter of wood off in one of the corners of the room. Using this to open the lock and door, he escaped back to the loading bay, with loud alarm and three security guards in tow. The guards looked at each other and appeared to reach a unanimous decision. Two of them backed off.

Tarrant looked to the ground, and saw one of the rogue pills nearby. He picked it up. The words "Bovine TB" were pressed into the surface. This is what he had been trying to stop. The lengths people would go to for material gain. The guard approached Tarrant from behind, and as Tarrant turned around, the guard leveled his gun.

With a bang, the gun discharged into the stomach of Chris Tarrant.

"Advance the plans, we don't have much time," the guard said into his radio. As Tarrant crumpled to the cold, metal floor, the sound of small propeller planes was heard directly overhead. On a screen over Tarrant's head, news footage of people living their lives showed, alternating with footage of biplanes spraying chemicals over crops. Tarrant was unsure of the story, mind you he didn't really care, because he was dying. He reached up to the big red button, with most of his energy (quite a bit, given he was bleeding out on the floor). The guard looked up, astonished, and his rifle moved back towards Tarrant. He didn't have much more time. The guard's gun leveled. Tarrant gained solid purchase on the button. Tarrant began to press down. The guard discharged his weapon. And ...

Chapter 2: The Perfect Crime

This one is a little early, I had planned for it to be done on Tuesday, but eh what do you do? It is as follows:

It all began with a chance encounter on the 3:30 train through the City one afternoon. I found myself sitting next to a broad-shouldered, tall man called Bob. Bob wore a loose t-shirt and shorts; he didn't appear to care about appearances. I myself was almost the exact opposite, for a cold June morning I had myself chosen a long wool coat and two-piece suit; I was on my way home from work, even though it was little after lunchtime. You'd be surprised how quickly conversations can turn so that two perfect strangers are talking about who they want dead. I suppose it was either that, or watch the city center go past the window.

"I mean I know I could go through the divorce system, but I'm not sure the courts would find "Being a bitch" reasonable grounds"

"It is a lot of hassle - the law. Listen, I have a plan, and this may sound a little rude, but ... are you familiar with the expression 'You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours'?" I leaned forward in the chair, staring intently at a fixed point just above the floor for no real reason.

"Yeah, it's really famous", Bob was perhaps a little slow on the uptake.

"Right, well it goes something like that, but a little more ... kill-y." I said, conspiratorially.

"Are you going to kill my back?" Still slow on the uptake.

"No, of course not. Your wife ... you could kill my husband"

"Oh, that sounds much better. And because we've never met before, nobody will ever suspect a thing." Bob looked excited, although based on my prior knowledge of him, that didn't seem too difficult.

"Exactly, so here's what you need to do ..."

We outlined the tasks for each other, after which point the train stopped and Bob got off. I never saw him again after that.

After two weeks, I plucked up the courage, and followed the given instructions to a remote cottage, with lights on in most windows. I knocked on the door, and a woman answered the door.

"Hello, what do you -- what're you doing with tha-" Her tone went from tired frustration to surprise to ... nothing because she was dead.

It was that simple. I drove back home, knowing that in the not-too-distant future, my husband would meet a similar fate.

At midnight, I was woken by a knock to the door. It was the police, as per.

"Good morning ma'am. Are you Christie Smith?"

"That's right, is there a problem?"

"I'm afraid your husband was found dead just now. I'm sorry if this seems insensitive, but I have to ask you where you were yesterday."

"Well that's easy. I was - Oh hell."

Chapter 3: Glass House

The idea with this one was "no dialogue and extremely sad". I failed on both counts, while analysing society in what I consider a semi-successful way. So enjoy it. It's also shorter than the others, but I feel it's better in terms of character, something the previous pieces had not done. It also uses the name Chrystal, a name that I am told is missing from this blog. It is as follows;

The wall was impenetrable. Chrystal had tried to break the wall, in a very literal fashion, by running at it. This had by and large failed and she had little energy left. She slumped against the wall, spent, turning in her exhaustion to see a group of teenagers, mixed - boys and girls - playing some kind of volleyball nearby. She didn't have enough energy to call. Not that it would have mattered, the glass would have killed any chance of the sound being received. So she sat there, in self-reflection.

This self reflection lasted the rest of the night, and until sunrise the following morning. It was mid-summer, so the kids were back in the volleyball court (or whatever it was called, she had never bothered to check) within a short time. Chrystal had got to the stage of her analysis where she was convinced a god somewhere in the sky was smiting her for something or some reason, or perhaps just trying to teach her a lesson of some sort.

Or maybe just torture her by making her watch the happy people, while being unable to take part herself. She had found this a problem through the majority of her life, and it hadn't got easier as she'd got older - just more awkward and annoying. It really didn't help that the 'cool' kids paid less attention to that, not more. So her standards slipped, and anyone who talked to her at all was a huge achievement. The thought of these things made her sad, but as always she felt as though she were missing something, but was never sure what.

As she was having this particular thought, one of the teenagers yelled out, in a voice not quiet, to one of the girls across the other side of the net "You're so useless, get back in the kitchen!"

This would be the first comment of anyone in the group that Chrystal had actually heard. the realisation of this made her jump. Then she thought.

Tentatively, she touched the glass, armed with this new idea. Already she could feel a change, but nothing happened. Overcome with sadness, disappointment and loneliness, she succumbed to a not-entirely-infrequent bout of sobbing, leaning against the glass because what did it matter, they couldn't see her anyway. There was a sound that made Chrystal look up, noticing a foreign item about at head height.

She touched the window with her finger, tracing the foreign item. The glass had begun to crack.

Chapter 4: Sargeant Major

This is a Christmas themed one, cos what the hell. It's also short.

The war had been ongoing for about two years now, but nobody ever bothered to check any more. Not specifically, anyways. Time was measured by the distance between air raids, not via squares on paper. Timothy Major was leaving his office in one of the bunkers south of London on this particular evening when one of his secretaries leaned out of the nearby window, shoving a telegram in his face. Apparently it was Christmas eve, 1914, but anyone would believe anything these days, so the information was not necessarily reliable. The other contents of the telegram, were however, less than trivial.

"Are you sure," Major asked the secretary.

"Pretty much", the reply was almost sheepish

"Why, though?"

"Well it is Christmas".

Sargeant Major sauntered into his office, holding the telegram, intent on doing nothing about it. This belief was of course challenged by his senior, one General Darling.

"So, Sargeant Major. What the hell are your troops doing?"

"I don't know. My junior is in charge, Darling." A lie.

"It's GENERAL Darling, to you Major Dickhead".

"It's SARGEANT Major Dickhead, to you, sir."

"Quite. It seems your troops have all decided to ascend the trench and play football on No-man's-land". Darling had yet to pick up on the lie.

"Are they insane? They bloody WHAT?" Acting, but it seemed to work. Darling ran out of the room, followed by Major himself, but for entirely different reasons.

Some time later, and in a different place, a whistle sounded.

"Hey, General, if you distract one of the midfielders, the goal will be unguarded, so I can score", the Sargeant said, midst football game.

"Do you even know what you're talking about?" asked the General.

"No sir. I never paid much attention".

"To what, the rules, or what you were saying?"

"Both. Let's finish this game."

"But there's a time limit."

"Oh, you know what I mean."

"The game was a breath of fresh air, certainly," said Major, from back in the bunker after the conclusion of said match.

An officer of some description (as Major could not identify the bands on his arm) walked into the room, and handed him some papers.

"Thank you, Mister ..." Major implored the man to give his name.

"Schmitt," the man said.

The Major and his junior looked at each other across the table as Schmitt left.

"What, do you think we ... oh God."

"Hey - hey Sarge, you know that football match we played on Christmas Day ... which way did we walk back afterwards?"

"Well obviously to the left, where we walked from at the beginning"

"Even after we changed ends at half time?" They looked at each other in stunned silence.

"So. What do we do now?"

Chapter 5: All Your Base Are Belong To Us

The nuclear radiation from the onset of some war or other over the other side of the world had rendered a large part of the surface of the planet uninhabitable. So the population felt an overwhelming desire to, for some reason, move underground to continue living. To this end, society was now divided into factions of about a thousand people living in underground bunkers. Some were larger than others, it all depended on the funding they had when the decision had been taken to move underground. In this particular bunker, ten scientists were figuring out a counter-measure for the radiation to reinhabit the surface of the planet. the lab was a small, enclosed space, maybe twenty metres across, with glass vials of coloured fluids and white walls - the very archetypal image of a scientific lab. Bib Mortimer was the chief scientist of the faction. He hadn't had to work to get there; he'd just been given the job one afternoon, immediately before the move underground.

The thumping was getting to Bob. It had been going on for twenty minutes now. He just needed to finish his diagnosis of the components within the concocted counter-measure mixture, then he would investigate. Four rhythmic thumps, then a rest for ten or so seconds. Then four thumps, then a rest. And so on. Bob looked up, surprised by the silence from outside. Bob called his nine colleagues into the lab from the adjoining staff room and said to them; "there are people outside this room that want this mixture", he gestured at the vial on the table "and we have to defend this room to ensure they don't get it. The vial would allow control over the surface of the planet, and the people who want this ... bad idea. So this is what you guys need to do ..."

He outlined the plan of action and kitted out his staff with sufficient chemical weapons for the defence of the room. The thum[ing began again after a time, and the ten scientists braced themselves for the intrusion of the outside world - the only defence between the current society and certain death. the thumping got progressively louder and louder over the space of the following ten minutes, as the scientists each became more and more edgy about the vial they were charged with protecting. Then the thumping stopped. In the resulting silence, Mortimer crept across the lab floor and grabbed the vial, keeping it safe, or even more so than it was already.

One of the scientists leant over the table, and asked Bob for the vial. Bob smiled politely, but kept the vial clutched to his chest. His reasoning; you could never be too careful. There was a flash in the scientist's eyes that made Bob jump. They were inside. He didn't know how or why, but the creatures they had been protecting the world from had snuck through the barricades. Calmly, Bob stepped back and pulled a lever.

Orange lights flickered through the corridor and "This is Not A Drill" blared through large speakers mounted every hundred meters or so along the corridor outside the lab. Bob picked up a phone and yelled into it, disregarding

pleasantries and hiding his panic, "I don't care what you do now, just smash the damn vials! They've got in, somehow. Just make sure -"

The scientist smacked the phone out of his hand. None of the others made any move to stop him.

"Umm, guys ..." Bob said, uncertainly. The other scientists looked at him with palpable malice and the undisguised flash in their eyes. They too had been lost.

"Treasure what little you have left of your miserable life," the scientist closest to Bob said, as he swung a fist.

Chapter 6: Theories

This one is short, sharp, hopefully scary and teeing up the end. I can see the finish now ... I also thought it would be a poem. Then decided against it for two reasons; a) it would be against the form set up in these previously, and b) poems are harder to write and I don't have that much time. There's also a subtle-as-a-hammer Sherlock ref in this piece which will be even more relevant than it already is at the end. Just to be clear; THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION.

March 8th - 20:00.

If you think the Government's out to get you, don't join conspiracy theory blogs. Don't do that, because then absolutely NO-ONE who will listen can hear you scream. I mean, sure, conspiracy theorists will agree with you and nod nicely about it, but you won't get a result. Typing words on to a server that everyone can read won't stop the slow, loud march of the Secret Service to your door. Believe me, I know. Then they'll bag you up and send you somewhere remote or to an asylum of some sort, just to shut you up. Because who needs fuss. You'd get put in a van, and left there.

I think maybe the most common thing you hear about conspiracy theorists is that they're just nutcases with sci-fi type plots trying to convince everybody of absolutely nothing whatsoever. This is because that's what They want you to think. They want you to distrust conspiracy theorists, because the conspiracy theorists are right and They know it. Big Brother is watching you, Resist the feed and all other associated taglines from dystopian media apply here, because that's what the world is now.

But nothing will stop Them. They are the faceless men in suits conducting experiments behind closed doors with a finger pressed to their lips and gags for those who disagree. Nobody knows what they're hiding, but everyone can agree that they are.

Now, I'm going on holiday for a bit, so I won't be on the forum for a while. Post your theories and I'll respond to them if I can when I return. There is nothing to worry about, I repeat, there is absolutely nothing to worry about [Vatican cameos].

Enjoy the sun, it may not be here forever.

*

I closed the laptop and handed it to the man.

"There. Happy?" I asked.

He gave no answer, pulling a syringe from the folds of a long coat.

Then the white set in.

Chapter 7: Vatican Cameos

Final post. All cliffhangers previously set up will be resolved, some by throwaway line, others as plot points. You will get answers. This is longer than the others, I think. Here we go;

"Welcome to HQ". The two boys stepped into a room that was mostly occupied by a single, large table. This table was strewn with wires and screens to about a five centimeter depth, except for odd spaces where the monstrous amount of cables had been completely cleared, presumably for some people's laptops or something. People worked here, that was for sure, and they did a bloody complicated job using complicated words and stuff. That's what Alex got when he entered the building. There were many doors, all leading to different places, but perhaps the most shady part of the whole arrangement was the man who had employed the boys. Tall, reasonably old and graying, with curly hair and piercing eyes.

"Listen carefully", he said, "we're gonna try to topple the Government, and here's how..."

The scientist that had swung a fist at Bob connected with his lower jaw, snapping Bob's head up, but otherwise doing no serious damage. While doing this, he leaned in close and whispered "Limp. We need to get out of here". So Bob complied and was carried out of the room, while the other scientists watched, slightly jealous.

When outside, Bob stood up on his own feet.

"What was that about?"

"Don't trust anyone," the other scientist said.

"What do you want from me?" Bob asked, perplexed.

"To topple the Government. Quickly, get to HQ. We'll be safe there".

The cracks widened in the glass and Chrystal's view of the other kids became obscured. Then it faded, and was replaced by a green screen. She looked around her now changing environment. White walls and stainless steel occupied the space outside her glass box, as if she was in some sort of ... lab. There was a thin outline of a door, only just visible in the glass. That hadn't been there before. She opened it, and was swept up in the pair of men running along the hallway.

"Vatican ..." said one of the men.

"... Cameos". Chrystal finished. The men turned their attention back to the hallway and she ran alongside them.

Whatever it was they were doing for the Resistance, she could be trusted.

The gun in the guard's hand spluttered and clicked, but no bullet came out. Tarrant's own weapon discharged neatly into the guard's stomach and Tarrant got up off the floor, leaving the guard there to die. Like the conspiracy theorists and that one idiot who couldn't provide an alibi for the death of her husband - there had to be sacrifices for the good of the Resistance. Members who had made mistakes, were tried and found guilty and then executed were always late to meetings. They were late just generally. Christie Smith had been the history expert, she was always talking about the two idiots who, on Christmas 1914, were executed on the wrong side of enemy lines, and how they'd been there for a while before they were discovered ...

Tarrant couldn't afford sentimentality, not now. He was fighting a bullet wound to the stomach as it was, he just needed to get to HQ. they could patch him up there. It would buy him time. He was dead. That much was certain, but when. Grabbing the fallen guard's own bloody shirt and using it as a bandage (albeit rather unsuccessfully), he prepared himself to leave.

He checked his comm unit, and saw a message saying "HQ". He ran off.

The boys weren't expecting the four people who burst through the doors. Two scientists, by the looks, and a guy wearing ... whatever THAT was, and a girl who looked emotionally traumatised. Was this the "Resistance" their boss had talked about?

They patched up the man with bullet wounds in the chest. Everyone knew he was a dead man walking, but if they could all get out, his death might be worthwhile, unlike all the others.

The meeting lasted half an hour. In it, the boys learned there was a boat anchored offshore, that would be brought around by a minimal team of people to the others waiting at the shoreline. They would then use the boat to get away from the city, and go somewhere else. Or possibly just live off the boat, no-one had thought that far ahead.

Tarrant was elected as the boat collector. You would be if you were dying. Get there, and problems are solved. If you don't, they've got nothing on the group. Everyone else would wait at the shoreline for the boat to arrive. Hopefully they'd prepare some supplies or a story or something to get out and survive, while they waited for the boat. There wasn't much time, so Tarrant set off straight away.

He got to the vagie proximity of the ocean before he ran into issues. There was a yell from the settlement, and an alarm went off "THIS IS NOT A DRILL" blared out over the walls and probably a fair way over the ocean. Policemen in white ran out from the settlement. Tarrant had to think fast, so he ran. He wasn't even watching until it was too late. A cliff.

'So this is how it ends', he thought. 'Between a cop and a hard place'.

Chris Tarrant looked left. The police clad in white were encroaching. He looked to the right. Cliff. Straight up. So, this was it. No way left, no way right, no way up, no way down. At this point his time ran out. He had let the others down.

He sank to the ground as the cops approached him. His last view was of the others on the beach in the distance, waiting for a boat that would never come. He closed his eyes.

A Death Sentence

Apparently things that happen in my life are interesting for other people to read about (go figure, I think). But anyway it turns out that's what you (the readers) want - evn though I've had irate comments to the contrary in the past saying things like "BLOG ABOUT THINGS THAT ARE RELEVANT TO MY LIFE FGT" or similar.

So. The particular event I draw your attention to goes as follows.

Monday afternoon/evening. 2 oclock till 5 oclock. NCEA Maths Exam. Now Maths exams are hard exams as is, this difficulty is somewhat compounded by being very much in the graveyard shift - in this case meaning people would rather be dead than doing maths. But anyway, I am significantly more fortunate than most of the people sitting this exam, as I (and many others who chose wise options like I did) do not have to sit Statistics. Now, I do not like English as a subject, more because of how it is marked than because I dislike the subject, but seriously if you wwant to do English, do English. Don't do Stats, which is basically English walking around with one of those party masks on in old-fashioned parties. Call a spade a spade, and its basically English for Maths, not any kind of legitimate maths at all. However, it doesn't help my cause that the legitimate mathses (word? - I don't care) are harder by at least double than they should be, especially considering this is in the afternoon.

I also happen to have read the school yearbook, where the Head of English 100% endorsed complaining, but suggested it be done "with style and wit" rather than whining. While I agree with this in principle, it is hard to actually do, and with that in mind, here my attempt at styley-witty-complaining, rather than the utilisation of the no-you-are argument is as follows:

There once was a subject called Maths
And one day it - oh fuck it my brain's fried. Maybe another day.

For now, it seems "unsophisticated" whining will have to do.

Back to study. Chemistry tomorrow. Then my racist opinions while I get bored between then and Accounting ten days later.

That was a joke. I do not have racist opinions. I don't even have opinions about racing. As earlier posts may suggest, I do not like sport.

That's all for now.

Have a nice whatever.

Word Games #1 - One Syllable Words.

I feel like writing something, so I decided (after executive advice from another person) to talk for a few minutes without using words over one syllable in length. However, I realise this post is going to seem pre-meditated even if it isn't, due to its typed nature. It may not be very long.

The post without using words over one syllable in length starts; now.

I want to write with words of only one sound to see if I can, as I am bored. This is a test by me to give me a thing to do now. So, what should I write the post on? Sheep. Sheep are cool. I do not know much on sheep, and will make this point as I have no clue what to write. So I shall now write on life. Life is life. When life gives you the sour fruit, you make the sour fruit drink (of course I can not say that as it has words of more than one sound in it. This means I will have to keep on. Life is a thing it is quite hard to write on due to of the one sound thing. I think that is all I have to say. I have no more talk points.

And ... Stop.

Right, word game one, a reasonable success. We shall see next time I get bored if I try another game.

Documents of a Discussion With My Shrink - A Work of Fiction

This here following is a piece I wrote because I got bored on Friday afternoon, instead of studying for Economics and English, which incidentally I should be doing now, not writing this blog. So I'll be off, but not before I post the writing, obviously.

This here is a transcript of the events of a meeting with my behavioural psychologist, one Tuesday evening with rather warm weather for June, accounted for by the fact it was December.

The man was short and balding, and I feel this transcript adequately describes our relationships.

"The question, Mr Gardner, is 'how rich is this cake?'" The behavioural psychologist had been acting weird for the past three weeks. I couldn't figure out why, but then again, maybe it's my mannerisms. I'm never sure with these things.

"If the question is 'how rich is the cake' then tell me, how much cash does the cake have?" The question was delivered straight and punctually, although not in a box; we're not talking about pizza.

"I don't know, but if you want to existentialise about the socio-economic status of cake then I suggest you go elsewhere". The therapist had this manner with all of his clients; a wry, sceptical and dry wit that often beat his clients to punchlines.

"To a ... cook?" Genuine confusion, I was lumbering on after the uptake.

"No, that's a half-baked idea. Go to a shrink or something". Short joke setup #1. Self-deprecation gets no bonus points with me, especially when I'm in this office, with this person, in this mood.

"What, like a dwarf?" Deliberate mis-interpretation. Short joke #1.

"You're the one with the eating problem. Do you want me to sling fat jokes at you?" He snapped this back at me, and it became clear I'd touched a nerve.

"No, I apologise." At this point, the therapist buzzed the intercom for his secretary, who was too short to reach it mounted on the ceiling.

"Quite right, so stop throwing short jokes at me like tomatoes at a One Direction concert". He sat down and combed his fingers through a non-existent beard.

"Well. That's sorted. So what was the reason you called me here?"

"Discuss the cake." Flat, deadpan. He's serious. Or good at joking.

Either way, I have a reply ... "Do you mean "Discuss the cake? Like as in throw it at you like a discus. Don't mind if I do ..."

I move to throw the cake at him leaning across his desk and buzzing the intercom for the maid again while I do this (she's short, as I've said).

"No! Stop!" He wasn't entirely serious, but neither was I. I put down the cake. "Well okay. So the cake's a cake. Just a chocolate cake with bobbles on the ends."

He looked at me. I looked at him. Mexican standoff. Except there weren't any guns. (Don't make a biceps joke, it isn't worth your time).

"Okay, fine. Eat the fucking cake." I win. CAKE! But at the same time, fat joke #2.

"No! I won't be spoken down to by you, of all people!" Short joke #2.

"Okay, short joke for fat joke. We're even. Now, how's your wife ..."

This took forty minutes to write. Enjoy it? Anyway, off to study Economics ...

A New Purpose for This Site and/or A Rant

Welcome to my website! I posted a post similar to this at the start of February, but some stuff happened and there was an archive error and I'm sad because the old post was really cool, and I am sad because it's no longer with us and I'm sad because life's unfair, and I'm sad because no-one reads this blog

Yeah, that's me being a whiny bitch. Now, the purpose of this site.

This site serves multiple purposes, one of which is for me to whine about things that I find interesting and/or I find funny and/or I find annoying, and the other is just as a space for me to prove to myself continually that I am a person (prod myself with a stick). That's technology. In your face Terminator 2! Technology hasn't brought about the downfall of humankind; it's just wasted a lot of people's lives on Youtube.

(Although in James Cameron's defence that more accurate vision of man's relationship with machine probably wouldn't have looked as dramatic in CGI so you can't really blame him for making the script choices that he did)

Feel free to have a mooch about, put off going to bed for a bit or just use it to look busy at work*

*If you are at work and your boss catches you, [please click here](#), QUICKLY. (And look worried and thoughtful) Don't worry, I've got your back.

A new piece of technology on this site since the last time we were both here is the new-and-improved search bar. It means you can search stuff on the archiveforstuff.net46.net domain. Or just waste time. It's a cool search engine. If I can get it working.

That's it for now, off to fix the search. Hopefully by the time this is up it'll be done. But we shall see.

Try This At Home

Due to the fact you probably won't do this for many years (until you have / own a house that you can or are going to redecorate, or at least can convince someone to do it, which is unlikely), the title of this post is perhaps a little bit misleading. However, as I've started, I may as well finish. Follow my step-by-step guide to execute one of the best and most scary practical jokes you'll never see the punchline to, and will probably forget you did. Here's how to do it;

- Make sure you are going to wallpaper the house (Note 1).
- Select your wallpaper you wish to replace the existing wallpaper/paintjob with. Then set it aside.
- Go to the DIY store (Mitre 10/Mega/Bunnings Warehouse in New Zealand) and purchase a test pot (Note 2) of blood red paint. If anyone asks, it's for a feature wall (kinda true).
- Rip down the old wallpaper or prepare the paint that is currently on the walls to be painted over.
- Paint, in the blood-red paint on the wall in HUGE letters, the following.

- **I WILL KILL AGAIN**

- Then quickly paper over the wall, and promptly forget you did it in the first place. This only works if you wallpaper (Note 3).
- Continue repapering and living your life until you successfully sell the house.
- On your farewell tour of the property, suddenly remember you did it, just before handing the keys over, and get a lovely warm feeling inside. OR b)
- Be driving past at exactly the right time, and hear the rip of wallpaper, and then the scream.

Voila. That's how you do it.

Enjoy, and until the next time.

Note 1: This joke is based on a simple theory - one of territorialism (new word, perhaps). That being, a new owner of an existing house wants to make it THEIRS, meaning replacing the wallpaper/paint and carpet and drapes and stuff like that. As this joke will not work with a paint-based replacement system (Note 3), you must replace with wallpaper for this to work.

Note 2: I don't want to waste too much money, and you won't need too much paint.

Note 3: You will be painting on the wall. So painting over your own painted handiwork just destroys the time and effort you took to make it work, and then replacing with paint won't work either, but with wallpaper, to replace said paper, you must remove it, and to repaint, you also must remove the paper.

The Physics Of Playing Frisbee

The physics of playing Frisbee is rather simple, and yet destructive and damaging when done incorrectly.

So, this is me (a teenager with absolutely shit hand-eye coordination and therefore, almost by definition, no skill at frisbee) telling you (potentially similar, but possibly very different) readers how to play frisbee. And the logic behind frisbee is watch where the wind is coming from so the frisbe doesn't jack-knife and smack you in the face.

The main goal is, instead, to aim correctly so that it doesn't jack-knife at all, and instead smacks your opponent in the face. If this ever happens, you can pretend it was an accident, but we all know that it wasn't, don't we?

But enough social politics. Seriously though if you jack-knife too many frisbees you will get laughed at.

So here is my simple tip to completely avoid any humiliation of any levels when playing frisbee. Don't play frisbee.

Playing frisbee is one of those sports where you either impress everyone by landing / catching (whichever you prefer) the frisbee every time, or humiliate yourself by arsing it up (sometimes literally). The part of that statement that applies to you is literally a 50-50 split.

So ultimately I cannot help you, except for one tiny little pointer thing. The wind direction and intensity directly affects your ability to aim, and/or get smacked in the face.

So good luck, or bad luck, depending on how good you are.

Till later.

Making A Blog

A friend asked me how easy it was to make a blog.

"Easy." I said, omitting the fact that the hardest part of writing a blog isn't actually writing the posts. It's actually getting the blog to work, and look good working.

The simple fact of blogging is that you at least need some knowledge of html and hexadecimal colour labels. Know these and it will become a lot easier. The resource for this is attached below.

In designing a blog, you basically need 4 (or 5) pages;

- Index (the root page)
- About
- The Blog
- The Archive (optional)
- Contact

This will mean that people can navigate your site easily. It also means less work for you, as these 5 pages are already programmed into the menu above.

The hard bit of blog making is knowing how to use the code that has been set up for you, and/or looking around to find code that does what you want. The easiest way around this is to keep a copy of the .zip file AS YOU DOWNLOAD IT. Play around with ANOTHER copy, and try to figure it out. That way, if you screw it up, you haven't permanently buggered your new blog.

Also, save often, and whenever you do something that works.

And if you really can't figure out either a) how to do something or b) what a certain piece of code does, ask me, and I will help you (if I know you / can be bothered / care).

Putting the site online is easy enough. But I won't explain it here. If you get to the point that you want me to explain it, ask me then. And if you don't then I haven't wasted my time.

Resources below;

Site Making Resources [Blog Site Template and HTML Cheatsheet](#) - 22.3 KB

That's all for now.

A Year In Review (2012)

This is a review of the major news stories that I can be bothered to write about - basically, if we had filmed an edition of Bad Jokes, like we were going to, these would have been in it. But we haven't and we won't, so this'll have to do.

Right, so Greece was predicted to leave the Euro, but actually it didn't and instead the Euro won the Nobel Peace prize. The timing of these events seems mocking - as with Germany's conflict-ridden history, we can at least guess what some newspapers were thinking when they read these two stories one after the other; 'World War Three was prevented!' But actually, the Peace prize was in recognition of the last 60 years of trying to unite Europe, not just recent times. And somehow, they managed - at least for the time being - to pull through and survive a rather major market collapse that people thought would've surely happened by now.

And speaking of things that surely should've happened by now, the world didn't end on 21/12/12. Now, even if you look at this quickly, you can see the argument is full of holes. I mean, just because a calendar finishes on a certain day doesn't necessarily mean that the world will end, and all the YOLOfags who jumped on this bandwagon should be kicking themselves for having been so easily taken in, and resolve to change their ways. It is new year, after all. Because, quite simply, if the Mayans could predict the future, they'd still be here, right?

And then in August, the world's ginormous eyes turned to London, by form of HD cameras on strings above a sports stadium, and the stadium in question is the Olympic one. So I am not a fan of sport, or PE in general, but even I find myself watching - with a certain degree of interest - a person lifting a 100kg weight, or canoe slaloming, or even playing table tennis, but the one thing I would suggest is that they should introduce something like 'Olympic Sudoku solving' or similar. I don't know, maybe it wouldn't work, but in any case, the representation of people, the representation of sports and the crowd turnouts in these games is better than it has ever been.

Now I have always maintained (even if I never said it), that writing your own blog, and coding it yourself, has more ups than downs. For example, I don't have a five hundred word limit, so I can continue to write. So I shall.

And this year the Queen celebrated 60 years on the throne (not a toilet) and will hopefully continue to serve for a few years more.

The American General Election saw Barack Obama remain in the White House / Oval Office, however, it was unfortunate that just prior to this event occurring, New York and several states in the US were struck by Hurricane Sandy, which caused flooding and damage and ultimately destabilized the presidential race in the favour of Barack Obama, and potentially away from Mitt Romney.

Now, as the year is almost at its end, and I didn't film Bad Jokes, here are the funny news cuttings I found in places around the Internet.

- Federal Agents raid gun shop, find weapons.
- Study shows frequent sex enhances pregnancy chances.
- Manufacturer of flame-resistant fabric catches fire
- Prisoner facing 2000 year sentence could face more time
- Hospitals resort to hiring doctors

So yes, this is the year we call '2012' basically over, however it looks as though (for the foreseeable future at least), the world will continue its existence, and as such, so will we all.

Oh and also, there is ten posts now in the Archive, so the next post I make will be on a new page. Yay! New year, new Archive page - how exciting!

No ... just me then.

And with that, goodbye.

Apocalypse Now??

This'll be short - less than a hundred words. Count them.

My argument today is really simple, and it follows the vein of some Tui ads (you'll know the ones).

The argument in question is; "Yeah Right."

That will be all.

The Possession and Consumption of Cake

The argument I put forward today for your consideration is a simple one; can you have cake and eat it too.

That depends on how clever you are, and what the parameters set by the person using the phrase are. (More often than not, no parameters are set, but nevertheless, I will elaborate on this shortly).

Mostly what I mean is - are you limited to the possession of a single piece of cake, or are you allowed multiple bits. For if this is the case, surely, the solution of this rather elementary conundrum would come to any logicians, and/or members of the public easily.

For in order to have cake and eat it, there must be multiple bits, as (the point of the saying) it is impossible to both have an unharmed version of a particular piece of cake, and a slightly eaten/fully eaten version.

However, if multiple pieces are allowed then surely the saying would mean far less than it currently does, and even become void completely.

The other factor that needs to be considered is time.

Do both factors of the saying need to be addressed directly at any one point in time, or if having one, and then (a suitable amount of time later), the other. I suspect that the only way to invalidate the statement is to have both at the same time.

So, my solution to the "can you have cake and eat it" argument is yes, they just have to be different pieces, and you must have (at least) two pieces at any one time, because no, in my mind at least, prior possession of the cake does not tick that box, and then consumption tick the other. If that were the way it worked, I feel that the statement itself would be void. Simple as that.

As it is now, the statement's void anyway (because of this very argument).

See ya.

Airline Food

I'll be quick this time, I think. Not much to say really, just a small point, and minor accompanying evidence from me today. Then I'll write some story because I can.

All right. As quickly as I can (300 or fewer - NOT less - words; that's a debate for another day, i.e. the next time I post anything).

Airline food really isn't that bad. Maybe it depends more than it should on the airline with which you travel, but I dunno - the only even remotely long-haul flight I have been on is the one to Kuala Lumpur from Auckland with Malaysian Airlines.

Now, I am not saying that, in my experiences, airline food is perfect, I am simply saying that given the situations in which it is placed, it is pretty good. The problems I have with airline food is mainly tied with the amount of space you have in which to eat, as a passenger, rather than the food itself.

Case in point time.

I had a roast chicken dinner on said flight, which did, surprisingly, taste like Chicken, and was, also surprisingly, rather nice. It didn't give me food poisoning either, which is nice of it. However, this is only considering the food. The amount of time I had to waste moving it around on the ridiculously small tray table was grossly disproportionate to the amount of time I spent eating the actual (relatively palatable) food.

This is my point. Agree or disagree?

I don't care, because you can't post comments. Ha Ha Ha.

Till the next time.

Unusual Double Standards Debate

Me again. I'm baaaaaack. Yeah I'm not that excited either.

Anyway, something topical, but also true. This rant is one that I have prepared a while ago. I'm not sure how long it will be, but yeah ... I will try.

So to start this one-sided debate I will point out that key evidence in this rant is taken from the American song "Hummingbird Heartbeat" sung by young smasher of windows Katy Perry (my Justin Bieber rant may follow at a later date), and the rather countless number of American adventure / excessive use of a gun films.

So. The American media industry seems a little undecided on how to deal with several things; the sexualisation of content (film + music), or excessive violence or implied violence (again in either film or music). The reason for this discrepancy (and this rant) is that American music (and indeed, I should point out, varying levels of music internationally) have overly-sexualized and therefore inappropriate content and/or thinly concealed euphemisms (EEEEWWWphemisms). I have also noticed the sheer number of films with little other content than big, muscly, trigger-happy gentlemen running around shooting stuff (and not in a film way - that would be film-ception, and too complicated for most audiences, my Year 11 music video was a testament to that. It's late Saturday night when I'm writing this, and I don't have an internet connection at present. This means it is rather difficult for me to continue with the song side of this rant accurately and with specific evidence without a lyric sheet and I don't have one (as yet). So with the films (which again, as there is such a large number of films this refers to, will have vague and non-targeted evidence. English department shoot me.

So, the number of films in which people are allowed / encouraged to run around with guns that are made by the American Hollywood is simply - well, every Hollywood film. My point here is simple - what the hell?

Men can run around with guns in a film given a PGR rating, and yet cannot swear, or even imply sexual action (although the Steven Moffat based references to "dancing" in Doctor Who are established by him as euphemisms, and yet Hollywood films seem almost scared of the content (and you CERTAINLY wouldn't catch anything of that sort on American TV. It's like the US are trying to kid themselves into thinking that they're innocent, when a commonly-acknowledged fact by people is that "Sex AND Death" is the kind-of doorway to loss of innocence (or the Journey from Innocence To Experience, if you will). It seems broadcasters are unaware these things generally occur together. You can't complete half a job, and then just leave it. Either don't touch anything that could even possibly constitute a possible loss of innocence, or completely blow the audience out of the metaphorical water.

The lyric sheet I have obtained follows. The song that I will yell at is called "Hummingbird Heartbeat" 'by' Katy Perry. Ugh. Even writing it makes me ill.

Lyric Sheet:

You make me feel like I'm losing my virginity
The first time every time when you touch me
I make you bloom like a flower that you never seen
Under the sun we are one buzzing energy

Let's pollinate to create a family tree
This evolution with you comes naturally
Some call it science we call it chemistry
This is the story of the birds and the bees

Even the seasons change
Our love still stays the same

You give me the hummingbird heartbeat
Spread my wings and make me fly
The taste of your honey is so sweet
When you give me the hummingbird heartbeat, hummingbird
heartbeat
Oh oh
Hummingbird heartbeat

The taste of your honey is so sweet
When you give me the hummingbird heartbeat, hummingbird
heartbeat

Oh oh
Hummingbird heartbeat
Oh oh
Hummingbird heartbeat
Oh oh
Hummingbird heartbeat
Oh oh
Hummingbird heartbeat

I've flown a million miles just to find a magic seed
A white flower with the power to bring life to me
You're so exotic my whole body fluttering
Constantly craving for a taste of your sticky sweet

I was on the brink of a heart attack
You gave me life and keep me coming back

Oh oh
Hummingbird heartbeat

I've flown a million miles just to find a magic seed
A white flower with the power to bring life to me
You're so exotic my whole body fluttering
Constantly craving for a taste of your sticky sweet

I was on the brink of a heart attack
You gave me life and keep me coming back
I see the sun rise in your eyes, your eyes
We've got a future full of blue skies, blue skies

Even the seasons change
Our love still stays the same

You give me the hummingbird heartbeat
Spread my wings and make me fly
The taste of your honey is so sweet
When you give me the hummingbird heartbeat, hummingbird
heartbeat
Oh oh
Hummingbird heartbeat
Oh oh
Hummingbird heartbeat

You love me, you love me
Never love me not, not, oh no
When we hear a perfect harmony
You make me sound like, like a symphony

Spread my wings and make me fly
The taste of your honey is so sweet
When you give me the hummingbird heartbeat, hummingbird
heartbeat
You give me the hummingbird heartbeat
Spread my wings and make me fly

I see the sun rise in your eyes, your eyes
We've got a future full of blue skies, blue skies

Even the seasons change
Our love still stays the same

You give me the hummingbird heartbeat
Spread my wings and make me fly
The taste of your honey is so sweet
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You give me the hummingbird heartbeat
Spread my wings and make me fly
The taste of your honey is so sweet
When you give me the hummingbird heartbeat, hummingbird
heartbeat
Oh oh
Hummingbird heartbeat
Oh oh
Hummingbird heartbeat
Oh oh
Hummingbird heartbeat
Oh oh
Hummingbird heartbeat
Oh oh
Hummingbird heartbeat

Very quickly now, we can see where this argument will start.

Referring to the above sheet, the euphemisms ("Taste of your honey", etc.) are so blatant that you may as well just say sperm.

Then people know exactly what you mean. But then, problem is, you aren't commercially viable (not that Katy Perry was ever commercially viable), and the bigwigs cut you off.

Which brings me back to the "Why The Hell Do They Do That?" argument. WHY?? It's not like they need to prove anything to anyone about being "grown up", and even if they did, that wouldn't be the way to do it.

So what it seems to me is this; films can have violence, and music can be crammed with sexual innuendos and euphemisms, but neither can have both (if you follow).

So you should now see what I'm saying. My 'loss of innocence' argument still applies here, and just shows that the US media industry needs to get its shit sorted. If it doesn't, people like me will yell at them on forums like this (except they will be forums that people read), and so will be boycotted, and/or forced to change.

And that's all I have to say about that.

Changes to the Education System, Perhaps?

Editorial time.

Picture this; a classroom of 30-something students sit in a normal-sized classroom, on normal sized desks. But there's a catch. They all have computers on these desks instead of books. Computers have modernized the world; made it much easier to communicate with other people, develop ideas and say what we think. Like I'm doing now. So what if there was a possibility of having computers in schools? Surely it would increase classroom productivity, organization of notes and therefore, simplicity of study. But what about the cost?

Yes it would. Classroom productivity basically boils down to "the amount of work you can do, divided by the time you have". Naturally, then having a computer would increase this. I know from personal experience that you can type faster than you can write. In amongst the sea of facts, you also don't have to sit in class copying out a worksheet, because you can't write on the sheet, when all the teacher has to do is press one or two buttons to then forward the lesson's notes and worksheets on to the students.

This modern way of teaching would surely do away with writing using pieces of paper. Actually it wouldn't. Even now, there are still things that the human can produce without using a computer. Drawing, for example. This would require the same fine motor skills as it does now, and I would recommend that if this new method does come into force, the computer not completely take over.

Notes would then be more organized. There would be one folder with all notes from Social Studies, say, and not notes spread over multiple books that are also jam-packed with worksheets that don't help with revision. So you decide what goes in your file layout, and what doesn't even make it past your Gmail account. Studying with multiple people would also be easier, as you don't have to type out the notes from a book, just email the people you're working with the appropriate files. However, then poorer families would be stuck in an even larger ditch than before, because they either have a computer, or they don't and are rapidly falling behind.

For some schools, the issue of cost is what has kept the computers out. (Imagine a prison door, if it helps). It is partially true. But think; seven or eight books a year, plus 5 lots of maybe \$40 worth of stationary (which comes to about \$300/\$400 over 5 years), is about the cost of a small netbook. Now, I'm not saying netbooks are good, but they do the job. It's just all the money you'd spend in four years, in one hit. The schools could also amp up the school fees slightly, or put the photocopying budgets towards the new technology, if it helped to "ease the pain".

So, while it is in fact possible to have computers in schools, it would be an enormous undertaking to convert a whole school to this new method. However, I believe, if they were to do this, they would benefit from the advantages of the new technology more than reel from the debts. As technology will become more prominent as time goes on, it is also wise to slowly update the existing technology, or at least realize that the "Windows 95" computer in the corner's room has well and truly passed it by. Computers in schools would be a massive asset, to the students for ease of work, and for the school, in means of adaptability, and not being left in the dark.

But we all secretly know that's not going to happen.

Until the time I next have something to say.

Shake-ups or the Damn Obvious?

Posts on this blog will alternate between two things; weekly news-critical satire reports and whatever-the-hell-I-feel-like editorials. This is the first news report.

Okay, main events ...

Gaddafi was killed in Libya under unclear circumstances. A lot like Hitler. Mind you, the two men shared a lot - motives, methods, ideals, bloodline. (That last one was a joke, by the way. No laughs? All righty then. Movin' right on ... he was then dragged through the streets. His body (what was left of it), was burned and buried in a private ceremony somewhere, so it wouldn't be vandalized. The United States Government should be Tripoli pleased with this end result. (Get it yet? Anyone?)

We won the Cup, in a match that was far too closely-fought for comfort. I don't mean to say that the result of this match dictates comfort, although it does in a roundabout "You're famous, aaaaaaaaahhhhhh!" sort of way. For those that still don't know or care what I'm on about, it's the Rugby World Cup. Yes that one. So, for the next four years, New Zealand Rugby players (the Pro ones) will get treated like the Gods they're not. And yes, Sir Richie McCaw has been chucked around. (Not literally of course, that would be illegal), and there have been victory parades in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, slowing down New Zealand's already crap public transport system to a crawl (oh, wait, that's where we started). Notice how I deliberately went out of my way to avoid a Christchurch joke in poor taste. But back to the rugby; at their victory parade Christchurch City certainly knew how to rock!

Oops. Couldn't help it.

And with that, goodbye.

Screenwriting for Film, and Writing in General

I am bored, even though I should be writing for film. So I decided to describe my writing process.

Basically, I write by thinking of a plot first, This contrasts Aaron's writing style, because he just writes. The main problem, therefore, with Aaron's writing style, is he sometimes gets completely stumped and doesn't know where to go from a particular point. The other problem is other people can't help him, because they don't know where he wants it to go either.

It doesn't take a genius to realize that this wastes time. For example, he has now got - as at the time of writing - eight weeks to finish a script that he is half-way through. This isn't a problem except for the constant annoyance that is "end of year exams".

So, after writing a plot, I start on the script, following my plot. My scripts don't change course from the original plot. It makes writing so much easier because at any given point, you know full well what the hell is going on.

But it's easier to write without knowing where the text is going, isn't it? I'm doing it right now. I have no idea where this is going. So I disprove my own point, don't I?

Yes and no. It's easier to say "I'm lazy, so I won't write a plot" than it is to say "I'll go with the flow, because I know roughly where I'm going." This is obviously also going to result in better writing, because while you aren't sure exactly what you want to say, you have a fair idea.

Back on topic; then after finishing a script, check it so that it definitely makes sense. If you leave your viewers stumped, you lose favour. Easy as that.

So, in conclusion, it is unwise to write for screen without a clear idea of where you're going, and maybe even plan blog posts, if you aren't comfortable with free writing. If you are, you probably don't need to plan your blog posts, just get a general idea. Because no-one like a blogger who loses his train of thought half way through a editorial.

Where was I again?

Until next time.

The Lowlife – Series Archive

FOREWORD: Guidelines and History For The Safe Reading Of This Book

To all my readers;

This book was written over a period of no more than a year. Any more than that and I would have been in trouble. Not because of deadlines, because there aren't any, but because then it wouldn't really have been worth all of the 698 kilobytes that it occupies.

However, I managed to finish it, so there were no issues.

Then I edited it, and added several things, making it even more worthwhile. When I had finished the story in 2009, I had a printout of the full version. I completely reprinted it in early 2010, with the first batch of edits added, however in mid 2010 when I did the second batch of improvements, I refused to have it reprinted.

Unless there are some rewrites, this will remain the case.

You may be sitting there reading this and wondering why, or alternatively, you could be thinking "Why does he have only history? It said Guidelines too, didn't it?" Well, I'm getting there.

SAFETY FIRST

There are a few safety procedures for the reading of this book

- Don't handle in direct sunlight
- Don't handle in indirect sunlight (if you're wise)
- Don't use as a bookmark
- Don't use as a weapon
- Don't use as kindling
- Do not consume
- Do not use as scrap paper
- Do not attempt to start fire with it
- Do not present in a court case
- Do not use in a chemical experiment (Chemistry)
- Do not make a bomb out of it
- Do not read while skydiving
- Do not read while swimming
- Don't use it as storage for assignments
- Don't use it as a timetable
- Do not destroy
- Do not attempt to focus light on it. (It WILL burn)
- Do not attempt to build a house of cards
- Don't play rugby (using this as a ball)
- Don't play soccer (using it as a goalpost)

You may be thinking that some of these seem a bit of absurd, but if you try, you'll find that at least half of these (there are twenty) are done by at least one person (I can't say whether they'd be an idiot, but if the people you know, are anything like some of the people I know, then they are) or more.

In fact, that's my challenge to you. Look out for people doing some of these (remember, there are twenty) weird and wonderful things. If you see any, show them this page.

Actually, don't, because all that'll get me is a broken neck. But still, look out for them.

Write them down.

You never know, there are more weirdos than you think.

If you have finished the story, and think it's good, good for you.

But if you have, and you think either a) my humour's not funny.

b) the book's terrible

c) the storyline sucks, or

d) the layout's bung, then we have a problem. A big one.

But I can tell that a majority of you haven't. So let me tell you something about stories. In certain cases anyway.

You can tell a lot about a story by its first word. For example, if you read Snow White, you know it's a fairy tale because it begins with 'Once' as in 'Once upon a time'.

Then you get to more difficult ones like action stories. You don't know what word they begin with. But the first sentence will usually be about a crazed maniac trying to lop off people's heads with a malfunctioning chainsaw. Most fantasy stories begin with a witch writing a cookbook with entries like 'Banana Soup Surprise'. But as always there are exceptions. Believe it or not, this is one of them.

Horror stories always begin with a scream. There are no exceptions to this rule. Absolutely none.

But sometimes the first word alone is not enough.

Sometimes you have to read more.

That's why the rest of the book is there.

If you could tell a story by its first word, you wouldn't need to read it.

Humour stories are the most inventive.

They could begin with *anything*.

So, you can tell a lot about most stories because the first word is generally reflective of that genre. The first word of a story is its first impression.

So, in that case, what's this story about.

I can't tell you.

Because I know.

Based on the first word alone, give me an accurate description of the story.

See. I told you. You can't.

Back to those who have read it, and you think it sucks for one reason or another, or those of you that think I suck as a person, or a writer; kiss it.

Sincerely,

Dylan Thompson

Dylan Thompson

November 1, 2010

PROLOGUE: War

I was born in America, living on the outskirts of the CBD of New York. My mother died when I turned 13, leaving my father distraught; unable to look after the family he had created. I had to provide for my family, as a thirteen year-old, until my seven brothers and my father were killed when a car from a tower parking lot careened over the edge, killing them; walking by below.

I was left to cater, then, for only four people; my three sisters and myself. Until my sisters died in a ten-car pile-up, leaving me alone. My family crumbled around my feet in merely a space of six years. I migrated to Australia to restart my life, and I eventually found myself in Britain working for the MI5. But one mission went horribly wrong and I lost my left leg. I resigned from MI5 shortly after, heading back to the US, then I got married and had one kid. Wanting to bring my kid up somewhere secure, I fled America and floated back to Australia, en-route to New Zealand. My wife and I live there with our kid. This is my tale, after that point, saying that after you've been a convict once, it's very hard to quit.

Mike put the finishing touches on the prologue and screwed it up, not an overly nice way to treat an important piece of paper. New Zealand was only just feeling the end to a 10-year long recession, and just feeling the start to a third world war. Mike ran to the bus stop and waited for a bus, but instead, an army van pulled over.

"Hop in, son," said the driver.

"Why?" questioned Mike.

"New Zealand's at war, you egg," the driver snapped.

"There is nowhere to sit," Mike stated

"Frankly, I don't give a damn, hop in the boot if you must."

"All right, then." Mike huffed.

"By the way, you might need this," the driver said throwing a khaki tarpaulin over to Mike, "we don't want your lungs filling with grit."

Mike positioned the tarpaulin over the back of the truck, and lay down, so that he couldn't be seen. The day was boiling hot, so the tarpaulin magnified the heat, so that in less than five minutes he was lying in an inferno. The drive was long and boring, but at least his body got used to the heat. By the time the driver peeled back tarpaulin, Mike was asleep, the heat had sedated him to that point. The driver left Mike where he was, grabbed the gun from under the driver's seat and ran down on to the beach, to start bracing for the 'Attack of the Arabs' with the forty or so other soldiers.

Mike woke up not long after, with terrible cramp. He grabbed the gun stashed in the boot and raced into the driver's seat.

The van driver had left the starter card for the hybrid van on the driver's seat. Mike pressed the card into a scanner on the left side of the dashboard, after the steering wheel, and the vehicle started.

Mike scanned the surface of the dashboard for the air-conditioning button. He found the 'driver' air conditioning button lit, but the 'passenger' button was not.

Had they tried to sedate him on purpose?

He pondered that thought as he pulled out of the bay.

He heard someone yell "OY, LEAVE THAT VAN ALONE!" But Mike was racing away from the beach, long before the thought registered.

CHAPTER 1: Murder in the Masonry

The sirens sounded somewhere in the distance, so Mike turned down a side street. He had cleared the one-fifty mark, but he had perfect control. He saw something white flash past his windscreen, so he hit the brakes. Hard. His front wheels rode over whatever he'd seen, but the back wheels swerved out, so the object had only one set of tire tracks through its head.

It was a cat. A white cat with black spots above each ear, the left shoulder and a completely black tail. The tracks had cut its head clean down the centre. Other than that there was no damage. Mike jumped out of the van. He picked the corpse off the roadside; it had flown into a gutter. The cat was dead. The collar on the cat's neck read, "COSMO, 6 Duncumb St, Auckland, NZ." He picked the cat up and bent his head. A single tear fell onto the corpse. He delivered the cat to its home address and left it for the family to deal with it.

The cop cars pulled him over not long after, just outside the house. He co-operated and was arrested. He felt that he deserved the punishment that he would get.

He was sentenced to two years jail, for the combination of speeding, theft and evading police.

James woke up. He went to work. He came home again, sometimes at times near midnight. He slept for a few hours. He got up. He went back to work.

That was James' pattern.

He never told anybody where he worked, or what he did there. If he did, he would have been sentenced to prison in solitary confinement for the rest of his life under the Official Secrets Act. The reason for this was simple; he was a spy.

He didn't look like spy at all. He had the structure of a bodyguard. To someone very, very important. His face was large, his eyes focused and calm, yet stern. His nose was slightly crooked, as if it had been broken several times. Because it had. Six times, to be exact. His mouth was set in a solid line. He looked like he hadn't laughed for years. His shirt was the largest size you could get, but the shirt looked set to rip if he moved slightly. James was British. He had worked for a spy organisation since he was 21. He was just over 45, but he looked like a thug just passing his 20th. But you didn't pick a fight with him. Not unless you wanted to end up on life-support. His father had been an MI5 agent until his death, the previous year so he had worked and lived at MI5 since his birth. His mother was just retiring; both of his parents were going into their sixties. He wasn't married. He didn't have kids. He liked it that way.

So he went to work. He got an assignment. He came home again that night. His assignment had a lot to do with the Australians, but the Australians knew. *The Australians were stationed outside, poised for attack. They wouldn't let him get away this time. They would kill him and anything in their path. The leader rammed the door and charged inside. There wasn't anyone awake in the house. The Australian's quickly and quietly scoured the house of everything of value before searching for James. There was nothing James could do to stop them. The leader walked into James' room and leant over James' bed, gun positioned to kill...*

The explosions rocked the city. Adrian Patterson stared out the windows that lined his penthouse apartment. From the outside, it looked as though he had none. The windows were made to look like the brick that they were built into. But he was afraid. Afraid that the war would take the rest of his life, and the lives of many others. Another explosion shook the sturdy building. He was a striking man, tall for his age and muscular. He had the rare ability to sense things that were coming and unfortunately, he could sense war. A world-rocking war. The only problem was, he didn't like this ability. So he'd driven himself further and further into drinking, and then he had started smoking. But not smoking tobacco. Smoking marijuana. He had been a key figure in the legalisation of marijuana. The only problem is that now he was stoned, oblivious to the world around him, and calm. Those were the two things that he liked about being stoned. The weightlessness and the calm. A guy walked in. he had a balaclava stretched over what looked from the outside to be a fat face. His body was chubby, his suit stretching over a potbelly. He was short, like a dwarf, and his the way he walked made him seem old. He ambled towards Adrian. Adrian, who wasn't thinking straight, thought, *'Oh. There's where the postman got to. I thought he was a bit late.'*

Then the man pulled out a knife.

'Holy shit,' Adrian thought, *'I'm going to die, now.'*

He couldn't have been more right.

The man with the balaclava stabbed him through the ribs, puncturing his lungs. Adrian shut his eyes to brace for the pain, but the inability to breathe surprised him. Stars filled his field of vision.

"Why the holy father can't I..." he started. Then he ran out of breath. The stars in his vision turned into blackness as his brain shut down. It never started back up.

The gun was positioned at James' head. But he needn't have taken the precaution. He shot him through the brain, splattering his brains against the wall.

The security cameras picked up an image of the man as he walked out. He had a balaclava stretched over what looked from the outside to be a fat face. His body was chubby, his suit stretching over a potbelly. He was short, like a dwarf.

CHAPTER 2: Prison

Ralph woke up in a cell. Not an overly nice cell either. This one was a stainless-steel box. All it had in it was a bowl that was obviously used as a toilet and a tattered cot used as a bed. It had no windows. One fluorescent tube hung from the low ceiling, barely a metre above his head when he was standing up. He had nothing in his pockets. They had searched him before they had pushed him into the cell.

Not even the cigarette lighter that he had with him at all times. Except this one, of course. The bag of crack wasn't there either. He knew he would die in here unless he acted. Fast. So he lay down on the lumpy cot, trying to figure out how to get away.

Not long after, two guards barged their way through the door, which was solid steel, so it must have been hard, charged towards him, and then dragged him down a long hallway by his hands. He was dropped in another room, with at least another twenty people in it. His vision was blurry from the pain of being dragged down the hallway, so he couldn't recognise any faces. One inmate called out, "How's it down there, new guy?" Then one of the guards who had brought him in stormed over to the guy who talked and smashed him against the nearest wall, then they picked him up and carried him out of the room. Once the guards had left, Ralph asked "What did they do that for?" But all the other inmates ignored him as if he wasn't there.

Mike lashed out at the bare wall. All that he got for his trouble was a sore foot. His prison cell was less bare, with a toilet bowl, a cot, a window and a sink next to the toilet. He was allowed to have one type of entertainment. He had chosen TV. He was a smart guy and though he knew he would eventually get in trouble, he had hooked his TV up to the satellite dishes that were for staff use only. That meant that he had Sky. Compared to some other people whose chosen entertainment was music, he had a pretty good time. He was one of the richer inmates, so his door had a lock and he only shared his room with one other person. His name was Mark. He had been convicted of theft and evading police, so was in a similar position to Mike. Mark was tall, and scrawny, the sort of guy who acted, and coincidentally looked, like Bill Gates. He was an alright guy and Mike couldn't figure out why he was in prison. Mark eventually told him though. "I was convicted for something way back in high school. We had just robbed a dairy; taken all the cash. The owner called the police. The others all gave me the money and ran. But because my mum was working in the store next door, I waited around for her to finish working on that day. So the cops came just in time to see me stuffing money down into a rubbish bin. Then I was arrested. Of course, mum disowned me, so I haven't seen her since."

The guards came in, having heard the bang of Mike's foot connecting with the wall. Seeing two men sitting around a table chatting, they decided that it was no major threat, turning around and leaving.

They talked late into the night getting to know each other better and better, until late after midnight.

The killer walked slowly through the streets of downtown Whangarei. He was surprised that the most influential killing in his career had been as easy as it had. He followed the orders of a man who was known as Hitler, but he never mentioned any other name. James Brighton had put up surprisingly little resistance, leaving the killer unsatisfied. The killer was lucky. He knew it, too. His identical twin brother was already in Paremoremo Maximum Security Prison, leaving the killer on his own to answer to Hitler and carry out his bidding. He walked down the street and turned left into a dark alleyway. *My prize awaits*, he thought as he edged slowly towards the end. *And hopefully it'll still be there when I come. Or else...*

James' boss, Michaelangelo McGilacutty wandered slowly down the hallway, towards James' office. He hadn't shown up to work that morning, but someone had, requesting him. Michaelangelo had waved them through, not realizing that James had not shown up. Because James never missed work. He was never sick, and he never took holidays, until the agency made him. So Michaelangelo had automatically assumed that James was in his office. He

was greatly shocked when the visitor had come back saying that James was not in his office, and even more surprised to find that the visitor spoke the truth.

He was determined to get to the root of the problem, no matter what the cost was to him. He rounded the final corner and walked another hundred metres. Then he turned left and stepped into the room waiting for him. He walked over to the desk, expecting to see some form of a note, explaining James' absence. He found one, but not written by James;

Dear Michaelangelo,

James is dead, of my hand and naturally this will be a shock.

But I am warning you, if you try to find me, I will hunt you down and personally see to it that your life is ended. Don't involve the police or ANY authority.

Make sure you follow EVERY bit of this information,

coplos

Michaelangelo looked up from the paper. He knew, as he had suspected for years, that people had been infiltrating the Headquarters of NZSS, which far as he knew, no-one knew existed. Obviously, he'd been wrong.

CHAPTER 3: Explanations

The FBI knew it was trouble. They never got called to the small jobs, so when they were called, they knew it was a problem. So they came immediately, not hesitating to respond, but they were still a little too late. They rang their agent's house shortly after they had received the call, to find that the agent wasn't home.

The agent was woken by the ride cymbal in the drum kit adjacent to his bed. He sat bolt upright, looking startled. "Why the HELL do you have to bust into my HOUSE at this TIME?" he asked, confused and angry at the same time.

"We needed to bust into your house," came the manager's voice, "because we need YOU."

"Oh, so that gives you the right," the agent shot back sarcastically.

"Naturally, we rang you first, but you were obviously still asleep. We received a murder call, and thought that it was your," he paused, searching for the right word, "speciality."

"But surely there is a more conventional way of waking me up,"

"There were a few, but I knew that they didn't have one-hundred percent accuracy. Whereas, I knew the ride cymbal would work."

"But what if it hadn't worked?"

"Then I would have used a last resort."

"That being?"

The manager wasn't so quick to respond this time, letting a smile travel slowly across his face. Then finally he said; "I would have leant down to just in front of your ear and yelled 'COCK A DOODLE DOO'."

Then he paused, looking at the time, "And if you're EVER still asleep at ten-thirty again, you can expect a sacking. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir," the agent replied sulkily.

The manager's tone brightened. "So Mr. Mitchell Forester, if you'll be so kind as to get dressed, showered and be at this address in twenty minutes, that would be kind of you." He handed Mitchell a slip of paper. Then he turned around and left. Mitchell drove swiftly through the deserted streets. He arrived at a dock, dead on time.

Carlos sat in the back of an army van. The Australians had signed a peace treaty with the Arabs, who had pleaded allegiance.

They were just afraid, Carlos convinced himself. *Afraid that we would win*. One of his men came in. He clearly looked stressed.

“Why the hurry?” Carlos asked.

“Oh, just stuff, you know?” the man said.

“Ok. But I was sure that you looked stressed. Was I wrong?”

The guard was not sure whether it was his boss’ intense stare, or the way he had phrased the question that made him blurt the answer. “You were right, sir. They’ve discovered the body, there’s not long before they trace you to here.

Carlos swore out loud. “We have to move then. There’s no other option,” he said, clearly stressed. “Let’s move, then.”

The guard was not sure of his boss’ mood. His tone had changed from stressed to tired sounding in less than a minute. He also knew he faced a choice; follow the orders and relocate, or disobey the order and risk getting caught by the police, or sacked, or beaten up by his boss, who didn’t like being disobeyed. Either way, he either suffered himself, or, if he followed the orders, needed to put in a lot of work.

CHAPTER 4: Released

The boat was two hours late. The driver was a short, thin man, with a large pair of wire-rimmed glasses on his thin face. He wore a suit that looked three sizes too big. Mitchell jumped up the short flight of stairs leading to a small cabin fitted out in classic style, a wide armchair in front of a TV, with a mini fridge to its left. The driver’s cabin was through a door that spun off from the main ship. *The NZSS hired this ship and the driver. I wonder what they’ll say when they realize that it was two hours late*, Mitchell thought. He introduced himself to the captain. The captain’s name was Kevin. He was employed by the NZSS and had worked on the ship for 20 years. *This ship’s twenty years old?! It looks brand new*. Mitchell settled into the couch and started to watch 24-hour news. *It’s going to be a long trip*, he thought, as he sipped on a whisky.

The killer was grateful that the ship had been at the dock. *If it hadn’t...* he thought. He hated to think about what would have happened if it hadn’t been there. He had to ring his boss. He picked up the phone in his cabin. There was a door leading into the pilot’s cabin from his room. He checked the door, and made sure no-one was coming. Then he dialled the numbers. But his boss’ phone was switched off. So he paged him instead.

Subject: James Brighton – Terminated

Job done. Now he could relax...

Michaelangelo strode briskly through the ruined halls of James’ house. He came to the bedroom. The sight that he saw made him rush into the en-suite bathroom and throw up into the pristine-looking toilet.

What he had seen was this, James’ body coiled up under the blankets and his brains splattered over the opposite wall. He thought about having to wait in the house until the diagnostics team arrived. The thought made him shudder.

They could have shot him in the heart, couldn’t they? But he knew. The fact that James was dead was a problem. A big problem. Because it had profound implications. It meant that someone knew. It meant that someone was killing agents, and it meant that the war was not far away.

“What the hell should I do?” Mike wondered.

“I don’t know. Maybe someone will come for you. I don’t think anyone’s gonna come to bail me out. Ever.” Mark answered.

“So you’re just saying that I should wait?”

“Yes. That’s just what I’m saying.”

“How long have you been here?”

“I’ve been here for ten years. Thank goodness I had a job before I came here, otherwise I could be anywhere. Who knows ... Drugs, gangs, prison-tattoos. At least now I get a steady income.”

“Yeah. We’re lucky.”

Michaelangelo looked up into the ceiling. He didn’t like what he saw. He grabbed his phone out of his jacket pocket. “Someone get me Mike. He’s in Mount Eden Low Security. Be here in half an hour.”

Mike was sitting in his room. The PA system buzzed to life. “MICHAEL OF CELL 15, PLEASE COME TO THE RECEPTION AREA.” Mike ran to reception. Then he heard the second notice through his phone. “And bring your cellmate with you.” He wondered who might want Mark, but he turned around and sprinted back to his cell to give his friend the good news.

Michaelangelo stayed at his house, where he would meet his deputy, who was named Rex, Mike and his cellmate. He was sure that they were coming. Just when he had begun to give up hope, he heard a car in the driveway. *Great timing*, he moaned sarcastically. Then the door opened. The sight awaiting him caught him off guard. *HOLY SHIT*, he thought.

CHAPTER 5: Assembly

In his sleep, Mitchell heard voices. He heard a man come through his room and into the pilot’s cabin. He took no notice. Until he heard a blood-curdling scream come from the cabin. That was when he got out of bed. He walked to the door, and stepped into the cabin.

HOLY SHIT. HE KNOWS!!!!!! was the killer’s only thought. He stepped backward and smashed the newcomer over the head with a bed leg. The stranger fell like a rock. Out cold. The killer knelt down to check his pulse. He said something¹ under his breath. Then he realised who it was. *SWEET* his brain was yelling. He paged his boss again.

Subject: Mitchell Forester – Terminated

Then he leaned outwards, and, seeing his escape, leapt out of the window.

Mitchell woke up in a hospital. He didn’t know how he’d got there. Then he saw a sign above the door. It told him everything. He realized that he wasn’t in a hospital, or not a public hospital, anyway. So he knew, also, who had found him. The NZSS. He knew he was safe. He needed to get out. But he knew that wouldn’t be easy; bypassing somewhere between ten and fifty guards depending on the day was difficult, even by NZSS standards. But he knew why they’d found him. But the best part was that they had found him. He looked up at the clock on the wall. As his eyes travelled over to the clock, they also took in the layout of the room.

There were white fluorescent bulbs hanging from the ceiling. Under the bulbs stood a table. Directly under each one, so that when someone was lying there, there were no shadows. Through a glass window, there was a row of benches. Only one woman sat on the benches today. She looked tall, from where Mitchell was sitting, and certainly, she was beautiful. The name-plate just below her shirt’s narrow collar read, ‘RACHEL NEWMAN’ and then he knew. They had wanted him. And by the look of it, for something important. Her father was Michaelangelo Newman, the NZSS director. By the look of it, the good looks hadn’t skipped a generation.

She started talking. Surprisingly, Mitchell could hear her clearly. She sounded angry. “Just let him go, for Christ’s sake,” she snapped. Then she looked towards where Mitchell was lying. “Look at him. He’s looking at me.” There was a response, but Mitchell couldn’t hear it. Then he heard her, and he realised that she must have been yelling for his benefit. “He’s looking, and you bloody well know it.”

Wow. The temper hasn’t skipped either. Then someone that looked like a nurse hoisted him up and took him into an examination room.

¹ That something was not a word that should be repeated.

Rachel Newman hated waiting. Her relationship with her father had been a rocky one, especially since her father divorced her mother. So she hated him. She had inherited her father's temper, and she hated him for that. The patient was going into examination, and she was pleased by that. She knew that he would be ready. Soon.

Carlos was speeding. He knew it, too. But he didn't care. He was starting a war and the police had some of the biggest leads that they'd had on a criminal since the early 2000's – nineteen years earlier. He hoped they would never find him. Not until it was too late, anyway...

The killer was riding a motorbike. He hated riding motorbikes. But he was away. Away from the terror of getting caught. The world no longer mattered.

Then he saw a jeep. It was heading straight towards him. *It'll turn*, he thought. But it didn't. It didn't turn, it didn't stop. There was a guy behind the wheel. The killer could see that clearly now. The killer smiled. His pager had a template on it. He changed the name and paged his boss

Subject: Jacob Donningham – Terminated

He sent it, and laughed at his own joke. For he had changed the name to his name. He was doomed. He knew it, too. The jeep sped closer. Then impact. Then nothing.

Carlos was ecstatic. He was so ecstatic, he even started singing. Then he started running along the sand outside the vehicle.

He finished singing to see NZSS agents surrounding him. He looked up and before he could analyse the situation, he was shot. His world went white.

Mitchell listened to the radio in Rachel's car. He knew about as much as she did. Not much. All he had to work with was an address. But he trusted her. So he sat in silence, waiting for the time to come...

CHAPTER 6: Unity

The car stopped suddenly. Mitchell jerked upright, suddenly conscious. He had no idea of where they were.

Then he realized that someone was tugging at his arm, trying to pull him up, and out of the car. Mitchell allowed the grip to yank him out of the car. He realized that the car had stopped outside a house. It was dark, meaning that it was nearly impossible to see the size of it. The building stretched on and on, for meters in every direction.

Hang on, Mitchell thought, *This isn't a house, it's an office block or something for some major company.*

Then he looked behind him. He saw the electric fence; wiring literally buzzing with a blue light, pulsating rhythmically across the rough bars. *Ouch. That would hurt*, thought Mitchell. Then a neon sign flickered to life;

"WELCOME, COMMANDER," a robotic voice blared from a PA system somewhere over Mitchell's head. He realized that the hand, that he realized belonged to Rachel, was leading him towards the building. He inched closer and he saw the finer details of the building. He saw that the building was a grey steel box, and that it was located at – then there was a blinding flash as the security lights (also somewhere above Mitchell) flickered to life. But Rachel's hand never stopped pulling him forwards.

She must be wearing goggles or something. But then he entered the building. He knew because he could feel soft carpet under his feet. He could hear men running forwards, then they started to force his eyes open, rubbing a disinfectant solution into his eye sockets. His vision snapped into focus. All he could see of the monster of a man leaning over him was a nameplate. It read two words which knocked the breath out of him. "COMMANDER PIERRE DAVIS" The man stood up, releasing the crushing weight from Mitchell's lungs. "My God," Mitchell gasped. Then he fainted.

They're here. Michaelangelo thought. *It's about time.* He was beginning to get sore legs because he was pacing backwards and forwards across a room; the very room that served as his accommodation. There were other people too. Mike and his friend were sitting in the only available chairs; his armchairs. The lady backed into the room slowly, and it looked like she was carrying something. Then Michaelangelo realized. It was Mitchell. He flicked on the news, wondering what had happened.

There was one story on, and it was about murders. It was saying that the number of murders had risen about 200% since the same time last year. The news company had a specialist on. The specialist came to a conclusion. He said that this number of murders could only be caused by terrorists. Then, just like magic, everything fell into place.

“Hey guys,” Michaelangelo yelled to Mike and Mark, who were wandering around in the kitchen, “could you guys grab me the phone?”

He received the phone. *We need that analyst, and he needs us, NOW!*

CHAPTER 7: Case Closed?

The analyst was busy. The phone started ringing, but he ignored it, thinking it was the press, congratulating him on his presentation. Then he heard the message. He froze, with a pen halfway between his desk and the pen holder up on the shelf above his desk. He wondered whether it was a prank. *Surely they’re kidding*, he thought. Then a man strode in. he spoke in a high, clipped voice, as if someone was holding his nose.

“We know who you are, and what you’re about to do,” he said.

“What do you – ” the analyst responded.

Then there was a gunshot, and the guy turned around, screamed and ran out of the room.

Then a man walked in. But he spoke more gently, so the analyst knew he was a friend.

“Sorry about that,” he said, “We had to get rid of him. Because he was going to get rid of *you*.”

The analyst walked out of the room. The leader watched quietly. His employee had been scared out of his wits. *Only a minor setback. I’ll get a new puppet soon enough*. He knew the net was closing in. He decided to rename his next prey, not only because they wouldn’t be able to trace him, but also to annoy them. *I’ll call him Aringarosa*² the leader decided.

The analyst was standing in front of a large group of people. There was a guy who looked like he was from the Secret Service, two men wearing cheap trousers, clearly prison issue, another man who looked like he had been pulled out of bed, another man who was wearing a suit and tie, and a female analyst. *Fine. This is what I’m working with*, he thought. The Secret Service man beckoned for him to sit down. The analyst could tell it was going to be a log meeting. He yawned. The man played back the interview on a massive flat screen, but before the video had finished, the analyst’s head had rolled forward, hitting the walnut table with a dull thud. Then the room breathed a collective sigh of relief as the sound of gentle snoring filled the room.

Carlos stood outside a tall building. It was a rainy June day in West Auckland; most houses had TV sets blaring. But Carlos wasn’t that lucky. He was standing outside a post office, but he knew that if he went inside he would be spotted, his cover blown. He had escaped from the NZSS ensnarement had been easy. Not the sort of trap he had expected. He patted his waist, checking his waistline for the tazer he had known was there. He was reassured to feel its bulge. He knew he only had to wait. Wait until someone, or *something* for that matter, came along.

“I know who did it,” the analyst found himself saying. He had woken up in a daze, unsure of where he was, but then he had remembered. “It’s – ” He froze in terror, for staring back at him wasn’t the person he had thought.

“Don’t move,” the man snarled, levelling a gun, “or I’ll blow your brains through the wall behind you.”

CHAPTER 8: Military Intelligence

The killer walked silently through the maze of containers surrounding the drop zone. His boss would meet him there, or so he hoped. He would then receive his prize. There was a man waiting at the end of the street. He looked like he knew what was happening. Something clicked in the killer’s brain. Then he ran forwards to the man, stopping in front of him. Then he started throwing punches. One connected with the man’s temple. Then the man said something. The killer froze.

² It’s Spanish.

"I'm your boss, *Aringarosa*. Don't hurt me." That worked. Carlos was hurt, and certain that the killer would pay. But the moron hadn't known any different. He still would have attacked. But still ... Then the cops came. He continued throwing punches after the pause. He aimed carefully, and Carlos remembered why he had employed him. *His aim*. The killer aimed carefully above the eye, on the temple. Then as he sank into the abyss, he thought he heard someone yell an unacceptable word. And he realized he was bleeding. Lots.

He died.

The police arrived quickly. *Crap*, thought the killer, with regret. He had just killed his boss. But then he hit rock-bottom. He got arrested. But he wasn't sent to prison, he was sent to a penal colony³ and he stayed there.

Case closed. That was the impression that the analyst got when he woke up. There was an air about the room. He sat up and asked the SS guy, "What the hell - "

"We figured it out. Then we alerted the cops - hang on a sec, I'm getting feed from the cops."

His face grew whiter and whiter as he listened, until he slammed the receiver down so hard that it shattered. But he spoke with an eerie calm.

"Mike, go to the station," he said.

"Why?" It was Mike's turn to respond.

"I'll tell you later. Or I expect that they will,"

"OK."

So Mike walked out.

Mike was driving. But he didn't see the pole. He sure as hell felt it.

EPILOGUE: Happily Ever After?

MICHAELANGELO McGILACUTTY continued his career. He sent out medals to all those involved in the capture of the serial killer. However, he was never thanked and still remains unmarried. He was later found to be in charge of the terrorism bust, and got knighted for his role.

ADRIAN PATTERSON'S family demanded to know how their relative had died. Their petitions were denied by NZSS. They took the NZSS to court and earned over one million dollars compensation. They moved out of New Zealand into the States and remain there. ADRIAN'S body is now lying in a local Washington DC cemetery.

CARLOS ADAMS has been on the run since his apprentice was arrested. He currently is living out of the back of a van travelling around the West Coast of Australia. If he is found, he should be expecting a 25-year jail sentence. The NZSS kept tabs on him until he moved into Brazil, then he disappeared in a puff of smoke.

RALPH DONNINGHAM was kept in jail for 10 years. He got a broken spleen, two broken noses, somewhere close to a hundred black eyes and a fractured rib cage in his stay in prison. He now lives in North Australia, searching for his dead brother, JACOB DONNINGHAM. He has since been convicted of twelve speeding charges, and a minor drugs charge. All that the drugs charge earned him was two weeks in jail.

THE NEW ZEALAND ARMY and all of its allies officially went to war on the 17th of September 2019. They won many battles, but lost more than they had won. They ended up winning the war, however. It finished in world record-setting time – the longest war in human history – in 2040.

JAMES BRIGHTON'S family were charged 1 hundred thousand dollars in court costs when they took the NZSS to court. They had to religiously busk for two years to earn back the money. However, none of their assets were lost in the crisis.

MITCHELL FORESTER was awarded a bravery medal for his position in the terrorist bust. His biography has sold millions of copies, making him a relatively rich man. He lives with his wife and kids in a detached house in a West Auckland suburb.

³ A place where inmates do back-breaking labour in hope to make them learn.

MARK SHETLAN was released from jail on extraordinarily good behaviour. He suffered from minor depression after being released from jail, no-one is quite sure why, but he lives in a suburb of Central Auckland with his family.

RACHEL NEWMAN was married not long after the incident, and lives in the US, her homeland, with her family.

ARINGAROSA has survived penal colony, and continues to terrorise to this day. He is wanted in seventeen countries for murder, and many others for counts of terrorism.

THE ANALYST was made famous after the discovery. Due to this, he took to drinking and smoking, mostly at parties, and died of heart failure aged only 35. His family mourned him for days.

MICHAEL “MIKE” Mc ALLISTER lost his memory after his collision with the pole. When he woke up, he didn’t remember anything in the past year. He has been working on his memory, trying to re-obtain the memories, but so far to no avail. He currently lives with his wife in a suburb of Christchurch, where he attends regular psychiatric treatment. He is responding well to the treatment, he just doesn’t remember anything yet.